

Saltwater Fishes of Texas

*A Guide to Knowing and Catching
Bay and Gulf Fishes*

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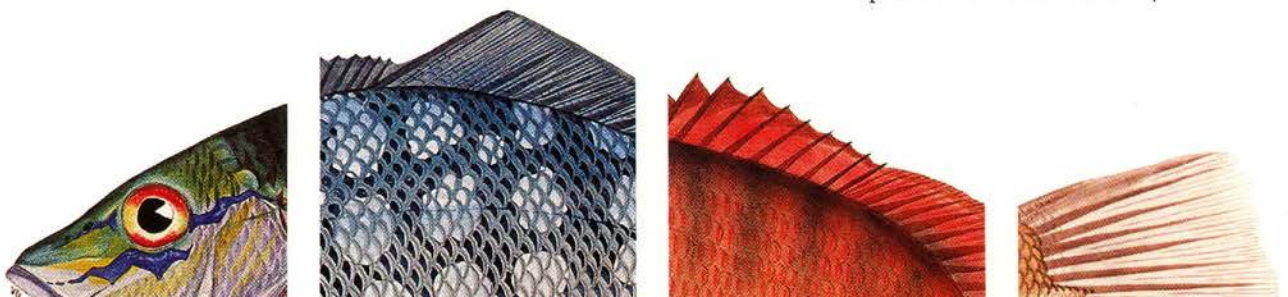
is the definitive guide to the common sportfishes of Texas' bay and gulf waters.

Illustrated with beautifully drawn, anatomically correct color illustrations, 78 species of fishes are described in short, concise, yet authoritative blocks of text that highlight pertinent biological facts, along with providing tips for saltwater fishing success.

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Sabine Lake

Galveston Bay

Matagorda Bay

San Antonio Bay

Aransas Bay

Corpus Christi Bay

Upper Laguna Madre

Baffin Bay

*Lower
Laguna
Madre*

**GULF OF
MEXICO**

Clemens III

THE TEXAS COAST

The Texas coast supports a large sport and commercial fishery. Commercial landings during 1990 totaled more than 98 million pounds, with some 85 million being shrimp.

Approximately 370 miles in length, the Texas coast extends from the Louisiana border at Sabine Pass to the Rio Grande at Brownsville. There are eight major bay systems along this coast, varying in size from 70-square-mile Sabine Lake, half of which is in Louisiana, to 581-square-mile Galveston Bay, for a total surface area of more than 2,100 square miles. Add to this another 3,800 miles in the Gulf of Mexico, since Texas' jurisdiction extends 10.35 statute miles into the Gulf, and the total area of Gulf and bay water in the state exceeds 5,900 square miles (3.7 million acres).

The habitat of the Texas coast varies tremendously from one end of the coast to the other. To the east, annual rainfall exceeds 55 inches per year, resulting in brackish bays which normally are fresh near the mouths of rivers. An extensive coastal marsh extends from Sabine Lake to Galveston Bay.

Farther southwest along the coast, rainfall diminishes and the bays become more salty and less turbid. The bay bottoms become more sandy and the coastal marshes are replaced by stands of submerged marine vegetation. South of Corpus Christi, rainfall averages about 25 inches per year and inland it becomes drier. High evaporation and little rainfall and runoff result in bays or lagoons where salinity often exceeds that of adjacent Gulf waters.

The upper coastal bays support a mixture of marine life, from shrimp, crabs and oysters to finfish such as the spotted seatrout, red drum, black drum, sand seatrout, croaker and flounder.

To the south, the oyster concentrations decrease and disappear at about Corpus Christi and reappear in the lower extremes of the lower Laguna Madre. The white shrimp, important on the upper coast, also decreases in abundance and is replaced almost totally in the Laguna Madre by pink shrimp. The brown shrimp, our most valuable shrimp, does well in all except the freshest and saltiest areas.

The salty waters of the Laguna Madre particularly are well adapted to finfish production; species such as spotted seatrout, red drum, sheepshead, black drum and flounder thrive. Shellfish (shrimp, crabs and oysters) generally do not do well there.

The offshore waters of Texas are more uniform than are the bay waters. However, the low salinity of the upper coastal bays persists to a lesser degree offshore. There also is a marked difference in the slope of the ocean floor between upper and lower coast, with depth increasing much more rapidly offshore from Laguna Madre than offshore from Sabine Lake. Important fish and shellfish in the Gulf include shrimp, snappers, groupers, mackerels, a sizeable assortment of sharks and numerous other species.

CATCHING SALTWATER FISH

Many of the methods used to catch freshwater fish also will work in salt water. Others must be modified. Freshwater tackle may not be suitable since it usually is lightweight and subject to corrosion. Plugs used in fresh water seldom work in salty conditions, but some of the spoons are usable.

Saltwater fishing generally is divided into wade fishing, boat fishing and bank or pier fishing, with surf fishing as an additional type. The most successful fishermen go out often and use a variety of techniques. One good method involves using a small boat to go to reefs, shoals or holes in the bay, hunting until fish are found. Some of the best anglers use this technique, going to shallow areas, usually less than waist deep, where they wade and cast into likely spots. Others stay in the boat and drift over the flats, usually dragging a small anchor to slow but not stop the boat. In the clear, shallow water of the southern coast, sight fishing is common. This simply involves cruising slowly until fish are evident. Signs include large swirls in the water, roiled patches, shadows or the tails of fish visible at the surface. In deeper water, a common sign is a slick or a flock of agitated sea gulls diving after small bait fish driven to the surface by larger fish.

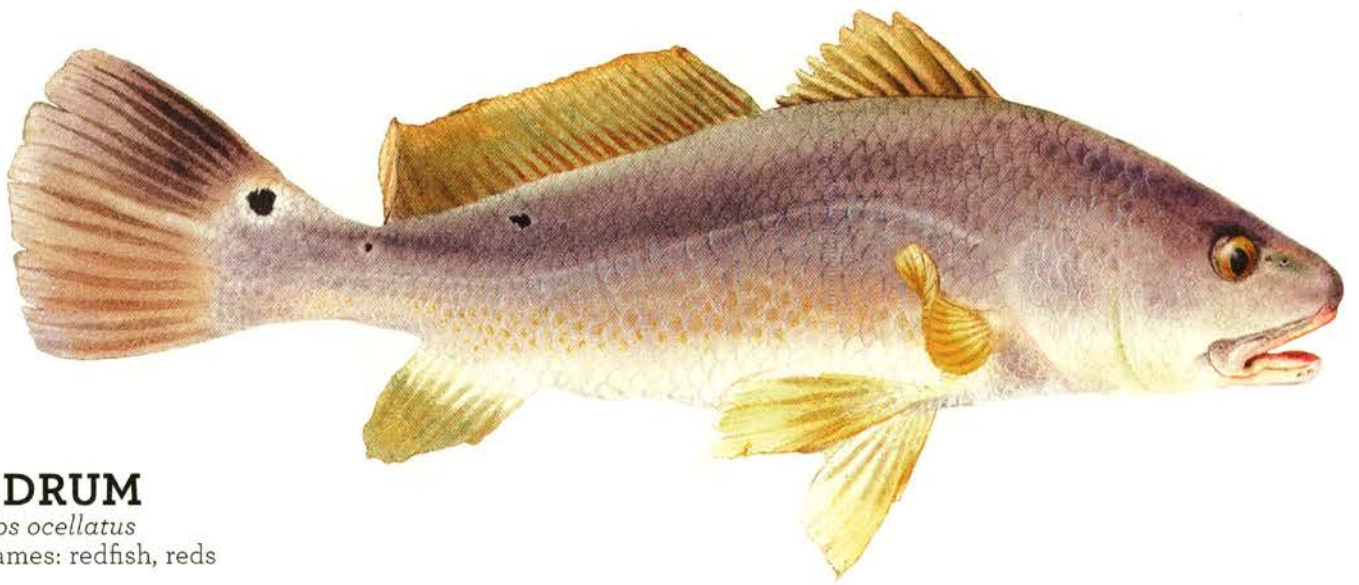
Persons unfamiliar with the coast can learn a lot by taking a bay fishing trip on a charter boat. These boats are capable of handling from four to several dozen people and usually are manned by experienced fishermen who know good fishing areas. Questioning the crew about methods and techniques is an accepted practice. The smaller boats usually are more expensive, but they can offer more personalized service.

Piers and jetties in the bays and Gulf are used by many fishermen and, at times, fishing action is fast and furious. Experienced fishermen seek out lighted piers in the bay and often do not start fishing until after midnight. Daytime fishing is less productive, but small piers away from crowds can yield good results. The larger jetties and public piers in the Gulf depend on "runs" of fish for action. At such times, various fish move in or by and good catches can be made. Between runs, action usually is slow.

Bank fishing normally is not successful in salt water unless deep water is at hand. Wading out from shore into water two or three feet deep can be an improvement. During cold weather of several days' duration, fish tend to congregate in deep basins and channels, and bank fishing can be excellent then. Lures, moved slowly near the bottom, live bait fish under corks or on the bottom, and even cut bait can work wonders. Slopes of channels often yield more fish than the deeper center.

Surf fishing is in a class by itself. Heavier tackle is required and conditions usually are rougher. The most successful fishermen drive along the beach looking for signs of fish or for locations where fish are likely to be. Deep cuts near shore, schools of fish near the surface, fish-eating birds feeding, and heavy swirls indicate fish. Some of the very best fishing is during or immediately after rough, cold weather when large cut baits are used. When clear water comes in near shore, various lures and spoons are used to catch red drum and seatrout. Bait stealers pose problems in summer, but even the good fish can be caught if they can be spotted.

