

## Identification of the Freshwater Fishes of Virginia

Source: Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries website (<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/fish/>)

### Smallmouth Bass (*Micropterus dolomieu*)

Other Common Names  
Bronzeback, black bass

#### Identification

Coppery-brown above, with greenish- brown sides with darker vertical bars. Three dark bars radiate from the eye on the cheek and gill cover. Dorsal fin is not as deeply notched as the largemouth. Upper jaw extends back only in line with the middle of the eye. A 4 or 5 lb. fish is considered a trophy.



### Largemouth Bass (*Micropterus salmoides*)

Other Common Names  
Black bass, bigmouth

#### Identification

Basically dark greenish above fading to a whitish belly, but variable depending on the water it lives in. Shows a series of dark blotches that form a dark horizontal band along its midline to its tail. Named because of its big mouth. Upper jaw extends well beyond the eye. Dorsal fin deeply notched. Average weight is 2 to 4 lbs., with up to 10 lbs. occurring in some waters.



## **Spotted Bass (*Micropterus punctulatus*)**

### Other Common Names

Kentucky bass, spot

### Identification

Much like the largemouth and the smallmouth, it is called the "in-between" species. It is distinguished from the smallmouth by the dark, blotchy lateral band from head to tail. The back of spotted bass's upper jaw lines up with the middle rear of the eye, while largemouth jaws extend past the eye. It derives its name from the black spots on its belly scales. Most are about a 1 lb. or less.



## **Black Crappie (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*)**

### Other Common Names

papermouth, Calico bass, specks, speckled perch

### Identification

White. The black crappie is covered with dark, irregular blotches and has seven or rarely eight dorsal spines. It shows more yellowish and greenish on its sides and its caudal (tail) and anal fins are heavily flecked.



## **White Crappie (*Pomoxis annularis*)**

### Other Common Names

papermouth, Calico bass, specks, speckled perch

### Identification

The white crappie has six spines - rarely five - and it has noticeable vertical bars on its silvery sides as well as a light pearlescent color or iridescent blue and lavender. Both white and black crappie have protruding lower jaws.



## **Bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*)**

### Other Common Names

Bream, bluegill sunfish, sun perch

### Identification

Colors are variable. Dark green, olive-green, olive brown, or bluish-black on its back, fading to yellowish- green or silvery. Normally has five to seven vertical bars extending down on each side. Lower parts of its cheek and gill cover are bluish. Its □throat□ is yellow on females to bright orange on the male, brighter during spawning. Has a black, ear-like flap on its opercle (gill cover) and a black blotch at the back base of its spiny dorsal fin. Typically under 1lb. in Virginia.

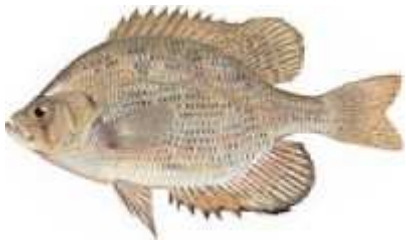


**Flier (*Centrarchus macropterus*)**

Other Common Names  
Round sunfish, millpond flier

Identification

A deep-bodied, almost round fish, with many spines on both dorsal and anal fins. Color is a yellow-green, or brassy-olive, to brownishgold, with a dark brown to black spot on each scale, appearing of rows of spots. A dark vertical streak extends downward from the eye to the lower edge of its cheek. It has large, rounded fins, much like a crappie, with a head and mouth similar in shape to a bluegill. Slow growing, they reach up to 10 inches in length.



**Green Sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*)**

Other Common Names  
Blue sunfish

Identification

Basically bluish green in color, with faint, alternating blue, brown and brassy gold stripes. Olive colored on its head with pale blue spots and wavy lines on its upper lip. Has a dark opercle (gill flap) spot and some orange and yellow-olive on its lower fins. Is a stocky, thick fish with a large head and large mouth.



