

Sheepshead Minnow

Cyprinodon variegatus



PHOTO BY CARL FRANKLIN

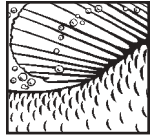


Sheepshead minnows are an important link in the coastal food chain. They eat plant materials including algae, and are then eaten by larger fish, turtles and wading birds.

Coastal Wetlands

Sheepshead Minnow

Cyprinodon variegatus



APPEARANCE

Length: Generally about 1.8 inches (4.6 cm); largest was 3.7 inches (9.3 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Silver, tubby bodies
- One *dorsal* (back) and one *anal fin* (fin closest to tail)
- No lateral line

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Along the Atlantic Coast and the Gulf of Mexico and south along the South American coastline

Diet: Plant material, algae, *detritus* (decomposing dead/animal matter), mosquitoes and smaller fish

Predators: Red drum, spotted seatrout, Atlantic croaker, turtles and some wading birds

Sexual maturity: At three months

Spawning season: In colder water, spawning occurs February through October; in warm waters, spawning can last throughout the year.

Nests: Males construct nest pits in bay bottoms to attract females.

Eggs: Females can spawn several times during the spawning season at 1-7 day intervals, depositing between 100 to 300 eggs per spawning period.

Incubation: From 4 to 12 days, depending on temperature

Young: Larvae have a total length of 0.16 inches (4 mm) when hatched and are yellowish in color. Hatching typically occurs during spring and summer.

Life span: Unknown

HABITAT

Sheepshead minnows are *euryhaline* (they can be found in freshwater as well as saltwater). They prefer quiet, shallow waters and have been found in saltwater bays and estuaries, as well as coastal inland areas such as creeks, canals and ditches.

BEHAVIOR

When mating, males turn bright blue, fiercely defending their nests. Sheepshead minnows dig into sediment to hide from predators or seek refuge from very warm or cold water. Sometimes, they hide in seagrass or algae. They travel in schools, especially when they have been frightened.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- This fish can live in water so shallow that it may be the only species there.
- They can survive water that has been deprived of oxygen by gulping air at the water's surface.
- Sheepshead minnows are also referred to as variegated minnow, sheepshead killifish, sheepshead pupfish, broad killifish and chubby.
- In one laboratory study, a single female sheepshead minnow produced 1,028 eggs over a 28-day period.
- The eggs are adhesive and stick to plants, the bay bottom and to each other.

SHEEPSHEAD MINNOWS AND PEOPLE

Sheepshead minnows are used by humans in a variety of ways: some fisherman use them as bait, collectors keep them in saltwater aquariums as pets and the Environmental Protection Agency studies sheepshead minnows to determine pollution levels in certain bodies of water.