

## *Hemiramphus balao* (Balao Halfbeak or Balao)

Family: Hemiramphidae (Halfbeaks)

Order: Belontiiformes (Flyingfish and Needlefish)

Class: Actinopterygii (Ray-finned Fish)



**Fig. 1.** Balao halfbeak, *Hemiramphus balao*.

[<http://www.deepseaimages.com/dsilibary/showphoto.php?photo=3691&cat=534>, downloaded 27 February 2017]

**TRAITS.** *Hemiramphus balao*, commonly simply referred to as balao, has a distinctive streamlined cylindrical body, with the upper jaw much shorter than the lower jaw which forms a narrow pointy beak (Fig. 1). The caudal (tail) fin is deeply forked, with the lower lobe larger than the upper lobe. The whole body is silvery, bluish grey above with a vague dark lateral stripe. The pectoral fin is long, its length being more than the distance from the pectoral base to the anterior nostril. This serves as the main differentiating feature from its close and nearly identical relative the ballyhoo. The body has no spines in the fins, with only soft rays on both the dorsal and anal fins (Fishbase, 2016). The balao halfbeak grows to 35cm on average, the maximum length recorded being 40cm (IUCN, 2015).

**DISTRIBUTION.** The distribution of the balao halfbeak is widespread in both the eastern and the western Atlantic (Fig. 2). The balao halfbeak is known in the western Atlantic from New York USA to Bermuda, and south to Brazil, including the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea (IUCN, 2015). In the eastern Atlantic the balao halfbeak can be seen from the Canary Islands to the coast of West Africa, from the Ivory Coast, the Gulf of Guinea, to Angola (Collette and Parin, 1990).

**HABITAT AND ACTIVITY.** Found in mostly offshore areas, balao halfbeaks are fish that dwell in the pelagic zone, which is the surface water, not close to the bottom of the sea. Most of their activity is only a few metres from the surface of the sea. Balaos typically inhabit areas with sand bottoms or over reefs, and they also associate with pelagic *Sargassum* weed (Fishbase, 2016). They occur in both brackish and marine waters. The balao halfbeak has a short lifespan of approximately 2 years, and is regularly found in large schools (McBride, 2001).

**FOOD AND FEEDING.** Their schooling behaviour in most cases allows for adequate feeding on various types of zooplankton, particularly copepods, decapods, siphonophores, and polychaetes (marine worms). *Hemiramphus balao* in particular does not consume seagrass unlike most of its close halfbeak relatives such as *H. brasiliensis*, which feeds on seagrass and is physically larger as a result (Barkeley and Houde, 1978).

**REPRODUCTION.** *Hemiramphus balao* exhibits the reproductive mode of straightforward egg-laying (oviparity) or spawning. Female balao produce up to 3,700 eggs, 1.5-2.5mm in diameter, a high number for fish of their size (Collette and Parin, 1990). Their fecundity is nearly three times as much as *Hemiramphus brasiliensis* (Barkeley and Houde, 1978). Eggs are typically laid in shallow coastal waters less than 10m deep, with seagrass and algae in which they attach to the vegetation by the aid of long filaments on the egg. Spawning activity is at its highest during the months March to July (McBride and Thurman, 2003).

**APPLIED ECOLOGY.** This species is listed as of Least Concern by IUCN (2015) as indication of population decline is non-evident. The balao halfbeak is highly sought after as bait for offshore game fish as they are preferred prey to many fish. The bait (Fig. 3) is used both cut and whole to suit different fishing applications including trolling or for use by the recreational angler.

## REFERENCES

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**Fig. 2.** Geographical distribution of balao halfbeak, *Hemiramphus balao*.

[<http://maps.iucnredlist.org/map.html?id=15521875>, downloaded 6 March 2017]



**Fig. 3.** *Hemiramphus balao*, caught and frozen to be packaged and sold for bait.

[<http://www.mexican-fish.com/balao/>, downloaded 7 March 2017]

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