**Pumpkinseed (*Lepomis gibbosus*)**

Other Common Names

Pond perch, sun perch, sunny

Identification

Dark, olive-green on its back, with mottled sides. Base color of sides, yellowish, spotted with orange, red and blue. Its belly is yellow to bright orange. Cheeks and gill covers marked with alternate worm-shaped bands of blue-green and yellow. Bluish-black gill cover flaps are edged with white, yellow, orange or blue, with a small half moon spot of red. Average 4 to 6 inches.



**Redbreast Sunfish (*Lepomis auritus*)**

Other Common Names

Yellowbreast sunfish, redbelly, red throat

Identification

Basically olive to brownish gray along the back, merging to blue with a golden cast along its sides and a bright orange to yellow underside. Has several irregular bluish stripes on its cheek and gill cover. Identifiable by a long, black opercular(gill) flap. Reaches about 8 inches.



## **Redear Sunfish (*Lepomis microlophus*)**

### Other Common Names

Shellcracker

### Identification

Yellow-green or olive, with faint vertical bars and random dark spots. During spawning, the margin of the male's gill cover flap turns bright red. Body is rounded like other sunfish and has a relatively small mouth. Pectoral fins are long and pointed. They grow faster and larger than other sunfish; 1 lb. fish not uncommon and often reaching 2 lbs.



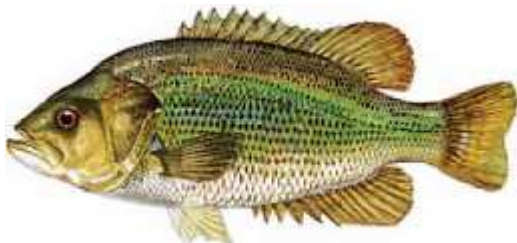
## **Roanoke Bass (*Ambloplites cavifrons*)**

### Other Common Names

Redeye, rock bass

### Identification

Robust body much like the rock bass but with dark, olivegreen to olivebrown back, fading to grayish sides and white belly. Has smaller scale spots than the rock bass and lighter small whitish or yellowish spots on its upper body. Has a slightly concave outline over the eyes. Checks scaleless or nearly so.



## **Warmouth (*Lepomis gulosus*)**

### Other Common Names

Openmouth, warmouth bass, Indian fish

### Identification

A large mouthed, robust fish with mottled sides and wavy lines on its cheek. Basically dark brownish above, with mottled and barred sides, and mottled or spotted fins. Can be olive-brown colored with greenish cast. Seldom gets larger than 8 or 9 inches.



## **Rock Bass (*Ambloplites rupestris*)**

### Other Common Names

Redeye, google eye, rock sunfish

### Identification

Short, robust body and fairly large mouth. Lower jaw protrudes slightly. Back is olive-green with sides tarnished gold or brassy colored. Each scale has a dark central spot. Large spots on its lower body forms a striped-like appearance. Has a discernable dark outline on its anal fin. Has wide vertical blotches on its sides and a dark spot on its cheek. Average 6 to 8 inches, but will reach 12 to 14 inches and 1 1/2 to 2 lbs. Checks with obvious scales.



### **Hybrid Striped Bass (*Morone hybrid*)**

#### Other Common Names

hybrid, hybrid striper

#### Identification

This is a striped bass x white bass cross, with a body shape between that of striper and white bass. Silvery-white with up to 8 dark broken stripes; first stripe below lateral line complete to tail. Tongue tooth patches are intermediate between white and striped bass. Typically less than 10 lbs.



### **Striped Bass (*Morone saxatilis*)**

#### Other Common Names

striper, rockfish

#### Identification

True bass family. Streamlined, elongate body; coloration shades from dark olive above through silvery sides to a white belly; 7 to 8 prominent unbroken black stripes originate behind the head and extend to the tail; more prominent than on the white bass. Two spines on the gill cover; two patch of teeth on tongue. Ten to 15 lb. fish are common with 30 to 40 lb. + fish landed each season.