Caution should be a byword in saltwater fishing. All boat safety rules should be observed. Going out in boats without life preservers aboard for everyone is not only illegal but also dangerous. Wade fishermen should move slowly and avoid stepping off into potholes or deep channels. With a little effort and care, saltwater fishing can provide a rich reward.

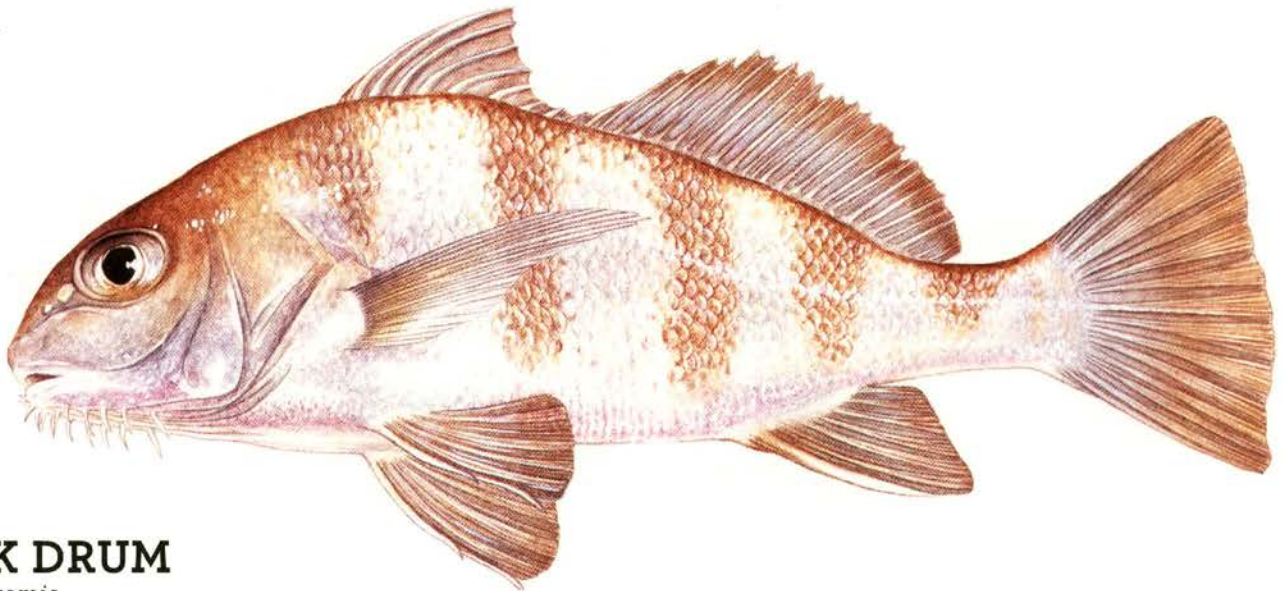


RED DRUM

Sciaenops ocellatus

Other names: redfish, reds

The most distinguishing mark on the red drum is a large black spot at the base of the tail, usually one on each side. Color ranges from a deep blackish coppery color to almost silver. The most common color is reddish bronze. Red drum is a fast growing fish that may reach a length of 5 feet (60 inches) and weigh over 50 pounds. The fish feed in a head-down position searching the bottom for crabs, shrimp, marine worms and small fish. For the first three years of their lives, red drum prefer the shallow water (1-4 feet deep) of bays where they can be found over all bottom types preferring, however, areas with submerged vegetation and soft mud. As the fish mature, they move from the bays to the Gulf of Mexico where they remain for the rest of their lives. Successful anglers fish shallow, grassy flats where schools are sometimes seen "tailing" the surface as they feed in a vertical position. Lures or natural baits should be fished on or near the bottom, with care taken not to spook the schools. Piers, jetties and the surf are good in fall and winter; rough weather provides the best action. Red drum are excellent table fare.



BLACK DRUM

Pogonias cromis

Other names: drum

One of the most characteristic features of black drum is the presence of barbels or whiskers on the lower jaw. Young fish are silvery gray with four or five dark vertical bars on their side that disappear with age. Adults range in color from dark gray to silvery black or bronze. Black drum can grow to over 50 inches in length and reach weights in excess of 80 pounds. Black drum feed on marine worms, shrimp, crabs, small fish and mollusks. Three large plates of teeth in the throat are used to crush shells. The barbels (or whiskers) are used to locate food by feel and smell. The fish can adapt to a wide range of habitats from shallow bay waters to Gulf waters more than 100 feet deep. They are found in extremely warm shallow flats of the Laguna Madre during the summer and survive better than most fish in freezing weather. They can also live in freshwater or in saltwater twice as salty as the Gulf of Mexico. Small black drum have firm, tasty flesh but larger fish often are coarse and parasitized with "spaghetti worms." These are unsightly but harmless to humans.

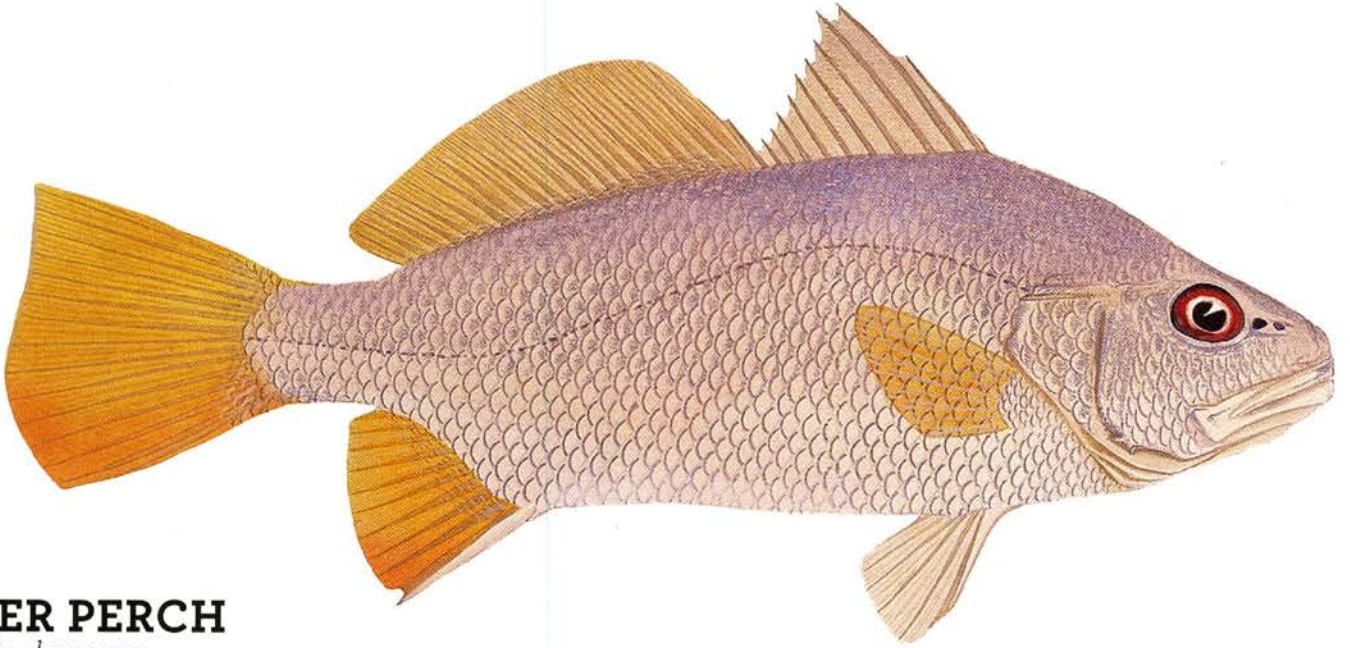


SPOT

Leiostomus xanthurus

Other names: spot croaker

Spot have a silvery body with a dark spot above and behind the gill slit. They are a very common bay and shallow Gulf species. Most spot only live a year with adults growing to a maximum length of about 13 inches. They feed on bottom-dwelling organisms such as shrimp, marine worms, small shellfish and small fish. Although the flesh is edible, it is not considered prime along the Gulf. Spot are therefore not as popular in Texas as on the Atlantic coast where they are a major sport and commercial food species.



SILVER PERCH

Bairdiella chrysoura

Other names: yellowtail

The yellowtail, or silver perch, is found from Texas to New York. The distinguishing characteristics are a translucent, yellow tail fin and a brilliant, silver body. Average size is about 6 inches and the maximum is reported to be about 12 inches. The yellowtail is a notorious bait stealer and is considered a trash fish by sport anglers. The fish is edible but its small size prevents utilization as a desirable food species. Spawning occurs in the bays in spring and the eggs are buoyant. This species' diet consists primarily of fish, crustaceans and worms.

