



MARINE LIFE PROFILE: ORNATE WRASSE

Hawaiian name:	‘ohua
Scientific name:	<i>Halichoeres ornatissimus</i>
Distribution:	Hawai‘i and central Polynesia
Size:	to 6 inches
Diet:	reef invertebrates

This small colorful wrasse is named for its vivid markings: the pinkish head is marked with horizontal green lines; the throat and belly are blue; scales on the fish's sides are marked by a vertical, crescent-shaped stripe followed by blue. The dark red dorsal fin is highlighted with green spots and traced by green and blue lines. A large dark spot on the dorsal fin and one just behind the eye are useful in identification. The colors are more intense in the larger males than in the females.

Like other members of the family Labridae, the ornate wrasse has an elongate soft body that is tapered and spindle-shaped. The dorsal fin is continuous, and like the other fins, rounded and soft. The pectoral fins are used extensively for swimming with up and down "flying" motions. The pointed snout has a terminal mouth and fleshy lips. Prominent canine teeth protrude slightly from the mouth and are effective in plucking small crustaceans and molluscs from the reef. Active predators by day, they shelter in reef crevices or bury in sand patches at night.

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. Wrasse 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.

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 Halichoeres

Species ornatissimus

ORNATE WRASSE
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Halichoeres ornatissimus