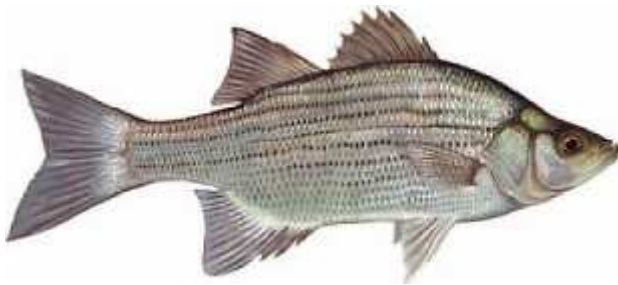
### **White Bass (*Morone chrysops*)**

#### Other Common Names

Silver bass, linesides

#### Identification

Temperate true bass family. Light greenish back, light yellowish-green to silver sides to a silvery white below, 6 to 8 horizontal faint stripes; stripes below lateral line are broken; the first stripe below the lateral line is not complete to tail. Deep bodied with distinctively arched back, considerably smaller than its striped bass cousin. Single spine on gill cover; variable patch of teeth on tongue. Commonly reaches 1/2 to 2 lbs.



### **White Perch (*Morone americana*)**

#### Other Common Names

stiffback, silver perch

#### Identification

Not really a perch, but a member of the temperate bass family along with white and striped bass. Averages 8 to 10 inches but reaches up to 2 lbs. Silver gray above, fading to silvery white below with no longitudinal lines. Has a deep notch between spiny dorsal and soft-rayed dorsal. No teeth on tongue.



**Sauger (*Stizostedion canadense*)**

Other Common Names

sand pike, jack salmon

Identification

A member of the perch family, very similar to walleye. Its best identifying marks are its spotted spiny dorsal. Its body colors are more of a dusky-brown to yellowish-olive, with large, irregular patches on its side, peppered in between with smaller dark markings and a white underside. Very slim build in comparison to walleye. Has a silvery, reflective eye similar to the walleye's, and a mouth full of canine teeth. When handled, it flares out its gills, flattens its head and shivers as if bracing itself for the hook removal. Typically 10 to 19 inches.



**Walleye (*Stizostedion vitreum vitreum*)**

Other Common Names

walleyed pike, jack

Identification

Largest member of the perch family (Percidae). Grows up to 21 inches, 3 and 4 lbs. by age three. Brassy-olive sides flecked with green and gold, and mottled by 6 to 8 obscure marking on top, white belly. Dorsal fins completely separate and unmarked, except for a distinct dark blotch at the rear base of the front dorsal fin. White blotch on tip of lower tail fin. The eye has a milky cornea, hence the name walleye.



## **Yellow Perch (*Perca flavescens*)**

### Other Common Names

ringed perch, raccoon perch, striped perch

### Identification

Member of the perch family, which includes the walleye, sauger and numerous small darters. Generally olive-green above, fading down the sides to green or yellow-green, to yellow or golden yellow. Has eight vertical dusky bars on its side and a silvery, underside. Dorsal fins have a distinctive dusky blotch. Ventral and anal fins are yellow to orange, turning a bright orange on breeding males. Average 6 to 8 inches, but commonly reach 14 to 15 inches and 1 1/2 to 2 lbs.



## **Chain Pickerel (*Esox niger*)**

### Other Common Names

chainsides, jackpike, pike

### Identification

A member of the pike family, it is named for its chain-like markings on its sides. Also has a black vertical mark under its eye. Normally its fin is unmarked. Averages 1.5 to 3 lbs and tends to be a little stockier than its cousin the northern pike. Fully scaled on both cheek and gill cover.



**Muskellunge (*Esox masquinongy*)**

Other Common Names

musky, muskie

Identification

Largest member of the pike family. Normally olive to dark gray on its back, with grayish to bluish to yellowish sides. Sides may have faint vertical bars, spots or blotches.



**Northern Pike (*Esox lucius*)**

Other Common Names

pike, pickerel, jackfish

Identification

Still fishing with large minnows or other baitfish, or casting or trolling with large spoons, spinner-bucktails or crankbaits.