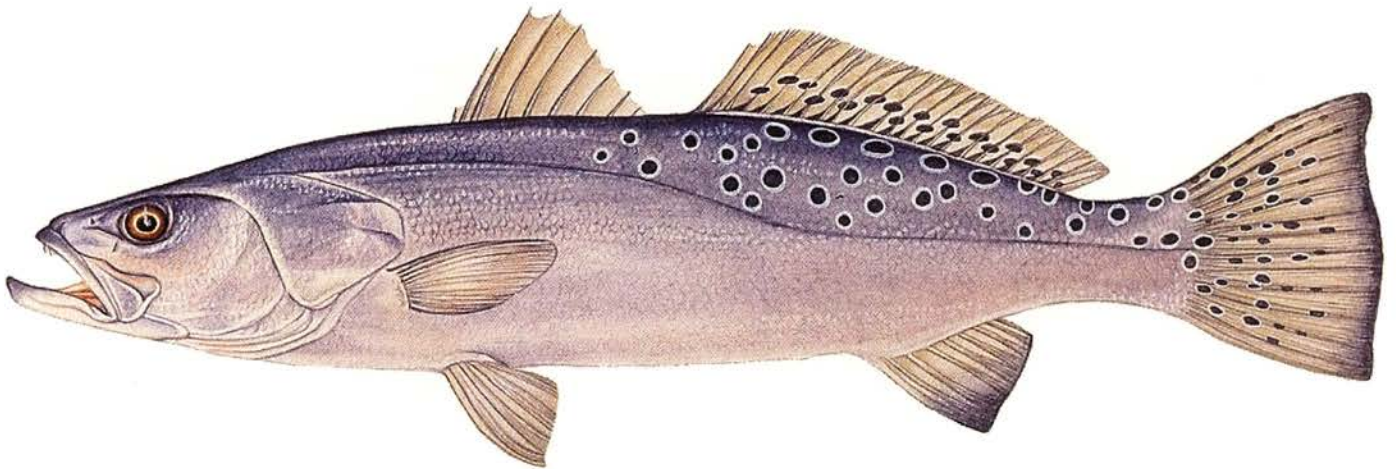


ATLANTIC CROAKER

Micropogon undulatus

Other names: golden croaker, croaker

Atlantic croaker have a row of small barbels (whiskers) on each side of the lower jaw. The young are silvery and older fish are brassy yellow with short, irregular brown streaks formed by spots on the scales in the middle of the body. Atlantic croaker are one of the most common bottom-dwelling bay species. They usually occur in the deeper portions of the bays over soft mud or mud-sand bottom. Croaker feed on a variety of bottom dwelling creatures such as shrimp, marine worms, small fish, small crabs and other small crustaceans. Atlantic croaker reach a maximum size of 28 inches in length and about 5 pounds in weight. The name "croaker" is derived from the fish's ability to make croaking sounds. The best bait is a small piece of peeled shrimp fished on the bottom.

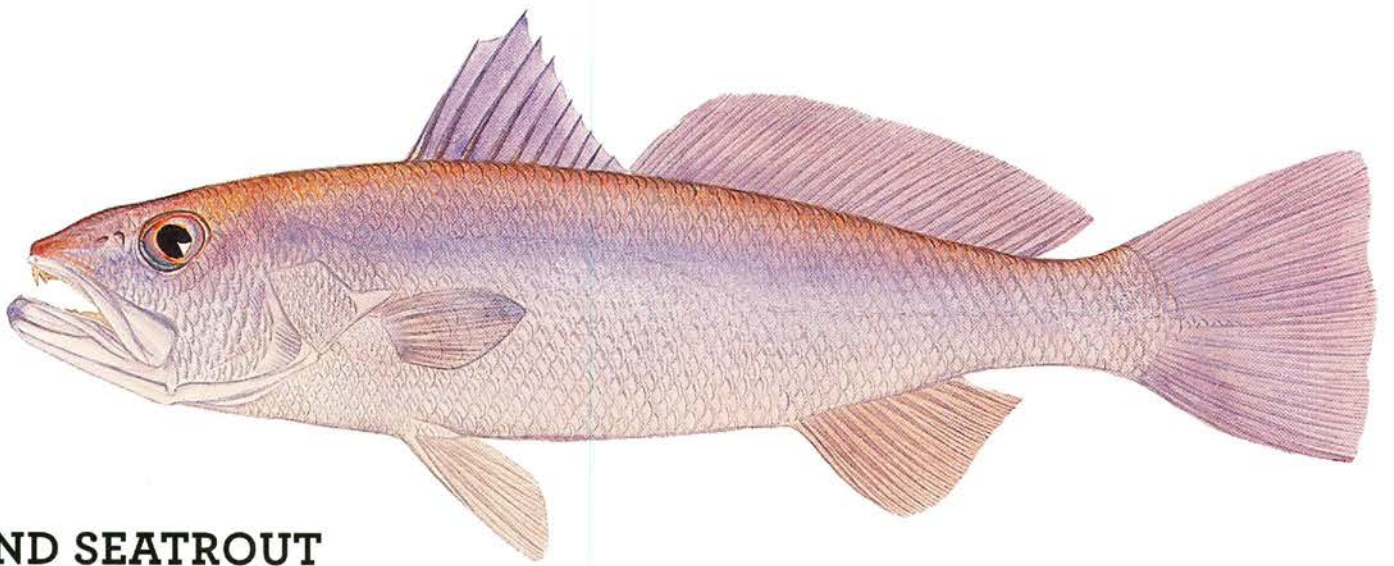


SPOTTED SEATROUT

Cynoscion nebulosus

Other names: speckled trout, speck, trout

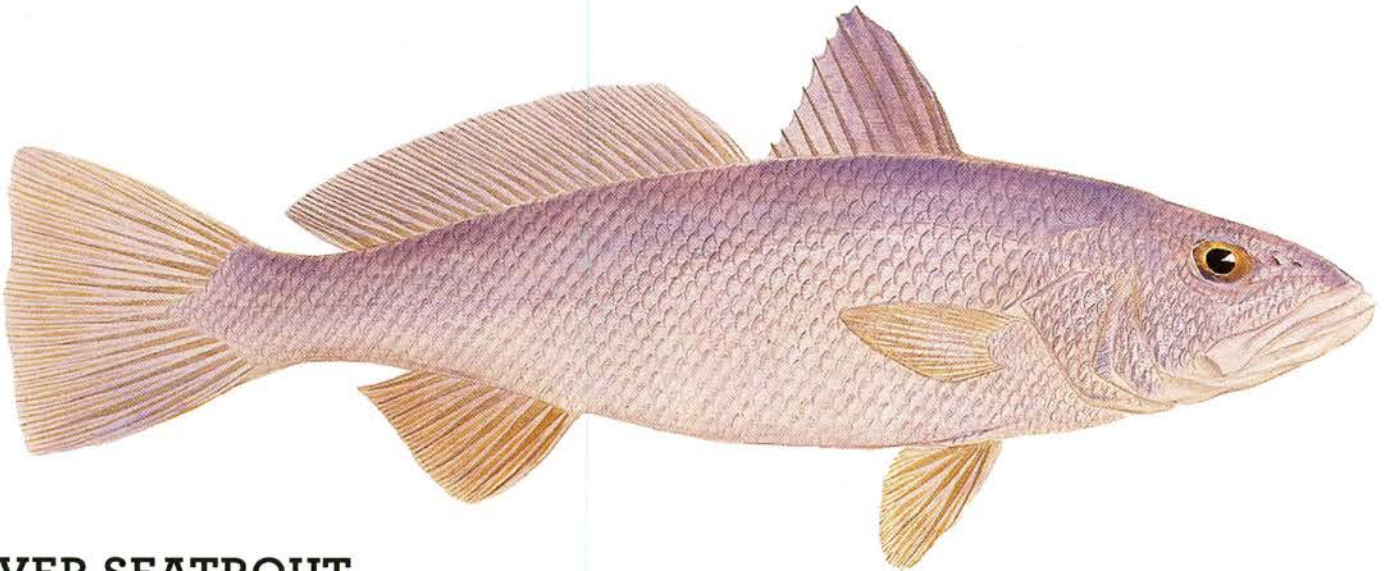
Spotted seatrout have silvery sides, a greenish back and numerous dark spots on the upper sides of the body and on the dorsal (top) and caudal (tail) fins. The mouth is orange on the inside with one or two prominent canine teeth in tip of upper jaw. Spotted seatrout prefer shallow water habitats with extensive submerged vegetation (grass bed), however they are also found in areas without submerged vegetation such as oyster reefs, shell reefs and marshes. Small spotted seatrout feed primarily on shrimp and some small fish; large spotted seatrout feed almost entirely on fish such as mullet or croaker. Spotted seatrout reach lengths in excess of 34 inches. In Texas, they seldom exceed 13 pounds in weight. Speckled trout mostly are caught near oyster reefs with live shrimp as bait. They also are taken by wading in shallows, from piers, jetties and shore.



SAND SEATROUT

Cynoscion arenarius
Other names: sandtrout

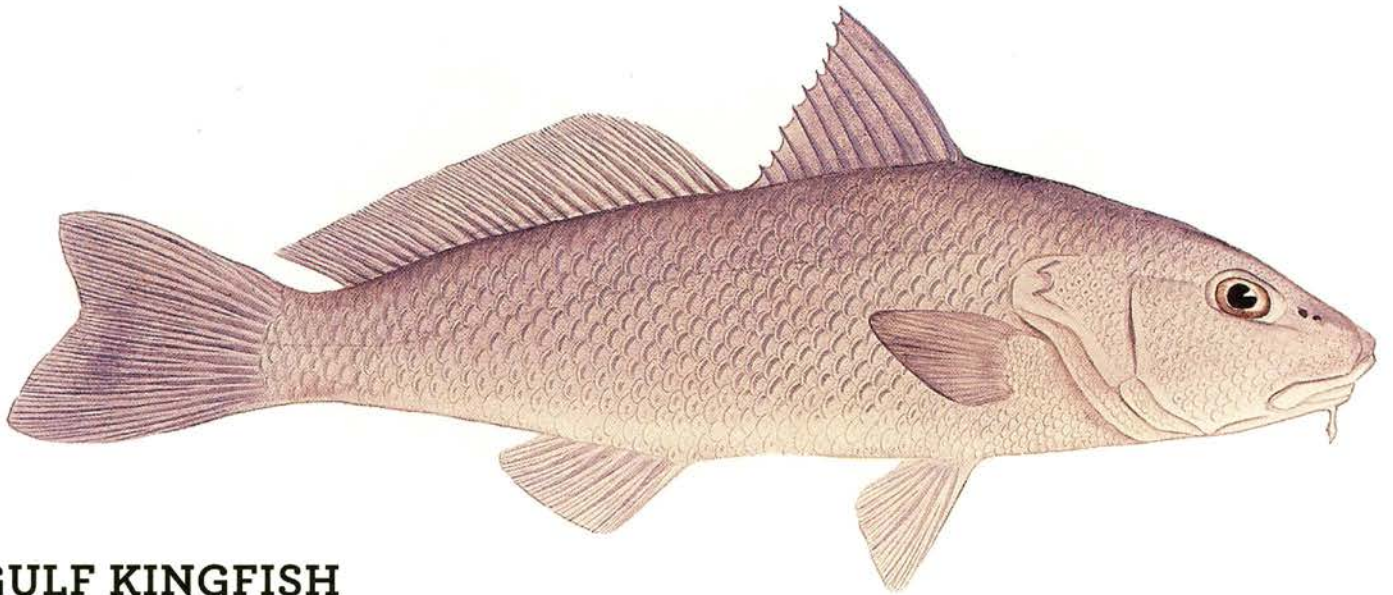
Sand seatrout is distinguished from the spotted seatrout by the absence of spots and a pinkish sheen on the upper sides. The species has one or two canine teeth on the point of the upper jaw. Sand seatrout do not grow as large as spotted seatrout, attaining not much more than 20 inches in length. Sand seatrout feed on fish and crustaceans. They are common in deeper bays, channels and the shallow Gulf. The best bait type is cut fish or shrimp fished on or near the bottom. They are attracted to light and many fishermen have success using jigs under lights or around gas flares.



