

The Little Cucumber Fish of Wyre

There are many places on earth that hold untold secrets; the deep blue sea is one of them. But there is one very special place where this deep blue sea meets the land and it is here where many more secrets lie... the Wyre Estuary.

It was a warm April morning and a tiny orange egg lay on the gravelly riverbed at Saint Michael's on Wyre. That afternoon a tiny cucumber fish popped out and began her journey downstream towards the sea. The tiny creature looked around her at this new world and began to feel quite excited. After a few weeks of floating and eating and growing she came to rest in some natural nursery pools at Ramper Pot and it is here where her story begins...

"Hello down there!" called a little voice from above the shimmering water. "Are you setting sail today?". Ayla popped her head out of the water and spotted her friend Cato the shore crab sitting on the mudflats above, cleaning his pincers.



The river was getting wider now and the traffic was getting busier. Powerful eels passed by snacking on small fish and shrimp.

"Those eels look so powerful and a bit creepy too, Cato," said Ayla as she slid back into the shadows.

"They might look creepy but they are amazing animals," said Cato excitedly. "Did you know they come up the River Wyre in spring after a 5,000km journey across the Atlantic Ocean! They are the opposite of cucumber fish like you and move into salt water to spawn in the Sargasso Sea; that's one of the longest journeys I know about. When they are born they call the babies glass eels, then they become eiders. That one has been here for twenty years!"

The tide was a big one today and that afternoon Ayla and Cato drifted back upstream to Shard Bridge where they rested in the shadows.

"Our river is so awesome, Cato. I can't believe how many other amazing creatures live here."



Cato scampered down the silvery mudbanks and sat by Ayla's side. "I know you love it here at Ramper Pot, Ayla, but it's summer now and it's time you headed out to sea with all the other young smelt."

Ayla was not too sure about the journey to open waters but she was a brave little cucumber fish and listened to Cato, who was a very smart shore crab after all.

"How about we travel there together?" offered Cato. "I could show you so many secrets of the estuary that hardly anyone else knows about. We could swim through secret creeks, silvery saltmarshes and magnificent mudflats and when we reach the turquoise sea we can party with the salmon!"

Ayla thought that sounded amazing and although she loved the safety of the nursery pools at Ramper Pot she knew it was time to leave.

Smelt (also known as cucumber fish) are an amazing green, turquoise and pink-coloured fish who live in some of the coastal waters around the UK. Each spring they travel many kilometres upstream in a few special estuaries to lay (spawn) their eggs in fresh water. They are a very curious fish who drift up and down the estuary with the tides and love snacking on smaller fish, brown shrimp, worms and small prawns. And YES they do smell of cucumbers!!

"This great river feeds the bay, you know. Without it the saltmarshes and mudflats couldn't exist either. We all depend on it really. Let's hope people will help look after it above the water as well."

"I hope so," said Ayla looking up at the people passing above on the bridge.

And so for the next few months Ayla and Cato floated up and down the estuary with the tides until one blustery afternoon in autumn when they spotted waves crashing in the distance.

"Woah there, cucumber fish!" shouted Cato as he grabbed her gently with his pincers. The water was moving faster now and they could see the bottoms of huge ships and the silhouette of a town above.

"Now this looks different," said Ayla. "Do you think we are near the sea?"

"We must be," said Cato. "This has to be Fleetwood. Look there's the docks up ahead. I bet many intrepid explorers have anchored up there after a great journey like ours. Only a few hundred metres to the sea now!"

As Ayla and Cato nervously journeyed out from Ramper Pot into the River Wyre the creeks began to widen and a whole new world of wonder opened up around them. Ayla popped her head out of the water and saw a strange cactus-like plant growing in miniature forests, bright green against the silvery mud.

"Where are we, Cato? What are those strange plants growing on the mud?" "We are travelling through the mudflats, Ayla, and that amazing plant is called samphire; it's a super veg!" said Cato knowingly. "Why is the mud so silvery and sparkly today?" asked Ayla as she looked around in amazement.

"Well, there are thousands of tiny little diatoms, a type of microscopic algae that live in little houses made of glass and they turn the mud flats glittery! Amazing, I know." "...and what about all those tiny little snails with spiral-shaped shells?" Ayla felt like she had a lot of questions!