## **Brook Trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*)**

### Other Common Names

native, brookie, mountain trout, speckled trout

### Identification

Most colorful of our trout. Back is a dark olivegreen with light wavy or wormy markings. Sides are lighter, sometimes with a bluish cast, yellowish spots and red spots with a light blue halo around them. Belly is white with bright orange fins. Fins have outer edges of white with a black line separating it from the orange. Ten to 16 inches and 1 to 2 lbs. is a good-sized brookie. Native brookies seldom grow beyond 12 inches in Virginia streams.



## **Brown Trout (*Salmo trutta*)**

### Other Common Names

English brown trout, German brown trout, European trout

### Identification

Colors vary widely. Natural wild browns are olivebrown on the back, lighter on the sides, brilliant yellow-gold on their underside, with yellowish-green, unspotted fins. They have numerous black or dark brown spots on their sides, along with a sprinkling of red spots encircled with light blue rings. Hatchery-reared browns tend to be more silvery with dark brownish above with light yellow undersides and spots of a lighter shade.



## **Rainbow Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)**

### Other Common Names

Rainbow

### Identification

The variety of rainbows has resulted in a variety of colors, hues and markings. Normally the back is olive-green with a silvery cast on its sides fading to a silvery white belly. A pinkish or light rosy red band extends from its cheek to near its tail. Normally, they are well spotted with black spots, but vary from large spots to tiny specks to no markings at all.



## **Blue Catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*)**

### Other Common Names

forked-tailed cat, humpback blue, chucklehead

### Identification

Heavy-bodied with a wide head and high spot forward of center near the head called the dorsal hump. Upper jaw projects well beyond the lower. Bluish-gray body above, fading to white on sides and belly. No spots and a deeply forked tail. Smaller blue cats are often confused with channel catfish. Blue cats are often confused with channel catfish. Small channel cats typically will have spots lacking in small blue cats. However, large channel cats and medium-sized blue cats can be more difficult to tell apart, often having similar coloration and general body shape. The margin, or edge, of the anal fin can be used to identify these fish; blue cats have an anal fin with a very straight margin, in channel cats the anal fin has a rounded margin. Biologists and anglers can definitively distinguish between the two species by counting anal fin rays; 30-35 rays on the blue cat's anal fin versus the channel cat's 25 to 29 rays.



### **Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*)**

#### Other Common Names

spotted catfish, speckled catfish, silver catfish, fork-tailed catfish

#### Identification

Deeply forked tail. Upper jaw is longer than, and overlaps the lower. When small, its smooth-skinned body is usually spotted; however, these spots disappear in older fish (can be confused with blues catfish, see identification of blue catfish). Has a small dorsal fin with stiff spine standing high on its back. It has eight barbels, or feelers, four located under the lower jaw, two on top and one at each end of the upper jaw. Barbels contain taste buds, which help it find food. Varies in color, although generally dark brownish to slate-gray on top, fading to light brownish-gray on the sides. Has 25 to 29 rays on its anal fin.



### **Flathead Catfish (*Pylodictis olivaris*)**

#### Other Common Names

mud cat, shovelhead cat, yellow cat

#### Identification

Broadly flattened head with a lower jaw that projects beyond the upper jaw. Tail only slightly notched and adipose fin is relatively large. Body is yellowish or cream-colored, with black, dark brown or olive-brown mottling on back and sides, fading to dirty white or yellow. Younger fish have darker, bolder markings and the upper tip of the tails have white, triangular patches.



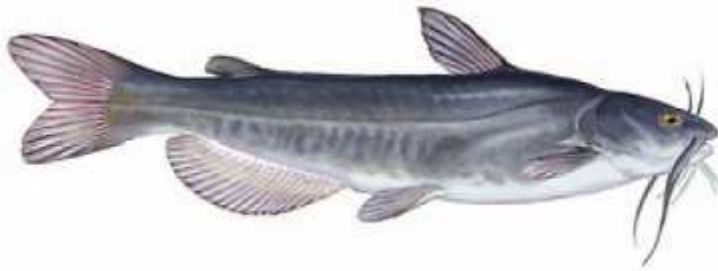


## **White Catfish (*Ameiurus catus*)**

Other Common Names  
forked-tailed cat

### Identification

One of the bullhead catfishes. Average 8 to 18 inches, rarely 20. Has a moderately forked tail, a stocky body with its upper jaw extending slightly beyond lower. Color is basically bluegray above, fading to gray on its sides with a white underside. Occasionally mottled light gray on its sides.