SILVER SEATROUT

Cynoscion nothus
Other names: sandtrout, gulftrout, silver weakfish

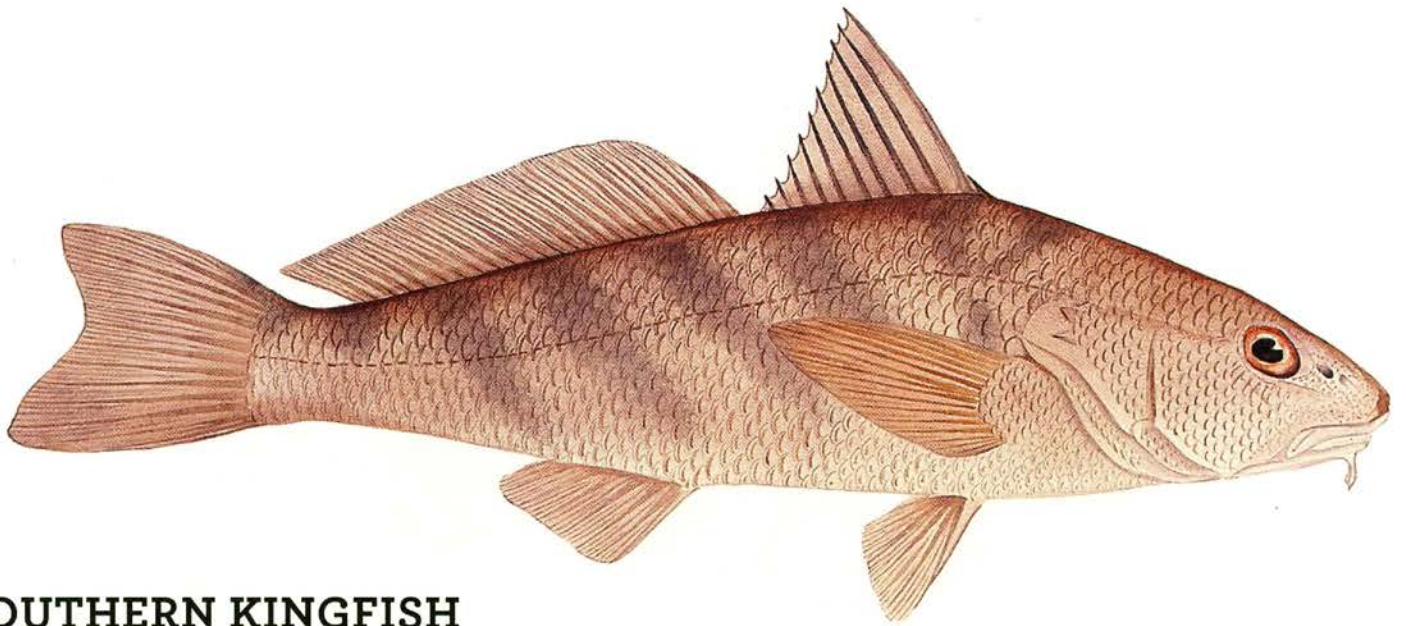
The silver seatrout, or Gulf sandtrout, is found from Texas to Maryland but is most abundant along the Gulf coast. Its features closely resemble those of the sand seatrout, although it achieves a much larger size. Individuals have been recorded up to 5 pounds. It is primarily a Gulf species but is caught in the Texas bays and is not uncommon. The primary habitat is from 3 to 10 fathoms in the Gulf. Spawning is believed to occur in the fall. It feeds primarily on fish and crustaceans and the best bait type is cut fish or shrimp fished on or near the bottom. The fighting ability of this species is well-known. The initial strike is very fierce, as if the fish took the bait at full speed, and many a rod has been pulled from an unsuspecting angler's hands. The eating quality is very good but the fish should be put on ice immediately after catching, to retain its firmness.



GULF KINGFISH

Menticirrhus littoralis

Other names: whiting, gulf whiting



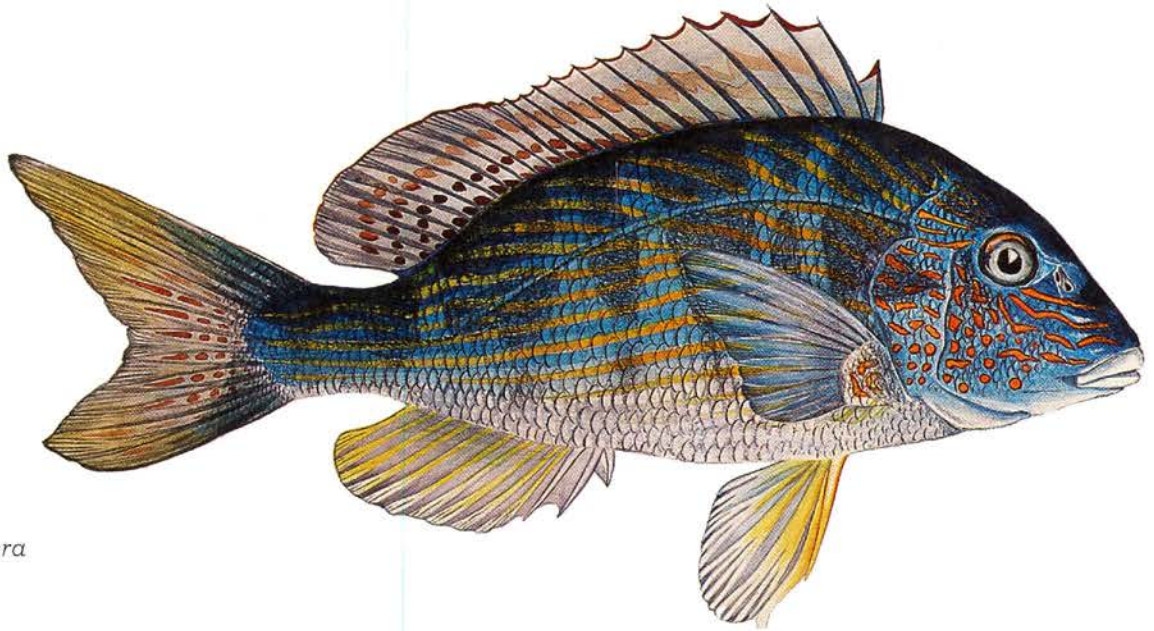
SOUTHERN KINGFISH

Menticirrhus americanus

Other names: whiting, shoemaker

Southern kingfish and Gulf kingfish both are called whiting on the Texas coast. They are found in abundance in the surf area along the Gulf beach and their range extends to Chesapeake Bay on the Atlantic coast. The southern kingfish is silver-gray to brown in color, with darker markings often more mottled than a regular pattern. The underside is white. The Gulf kingfish is silvery gray above, paler on the underside, with no dark markings on the sides. They normally are found in smaller schools in the Gulf surf and in the bays near the passes. On the East Coast they are reported to spawn in the bays in late spring and summer, but in Texas they are believed to spawn in the Gulf of Mexico. The whiting primarily feed on bottom-dwelling organisms such as worms and crustaceans. The best bait is peeled shrimp fished on the bottom. The average size is about 11 inches and less than 1 pound in weight. Maximum size is about 18 inches long and 2 pounds in weight. These species are of minor importance as sport species because of their small size.