Cato lifted one of the tiny snails onto his pincers. "Oh these are hydrobia," he said and popped it into his mouth. "The shelducks like eating them too," he said with a chuckle.

Suddenly they spotted a long worm wriggling down into the mud, leaving behind a little muddy cast on the surface. "Wow, lugworms!" said Cato. "They can grow up to 20cm long and have gills for breathing underwater. The wading birds like the redshank and curlew like mud-dipping for them."



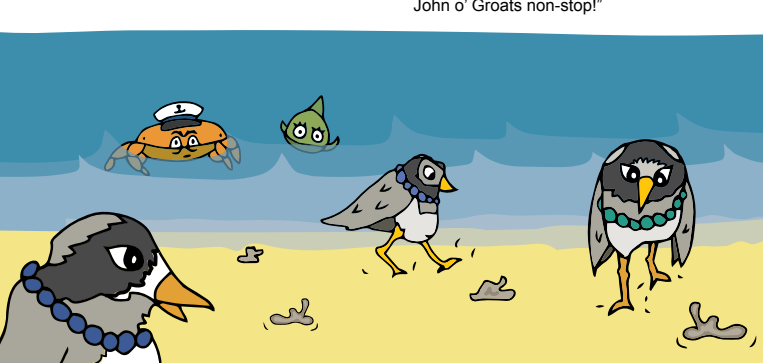
Just ahead the water started to turn a beautiful turquoise colour and the sand and shingle beaches guided them out of the estuary and into open waters. Ayla peeped out above the surface and looked back across the mouth of her river. All of a sudden she felt like a very grown-up cucumber fish.

"Look over here, Ayla!" shouted Cato as he scrambled up onto the beach. "There are so many cool things to look at." One treasure at a time, Cato picked up his precious beach finds and brought them to the water's edge for Ayla to see. "This one's a mermaid's purse and look, here are some whelk egg cases."

"Wow!" said Ayla. "What type of a creature lives in a mermaid's purse?"

"All sorts of animals like skates, rays and small spotted catsharks lay their eggs underwater in these. The babies take months growing inside them then, once they've hatched the cases wash up on the beach for us to find, yippeee!"

"Sharks!" gasped Ayla. "I bet they haven't got teeth as mean as mine!" she growled as she smiled a grizzly smile showing her layers of sharp teeth. Cato snapped his pincers at her playfully and scampered off to beachcomb again.



"What do you like eating, Cato?" asked Ayla. "Well, I'm not too picky. I eat seaweed, mussels, barnacles, bacon! Whatever I come across, really." "Yuk!" said Ayla as she gobbled up a passing shrimp.

As they travelled past the mudflats they spotted black and white oystercatchers with bright orange bills and pinky red legs making their 'peep peep' call. "That's a wading bird too," said Cato. "They love using their long beaks to find cockles and mussels in the glorious mud."

Shore crabs have ten legs and are cased in a hard, protective shell that acts like a suit of armour. Their claws catch, chop and crush their prey but are also used for fighting and chatting with other crabs. Don't worry if you see lots of 'dead' crabs on the shore as it is probably just their casing that moults off as they grow a new one. They hang out in groups called 'casts' and they actually have blue blood!

"Ooooo and there's a curlew too. The speckly bird with long legs and a long, curved beak. They are great at catching lugworms and ragworms... and crabs too!" said Cato as his knees began to wobble a bit. "Ooooo eeeeeee!" called the curlew.



Ayla floated west towards Rossall Point and spotted a tough-looking, spiky plant with purple-blue flowers. "What's that lovely plant on the beach, Cato?" she asked.

"It's called sea holly. It's very pretty, isn't it?" he said as he handed her one of the delicate flowers.

"Thank you." She blushed and placed it behind her long, elegant pectoral fin.

Little rotund birds called ringed plovers were tapping their feet quickly on the ground to mimic raindrops, hoping for some worms to surface. They had gorgeous orange bills with black tips and were sandy brown above and white below. "They look like they are wearing little necklaces," giggled Ayla. "I love watching them dancing."

They could hear the tapping noises of other birds called turnstones flipping over rocks to find food and watched them rummaging through the seaweed.

