



## Swordfish: A Biography of the Ocean Gladiator

By Richard Ellis

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### Swordfish: A Biography of the Ocean Gladiator By Richard Ellis

A perfect fish in the evolutionary sense, the broadbill swordfish derives its name from its distinctive bill—much longer and wider than the bill of any other billfish—which is flattened into the sword we all recognize. And though the majesty and allure of this warrior fish has commanded much attention—from adventurous sportfishers eager to land one to ravenous diners eager to taste one—no one has yet been bold enough to truly take on the swordfish as a biographer. Who better to do so than Richard Ellis, a master of marine natural history? *Swordfish: A Biography of the Ocean Gladiator* is his masterly ode to this mighty fighter.

The swordfish, whose scientific name means “gladiator,” can take on anyone and anything, including ships, boats, sharks, submarines, divers, and whales, and in this book Ellis regales us with tales of its vitality and strength. Ellis makes it easy to understand why it has inspired so many to take up the challenge of epic sportfishing battles as well as the longline fishing expeditions recounted by writers such as Linda Greenlaw and Sebastian Junger. Ellis shows us how the bill is used for defense—contrary to popular opinion it is not used to spear prey, but to slash and debilitate, like a skillful saber fencer. Swordfish, he explains, hunt at the surface as well as thousands of feet down in the depths, and like tuna and some sharks, have an unusual circulatory system that gives them a significant advantage over their prey, no matter the depth in which they hunt. Their adaptability enables them to swim in waters the world over—tropical, temperate, and sometimes cold—and the largest ever caught on rod and reel was landed in Chile in 1953, weighing in at 1,182 pounds (and this heavyweight fighter, like all the largest swordfish, was a female).

Ellis’s detailed and fascinating, fact-filled biography takes us behind the swordfish’s huge, cornflower-blue eyes and provides a complete history of the fish from prehistoric fossils to its present-day endangerment, as our taste for swordfish has had a drastic effect on their population the world over. Throughout, the book is graced with many of Ellis’s own drawings and paintings, which capture the allure of the fish and bring its splendor and power to life for armchair fishermen and landlocked readers alike.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Booklist

Swordfish are among the most highly sought game fish in all of the oceans. Since novelist Zane Grey wrote about his record-setting catches in the 1920s, reeling in one of these delicious but dangerous solitary giants has been considered an ultimate fishing experience. Because they fight fiercely and often escape, scientists labeled them *Xiphias gladius*, or gladiator fish. Easily identified by long, flat extensions of their upper jaws, swordfish have been harpooned since the age of the ancient Greeks, yet little is known about their spawning, feeding habits, growth, and migration, and no aquarium has ever held a live swordfish. Long thought inexhaustible, swordfish populations are now threatened by indiscriminate and often illegal industrial fishing and by global warming. In 12 authoritative yet sometimes conversational chapters, veteran marine biologist and artist Ellis recounts the natural history of a legend-worthy species. --Rick Roche

#### Review

“Richard Ellis writes that the swordfish is a ‘graceful, tapered teardrop of a fish’ that has enchanted and mystified humans since their most ancient encounters with this unique being. Ellis is one of a kind, too, a meticulous researcher and a fine writer who has brought to life more creatures of the sea than anyone working today. They come together in *Swordfish: A Biography of the Ocean Gladiator* for a great read and a valuable addition to our understanding of the ocean and its inhabitants.”

(Brad Matsen, author of *Jacques Cousteau: The Sea King*)

“A fascinating dip into the history and biology of a seagoing sabre fighter.”

(*Nature*)

“Talk about a fish story! With wit and masterful writing, Richard Ellis unveils the grandeur of the swordfish. He makes the reader laugh at the impossible tales told, while stunning us with the broadbill’s biology, history, and potential downfall due to overfishing. You cannot help but respect and marvel at one of the ocean’s most wondrous beasts after this fascinating read.”

(Ellen Prager, author of *Sex, Drugs, and Sea Slime*)

“Richard Ellis has to be the most productive and wide-minded person writing about the oceans today. In *Swordfish*, author and fish are the perfect match, both at the top of their games, masters of the realm they inhabit. In this awestruck and respectful book, swordfish, for once, get the treatment they deserve.”

(Carl Safina, author of *The View from Lazy Point*)

“With a keen eye for detail and a great ear for a good story, Richard Ellis takes us to this mighty ocean warrior, into the depths to chase dinners of three hundred pound squid, across the water into exhilarating contests with fishermen, and through history, where the once decimated swordfish is perhaps resurging. Magnificent and wide-ranging, like the fish itself, Ellis’s biography reconstructs in all its glory, a mythic story.”

(Deborah Cramer, author of *Great Waters*)

“Mr. Ellis has trawled a vast range of sources to present the current state of swordfish knowledge in a clear, accessible and—to this pisciphile reviewer—riveting way. . . . I would be surprised if there is a single pertinent fact about swordfish that is missing from Mr. Ellis’s commendably concise text. But it is the mystery of fish and fish lives that makes them so beguiling. We can intrude on their world, for sport,

sustenance or study. But we do not belong in it, so we can never know it all, which is just as it should be."

*(Wall Street Journal)*

"Notable American marine artist Richard Ellis certainly knows his fish. . . . This is an intriguing book about a fascinating creature."

*(Literary Review)*

"*Swordfish* has plenty to offer, from striking facts to adventures on the high seas. . . . Ellis paints the picture of an enigmatic fish and delivers plenty for the reader to enjoy."

*(Times Literary Supplement)*

#### About the Author

**Richard Ellis** lives in New York and is the author of more than twenty books on marine life, including *Great White Shark*, *Men and Whales*, *Monsters of the Sea*, *The Encyclopedia of the Sea*, *Deep Atlantic*, *The Search for the Giant Squid*, *The Empty Ocean*, *Tuna: A Love Story*, *The Great Sperm Whale*, and *Shark: A Visual History*. A renowned painter of marine natural history, his paintings have been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, and have appeared in such publications as *Skin Diver*, *Audubon*, *National Wildlife*, *National Geographic*, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, as well as his own books.

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##### **Daniele Chambers:**

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##### **Gayle O'Connell:**

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**Ann Lang:**

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