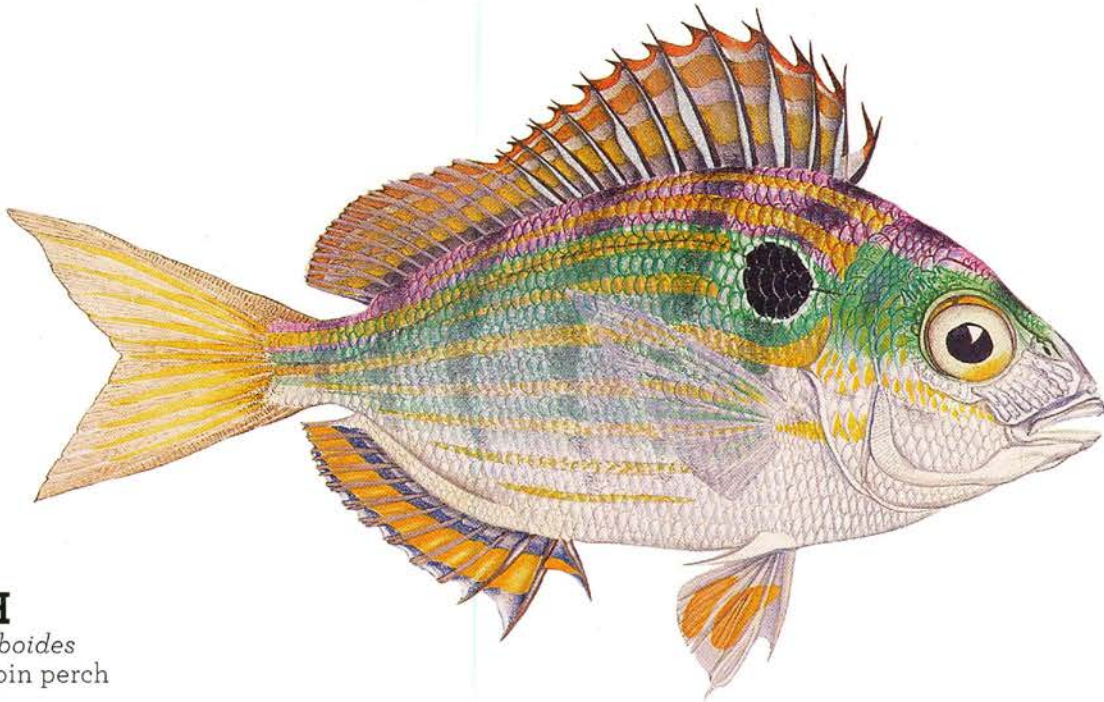


PIGFISH

Othopristis chrysoptera

Other names: piggy, piggy perch, grunt

Pigfish, known locally as piggy perch, are characterized by irregular barring on the cheeks, a mottled appearance, or indistinct, irregular vertical bars. Often mistaken for pinfish, its dorsal spines are smaller, the eye is smaller and the distance from eye to mouth is greater. They are much less abundant. Like other grunts, pigfish are vocal and may “chatter” after capture. Adults spawn in the Gulf and the young grow up in the bays, living in grassy areas or on shoals. Maximum length is about 15 inches, but fish over 8 inches long are uncommon. Pigfish feed on small crustaceans and mollusks but also will take small fragments of other food. Many are caught along the slopes of channels by fishermen using cut bait on bottom rigs. The flesh is edible, but most pigfish are used as excellent live bait for larger fish such as seatrout.



PINFISH

Lagodon rhomboides

Other names: pin perch

Pinfish are aptly named for the sharp spines in the dorsal and anal fins and for a single, small, forward-protruding dorsal spine. Widespread in the bays, they also are common in the Gulf, particularly around piers, jetties and wharfs. The color is greenish with yellow tinges and the belly is white. A dark spot near the shoulder may be pronounced or blurred. Pinfish spawn in the Gulf in early spring. Growth is slow. A year-old fish is about 3 inches long, a two-year-old about 5 inches and a few exceed 8 inches. Small mollusks, crustaceans, fish and vegetation comprise the usual diet. A notorious bait stealer, the pinfish is still a favorite, particularly for children armed with poles, lines and tiny hooks. The fish readily accepts bits of shrimp, cut fish, squid, or smaller bait. The flesh is edible but not highly sought and pinfish are used mostly as live or cut bait for larger fish.



SHEEPSHEAD

Archosargus probatocephalus
Other names: sargo

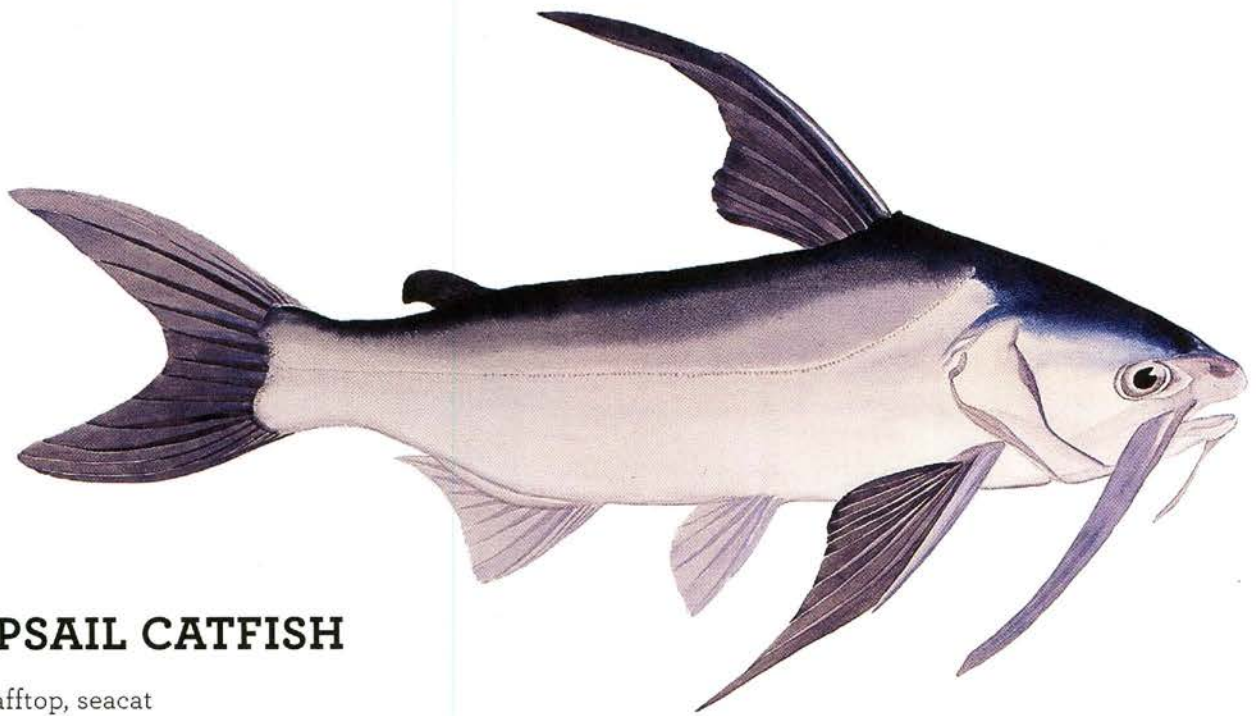
Sheepshead are easily recognized by the presence of a vivid black and white vertical bars along both sides of a laterally flattened body. Sheepshead also possess large, incisor like teeth which are used for nibbling barnacles off submerged structures. Sheepshead are relatively fast growers, reaching lengths of 25 inches and weights of 13 pounds. Experienced sheepshead fishermen use small fiddler crabs for bait. Alertness is essential, since the fish are adept bait stealers. Sheepshead are most often encountered around some type of underwater structure, such as pier pilings, bulkheads, and jetty rocks. Fishermen catching sheepshead should handle them with care, since these frisky fish possess an impressive array of spines along the dorsal, pectoral, pelvic and anal fins. Although sheepshead are difficult to clean, the flesh is excellent.



ATLANTIC CUTLASSFISH

Trichiurus lepturus
Other names: ribbonfish

The Atlantic cutlassfish, or ribbonfish, has a long sword-shaped body, tapering from a large head to a pointed tail. The body is covered with a shimmering metallic, silvery skin. Live cutlassfish should be handled with care, since these fish possess an impressive array of needle sharp, arrow-shaped teeth that are capable of inflicting extremely painful bites. Although the flesh of the cutlassfish is edible and considered a delicacy in some countries, in Texas they are utilized only as bait for offshore species such as king mackerel. Large cutlassfish are notorious bait stealers, often breaking leaders with their sharp teeth or devouring other hooked fish before the angler can land them. Adults can reach lengths of nearly 5 feet, although lengths of over 3 feet are rare. Cutlassfish are common in the inshore Gulf and bays during warmer months. In Texas, cutlassfish are referred to almost exclusively as ribbonfish.

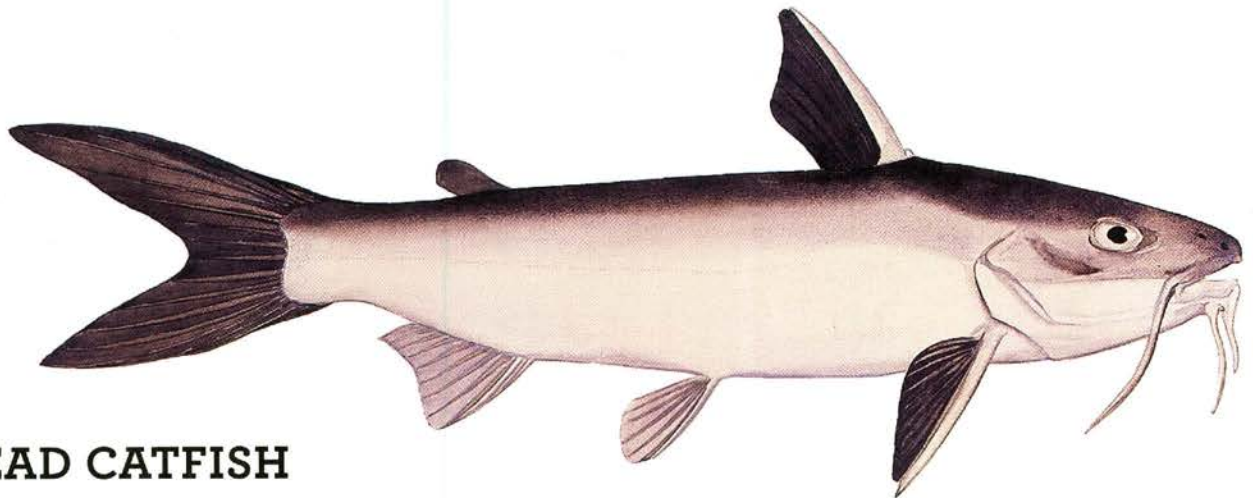


GAFFTOPSAIL CATFISH

Bagre marinus

Other names: gafftop, seacat

The gafftopsail catfish ranges from Panama to Cape Cod and is very abundant in Texas waters. Spawning occurs in the spring. The eggs are large, ranging up to one inch in diameter, and are carried in the mouth of the male after fertilization until they hatch and the fry can feed on their own. During this period the male does not eat and the period may extend up to 65 days. The gafftopsail catfish is distinguished from the hard-head catfish by the extended rays on the dorsal spine. The dorsal and pectoral fins are supported by sharp spines, as with the hard-head catfish, and extreme caution should be exercised when handling these fish. A puncture by the spines is very painful, due to a toxic slime which coats the spine. The average size is about 2½ pounds, with larger fish caught in the fall. Maximum size is about 2 feet, with the weight ranging up to 8 pounds. Live shrimp, small crabs and small live pinfish are good natural baits. Artificial worms and spoons also work well. The fish will feed from the bottom to the surface but baits fished near the bottom work best.