"Those little fellas must be exhausted," said Cato. "They fly over 500,000 km in their lifetimes, sometimes a thousand kilometres in one day. That's like going from Land's End to John o' Groats non-stop!"

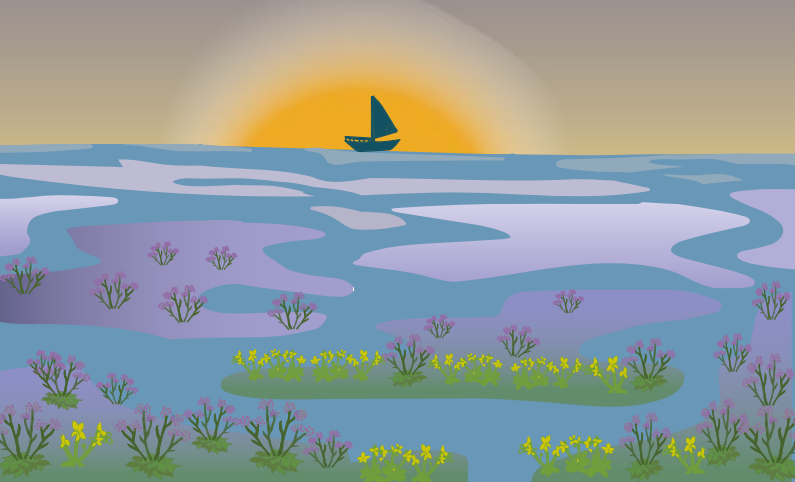
As Ayla and Cato floated past Stanah they saw purple colours on the horizon and heard the most beautiful birdsong in the skies above. The skies looked SO big and the land was changing as the tides gurgled in and out of the creeks. Nothing seemed to stay the same for long in this mystifying land.

"What is this mysterious, shape-shifting world, Cato?" asked Ayla as she peered out over the purple-coloured land.

"We are at the saltmarshes, Ayla; pools like mirrors, tough plants that survive these salty waters and most importantly a safe place for us to rest for the night."

Ayla watched as the orange glow of the sun crept below the horizon and wondered how many years it had taken for the river to deposit all the silt and sand here to make this secretive marsh.

"Why is the land purple, Cato?" she asked as she looked out in awe.



Little sanderling birds scampered about near the waves as they searched for small crustaceans and fish to eat; they looked like they were wearing rusty summer jumpers.

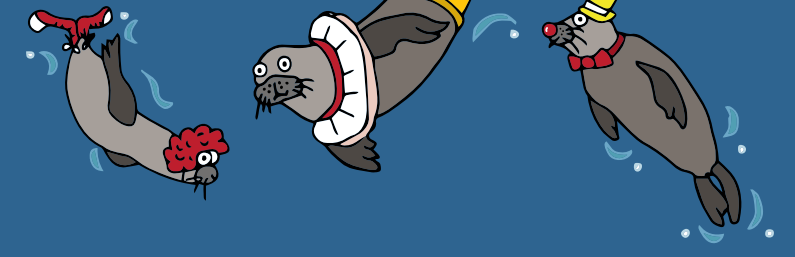
"Those birds turn a beautiful silvery grey colour in winter," said Cato as they watched the sanderlings quietly so they didn't disturb them. "They migrate all the way from Africa and rest here before travelling to Iceland. A wise old seal told me they saw one eat more than 300 cockles in a day; globetrotting must be hungry work."

"Talking of seals Cato, is that some over there?" In the distance near a place called King Scar they could see some grey seals flipping and playing in the waves that were breaking on the sandy ridge.

"It certainly is, they are the clowns of the sea world for sure. Seals are amazing creatures really though. Did you know they spend most of their life in water, but they give birth to their babies and take care of them on the shore? They have a really thick layer of blubber that protects them from cold temperatures; I think they must be the seals that live on Walney Island in Cumbria, on the North side of Morecambe Bay."

"I wonder if they can dive to the bottom of the Lune Deep?" asked Ayla.

"Not a problem for a grey seal. They can hold their breath for two hours!" said Cato smartly.



"The beautiful sea lavender is in bloom! Bees travel long distances for the tasty nectar. Ooo and look here, this is scurvy grass. It tastes like bitter tar but poor sailors used to eat it to stop a nasty disease called scurvy!"

