

Education Department
Waikīkī Aquarium
University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa



WAIKIKI
AQUARIUM
University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa

MARINE LIFE PROFILE: CHRISTMAS WRASSE

Hawaiian name: ‘āwela
Scientific name: *Thalassoma trilobatum*
Distribution: Indo-Pacific, including Hawai‘i
Size: to 11 inches (28 cm)
Diet: reef invertebrates

Named for its predominantly green and red color pattern, this is one of the largest and most heavily-bodied of Hawaiian wrasses. It shows the typical wrasse swimming pattern, an up and down "flying" motion using the pectoral (side) fins. The Christmas wrasse is abundant on the reef and over rocky bottoms where it feeds on crustaceans (especially crabs), molluscs and brittlestars. Larger males have the brightest colors; colors of the smaller females are muted green with black lines.

The wrasses (Family Labridae) are among the most common and diverse of reef fishes in Hawaiian waters. There are 43 different wrasse species reported and 13 of them are endemic, found only in Hawai‘i. Although they are a varied group, they all share an elongated body tapered at head and tail. Their soft, continuous dorsal and anal fins are often held close to the body, accentuating their spindle shape. The caudal fin (tail) is soft and broom-like, it is often folded to a squared-off shape. Wrasses are alert, the eyes constantly moving, scanning the reef and surroundings. They are seen alone, in pairs, or small groups close to the reef where they forage for small reef invertebrates like crustaceans, molluscs, worms, urchins and brittlestars. Their prominent lips hide canine teeth in upper and lower jaws that are used to pluck their invertebrate prey from the reef. Pharyngeal bones in the gill area help crush the shells of their prey. Larger wrasses can also take small fishes. Wrasses are active predators by day, they shelter in reef crevices or bury in sand patches at night.

As a family, wrasses are well known for a life history that includes sex change. Sexes can be identified by color pattern. Smaller individuals are usually female; the larger, more colorful individuals are males. Color and behavior changes, as well as changes in the reproductive organs take place as elements of the sex reversal.

Classification:

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata, Subphylum Vertebrata
Class Osteichthyes
Order Perciformes
Family Labridae
Genus Thalassoma
Species trilobatum

CHRISTMAS WRASSE, Male
ʻāwela
Thalassoma trilobatum