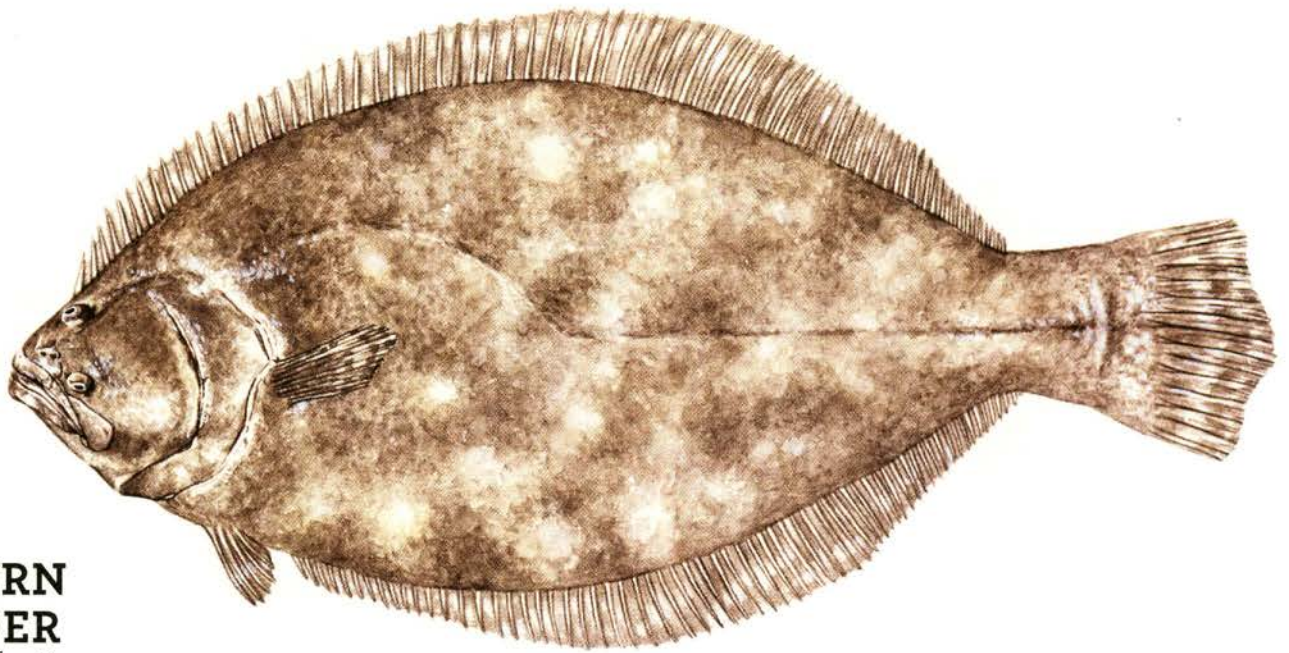


HARDHEAD CATFISH

Arius felis

Other names: tourist trout

Hardhead catfish, or hardheads, are notorious bait stealers and often occur in such numbers that it is difficult to catch other species. Hardheads are considered a nuisance by most fishermen and they are seldom eaten, although the flesh is edible. The species is known for its extremely diverse food habits. Young hardheads have even been observed nibbling the sides of other fish, presumably feeding on the mucus, scales and ectoparasites. The dorsal and pectoral fins are each supported by a sharp, slime-covered spine. Great care should be exercised when removing a hook, since the slime layer is mildly toxic and a puncture will be followed by severe pain and discomfort. The spine is also barbed, which makes withdrawal additionally painful. The one redeeming quality of hardheads is that they are always willing to bite a hook, giving the young angler who just likes the feel of a tug on the end of his or her line, a chance to do just that. Hardheads have been reported to reach lengths of 24 inches and weights of 3 pounds.



SOUTHERN FLOUNDER

Paralichthys lethostigma
Other names: flounder

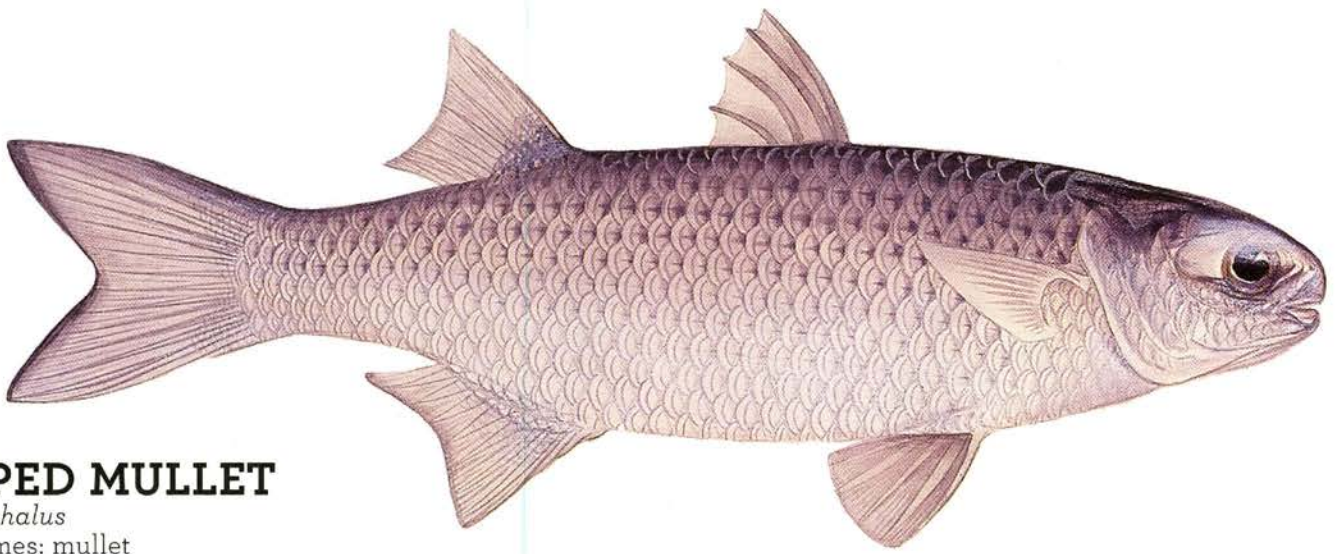
Southern flounder are left-handed flatfish, meaning their eyes and body coloration are on the left side of the fish. Southern flounder begin life with normally arranged eyes, one on each side of the head. When the larva are still less than an inch long, metamorphosis occurs. The right eye migrates to the left side of the head, the mouth shifts and a rearrangement of the internal organs and gills occurs. Southern flounder, like most flatfish, are bottom dwellers capable of changing their upside color pattern to match the surrounding bottom. Southern flounder are considered excellent table fare, and support substantial commercial and recreational fisheries. Adult flounder migrate to the Gulf to spawn in fall, and that is when flounder is considered to be the best. Southern flounder are caught with both rod and reel and flounder gigs. Flounder hit all types of natural and artificial baits. Best results occur when baits are fished on or near the bottom. Southern flounder reach lengths of 36 inches and weights of over 12 pounds.



GULF MENHADEN

Brevoortia patronus
Other names: poggy

Menhaden are small shadlike plankton feeders which have no food value as a sport fish. They do support an extensive commercial fishery, however, since they are used in the production of fish meal and fish oil. Menhaden also provide forage for many larger carnivorous fish. The species has a greenish back and silvery sides, with a large dark spot directly behind the gill opening. There can also be a series of smaller spots behind the larger one. Juvenile menhaden are one of the most abundant fishes in lower salinity bays. Adults stay in the shallow Gulf, seldom venturing far offshore. The maximum length is about 10 inches.