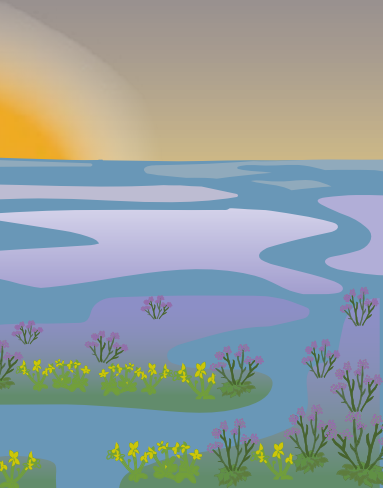
They listened to the hum of the bees and watched the little fingers of the sea clubrushes blowing in the wind. In the distance a tawny owl hooted into the cool evening air.

The next morning a mummy shelduck with her fluffy brown and cream ducklings swam past. She had a dark green head and neck, a chestnut belly stripe and a bright red bill.

"Look out ahead!" said Ayla. "Ducks passing!"

"There's an egret out fishing there too," observed Cato.

They could hear the sounds of skylarks and buzzards in the skies above and although it was tempting to stay a while longer they knew it was time to leave.



The Lune Deep is a sea trench that is 70m deep and 20km long. It is a bit like an underwater Grand Canyon and was carved during the last ice age. There are rocky reefs, cliffs and steep slopes of boulders and some amazing animals live there like squat lobsters, dead man's fingers, brittle stars, peacock worms and sea anemones!

"Doesn't the word Morecambe mean 'great hollow', Cato?" asked Ayla curiously.

"Maybe, Ayla. I wonder if the Celtic tribes who once lived around the bay called it that."

Ayla and Cato looked out across Morecambe Bay and thought about all the secrets and wonders they had discovered on their journey so far. Ayla missed Ramper Pot but knew that one day she would pass by there on her journey upstream again. Only next time she would be making the journey to lay eggs of her own. She watched Cato scampering around the shingle beach beneath the observation tower at Rossall Point and wondered if he would make the journey with her. Either way, the moment was perfect just now and as Ayla looked back along the beautiful Wyre Estuary she knew there was no other place on earth she would rather call home.



By Anja Phoenix

A family story trail around the Wyre Estuary and surrounding coast

The Little Cucumber Fish of Wyre

A Family Story Trail around the Wyre Estuary for children and the young at heart

Places to visit around The Flyde Coast

This interactive Tale Trail explores the wonderful wildlife and coastal landscape of the Wyre Estuary. You can visit some of the places in this Tale Trail, following Ayla and Cato's journey.

Estuaries & wildlife
Where the freshwater of the river meets the salty sea. Home to special communities of plants and animals, from vast flocks of wading birds to salt-loving plants, shoals of fish and hidden worms in the mud.

Special recognition
The Wyre estuary is so important for wildlife that it is included within FIVE different protected areas, created to safeguard wading birds and other wildlife. The smelt which star in this adventure have special protection within the Wyre & Lune Marine Conservation Zone.

Wyre Estuary Country Park
River Rd, Thornton-Cleveleys, FY5 5LR. There are a number of visitor facilities at the Wyre Estuary Country Park including a café, toilets, play area, and lots of benches to rest. A 4x4 trampler (off-road wheelchair) can be booked directly with the park. For more information on facilities and open times visit: www.wyreestuarycountrypark.co.uk

Getting There
By public transport: The number 24 bus (Fleetwood to Poulton-Le-Flyde) stops at Gravners Field, a ten minute walk from the park.
Car parking: There are free car parking facilities here.

Rossall Point
At Rossall Point, there are nearby café, play area and toilet facilities as well as a visitor centre at Rossall Point Observation Tower. Please check facility opening times before your visit to avoid disappointment. www.wyre.gov.uk/rossallpoint

Getting There
Car parking: There is free parking at Rossall Point car park, Princes Way, Fleetwood, FY7 8LF.
By public transport: The number 14 bus (Fleetwood to Blackpool) stops at Queen's Hotel, Fleetwood, a 10 minute walk away from Rossall Point Car Park.

Find out more at: www.livingseasnw.org.uk