## **Alewife (*Alosa pseudoharengus*)**

Other Common Names  
river herring

### Identification

Blueback herring and alewife are almost identical looking; the best way to tell them apart is an internal difference, blueback have a black membrane that lines the abdominal cavity and alewife have a light colored one with few, scattered spots. Blueback are bluish along the back with a silvery head; alewife is grayish- blue above, with a bronze head. Maximum length is 12 to 15 inches and less than 1 lb.





**American Shad (*Alosa sapidissima*)**

Other Common Names

white shad

Identification

Largest of the river herring Family, American shad average around 3 lbs., with fish up to 6 lbs. common. Silver-sided with greenish-blue back; deep bodied from the side, narrow and symmetrical top to bottom head-on; row of dark spots on the sides, running back from the gill cover; the upper and lower jaws are equal length when the mouth is closed.



**Blueback Herring (*Alosa aestivalis*)**

Other Common Names

river herring

Identification

Blueback herring and alewife are almost identical looking; the best way to tell them apart is an internal difference, blueback have a black membrane that lines the abdominal cavity and alewife have a light colored one with few, scattered spots. Blueback are bluish along the back with a silvery head; alewife is grayish- blue above, with a bronze head. Maximum length is 12 to 15 inches and less than 1 lb.



## **Hickory Shad (*Alosa mediocris*)**

### Other Common Names

hickory, silver shad

### Identification

River herring Family, averaging around 1 lb., with fish up to 2 lbs. common. Silver-sided with grayish-green back and a prominent dark spot, followed by a row of lighter spots (especially when fresh), on the upper part of the side just behind the gill cover; body long but compressed, asymmetrical top to bottom and in cross section it is wedge-shaped; the lower jaw protrudes significantly beyond the upper jaw when the mouth is closed. Each scale on the sides has a small dark spot.



## **Bowfin (*Amia calva*)**

### Other Common Names

grindle, grinnel

### Identification

Bowfin are living relics, with primitive roots back 70 million years ago. Has a long, soft-rayed dorsal which arches in a bow over most of the length of its body. Tail is rounded, with distinct black spot rimmed with orange on males; black spot on females faint or absent and no orange rim. Its back and sides are brownish-green or olive-green, with mottled sides fading to yellowish or white. During spawning, its underside turns a bright yellow-green. Body is cylindrical and a wide flattened head, almost snake-like, with deepset dark eyes. Snout is rounded with short nasal barbels. Mouth is large and has conical-shaped teeth. Note: While the bowfin shares similar coloration and body shape with the northern snakehead (recently introduced to the Potomac River), the anal fin of a bowfin is much shorter than that of the snakehead, and snakeheads will not have the spot found on bowfin.



## **Carp (*Cyprinus carpio*)**

### Other Common Names

German carp, European carp, mud bass, buglemouth bass

### Identification

Very large member of the minnow family. Thick bodied, with a brassy sheen, humped back, very large scales, large lips, barbels extending from lips, and spines on the front of dorsal and anal fins. Commonly attain 15 to 20 lbs.



## **Longnose Gar (*Lepisosteus osseus*)**

### Other Common Names

Billy gar, billfish, garfish, garpike

### Identification

Living relic of prehistoric past; family dates back 245 million years. Nothing in Virginia is even remotely similar to the gar. The long narrow beak-like jaw, laden with sharp teeth, is the unmistakable feature. Very long, cylindrical fish with dorsal and anal fins set well back on the body, and a large rounded tail fin; note the armament of very large, hard, sharp, bony scales. Brownisholive on its back, fading to yellowish- or olive-green to white on its belly; 2 to 3 ft in length is not uncommon.