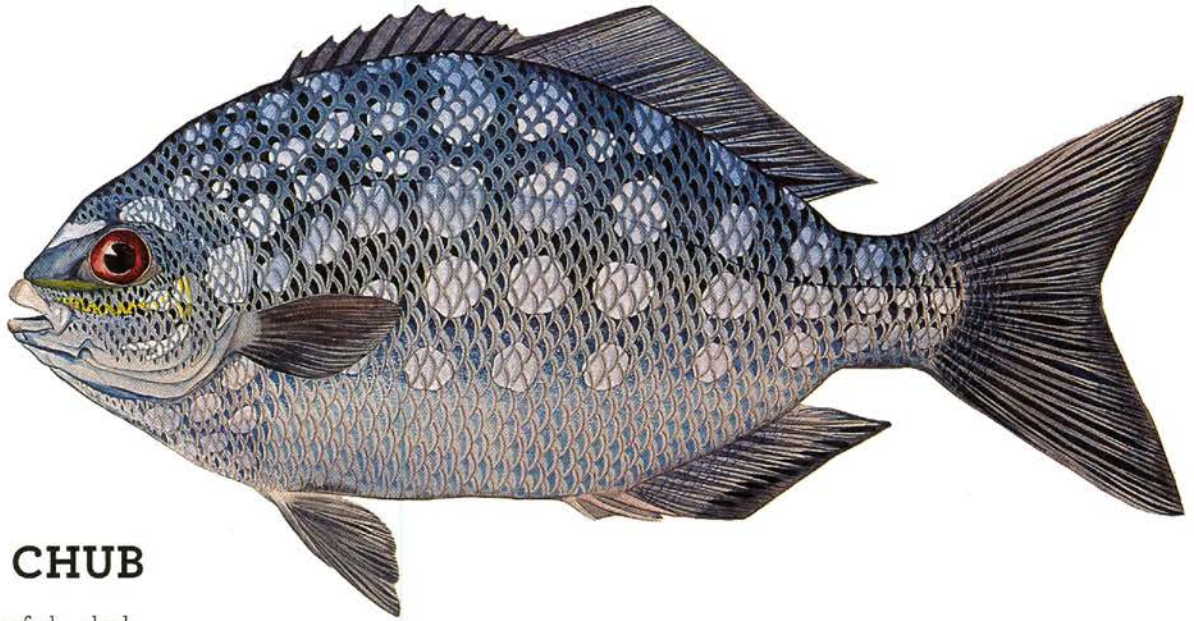


STRIPED MULLET

Mugil cephalus

Other names: mullet

Striped mullet have an irregularly round, silvery body, with a dark bluish green back and dark longitudinal stripes on the sides. Striped mullet are one of Texas's most abundant fish, occurring in practically all environments, from fresh to hypersaline waters. Striped mullet are known from many major rivers in Texas and have been reported from as far inland as Lake Texoma. Striped mullet are regarded as an excellent food fish in Florida and support a substantial commercial fishery. However, in the muddier waters of the western Gulf, they take on an oilier taste and are not generally eaten. Striped mullet grow to lengths of 30 inches. Mullet feed by filtering water and mud searching for various types of plankton and debris. Striped mullet spawn in giant schools far out in the Gulf of Mexico during winter. Soon thereafter, schools of juveniles begin appearing in the bays. While there is no fishery for adult mullet in Texas, three to four inch juveniles, or "finger mullet," are used extensively as bait for spotted seatrout and red drum.



BERMUDA CHUB

Kyphosus sectatrix

Other names: rudderfish, chub

Bermuda chubs are rare in Texas bays but may stray in. Usually they are found offshore around floating drifts, where they swim in large schools. They are brownish to steel-gray with small round spots or horizontal dark and light lines. The two patterns often interchange. Below the eye there are two yellow streaks separated by a pale streak. The fins are dull gray. Although this fish can attain a length of 30 inches and a weight of 20 pounds, most caught in Texas average about 1 pound. They spawn in the Gulf during warmer months and probably in schools. The young may remain near drifting objects for protection. Food of adults consists of small fish, worms, shrimp, decaying matter and vegetation. Not highly desired by fishermen, they may be caught on small hooks with bits of cut bait. Although edible, the flesh is reported to have a poor flavor, possibly because of some food consumed.

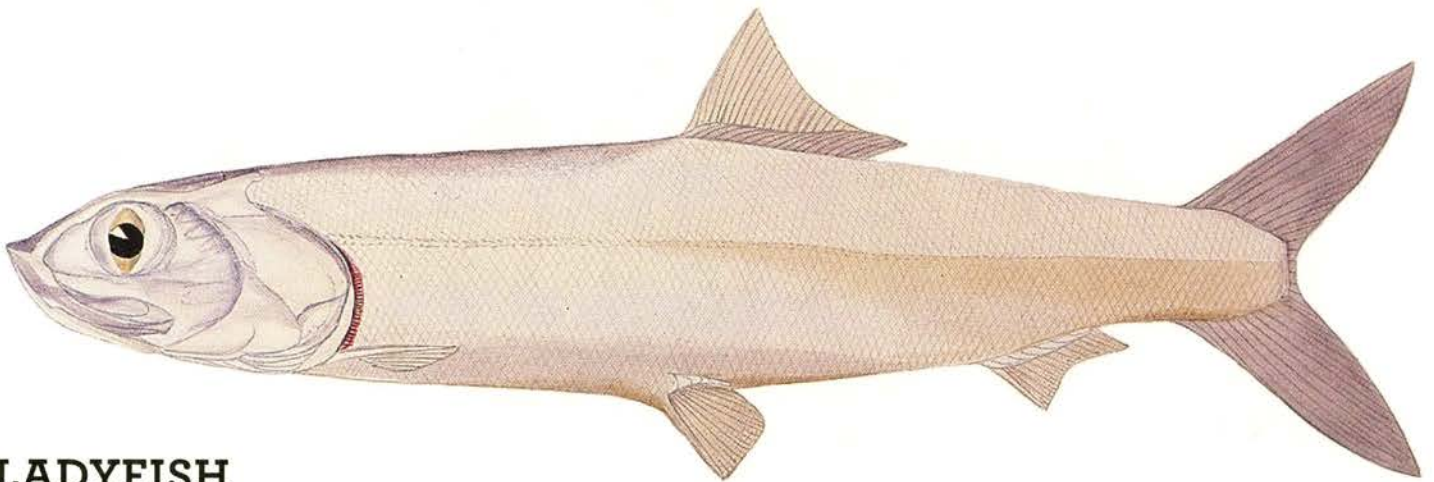


ATLANTIC SPADEFISH

Chaetodipterus faber

Other names: spadefish, angel fish

Spadefish, often erroneously called angelfish, are distinguished by two distinct dorsal fins. Usually barred with black and white, the pattern may change to nearly solid black or white. This fish reportedly reaches a weight of 15 pounds and a length of 3 feet but seldom exceeds 1 pound in Texas. Spawning occurs in the Gulf in summer but little is known of early life history. The small mouth indicates that the primary food is crustaceans and young fish. It is said to eat large numbers of comb jellies and small jellyfish. Piers, reefs and jetties provide good fishing sites where small hooks and baits can be used. Spadefish frequently are found in bays near passes, but are taken infrequently. The flesh is excellent.

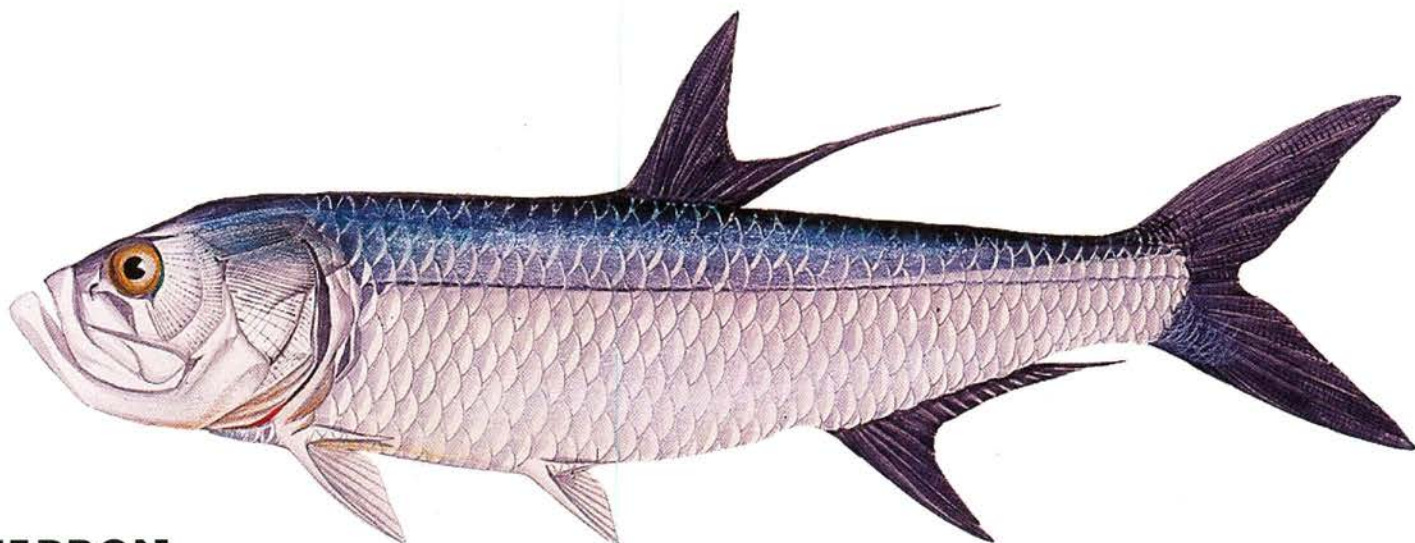


LADYFISH

Elops saurus

Other names: skipjack,
ten pounder, horse mackerel

Commonly called skipjack, ladyfish are closely related to tarpon, although ladyfish seldom exceed 3 pounds in weight. Ladyfish have a long, slender, almost round body, tapering in color from greenish along the back to bright silver along the sides and abdomen. Although ladyfish are renowned for their fighting ability, the flesh is not considered good eating, and thus the fish are seldom targeted by fishermen. Ladyfish and tarpon both possess an elongated, flattened, transparent larva called a leptocephalus, a larval type characteristic of eels, indicating a close relationship between these otherwise dissimilar fishes. Ladyfish normally feed on shrimp, squid, and other fishes.

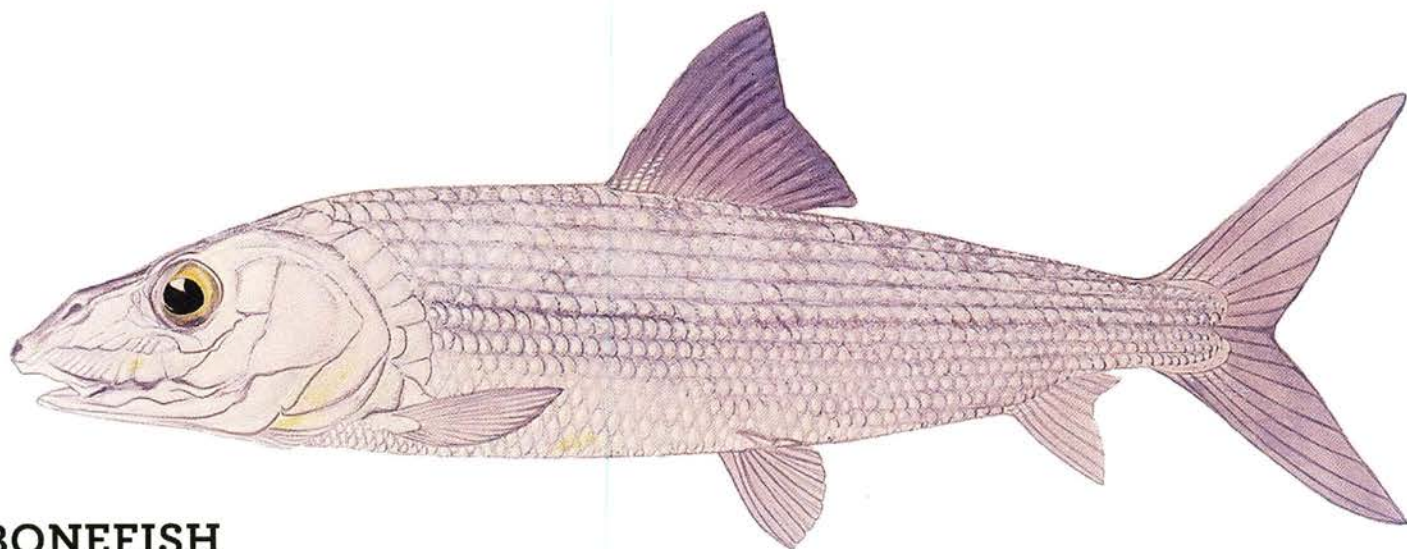


TARPON

Megalops atlanticus

Other names: silver king

Although tarpon hold little value as a food fish, their extraordinary strength and spectacular jumping ability have vaulted them into a position of prominence in the sportfishing world. The tarpon's silver body is covered with unusually large scales. Small tarpon can be distinguished from ladyfish by the presence of an elongate ray on the dorsal fin. Tarpon grow to lengths of 8 feet and weights in excess of 300 pounds. Food consist of crabs, shrimp and other fish. Tarpon are most often fished for by casting or trolling jigs and spoons. They will also hit live bait fish under a cork. Young tarpon frequent low salinity waters and adults are often found far upstream in larger rivers. Tarpon and snook are very similar in habitat requirements, and the two often occur together. The scarcity of tarpon in recent years has greatly reduced the numbers of fishermen who actively pursue them.

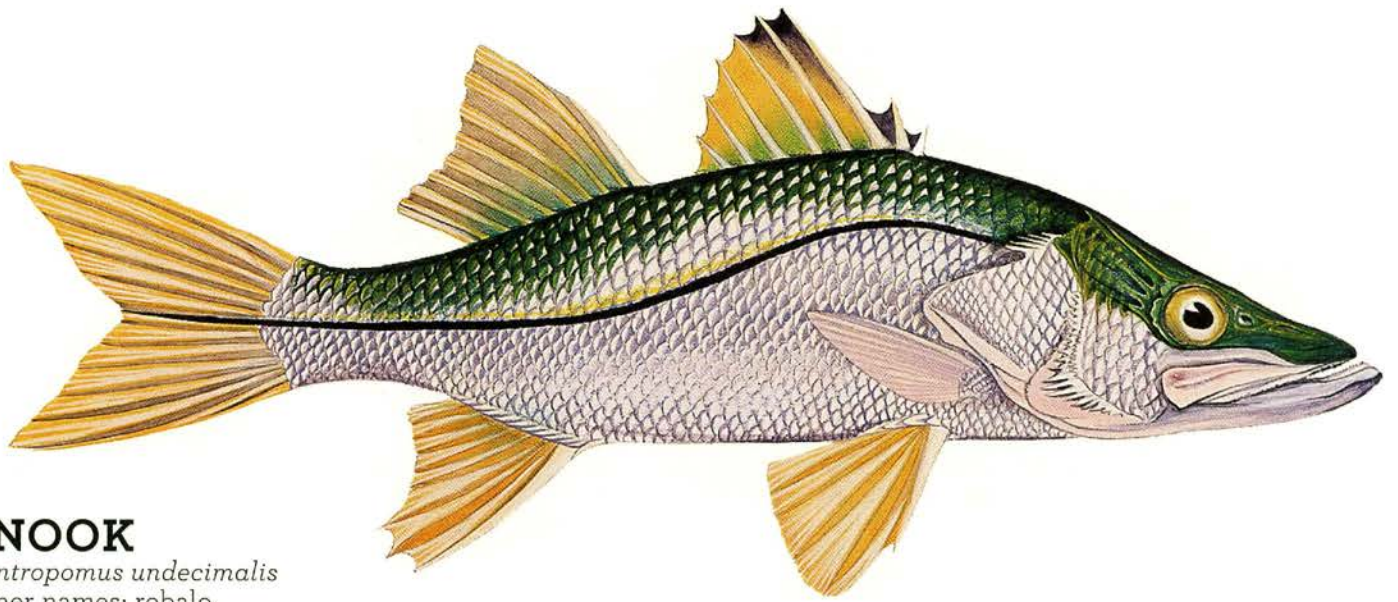


BONEFISH

Albula vulpes

Other names: bonyfish, big-eyed herring

Bonefish are rare in Texas and usually restricted to warmer waters. This odd-looking fish with bony head plates and a greenish silvery body has an inferior mouth adapted to bottom feeding. Little is known of the life history. The larvae are transparent and ribbon-shaped and look nothing like the adult. Presumably, spawning is in open water. In Florida adults inhabit clear shallow water where they may be seen "tailing" as they feed on small fish and bottom-dwelling invertebrates. Average size is 2 to 5 pounds with a maximum of 20 pounds. The fish is reported to be extremely spooky and fast but not a jumper. Any fisherman catching a bonefish in Texas should take it to the nearest office of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for verification.

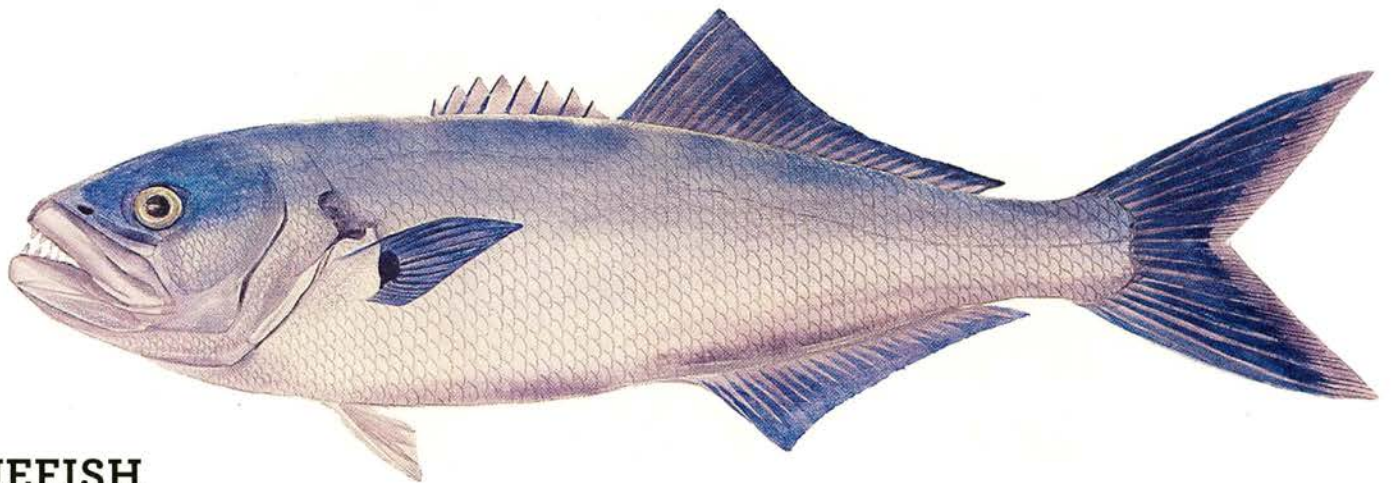


SNOOK

Centropomus undecimalis

Other names: robalo,
saltwater pike

Snook are a neotropical species whose range barely extends into south Texas. Highest concentrations in Texas are in the Rio Grande and in brackish waters in and around Port Isabel and the Brownsville Ship Channel. Snook have long concave snouts with jutting underjaws. Coloration ranges from dark brown on the back to silvery on the sides to white below. Snook also have a distinct lateral line which aids in easy identification. They are euryhaline, spending their time moving back and forth between salt and fresh water. When in seawater, snook seldom stray far from a source of fresh water and when in rivers, they seldom wander far upstream. They are voracious feeders that eat crab, shrimp and other fishes. Snook have been reported to hit all types of natural and artificial baits. Adults reach lengths of 36 inches and weights of 57 pounds. The flesh is considered excellent eating and snook are a highly prized game and food fish in areas where they are abundant. The similarity of habitat preference of both snook and tarpon supports the hypothesis of habitat destruction and/or environmental change as a common cause for the disappearance of both species in recent years.

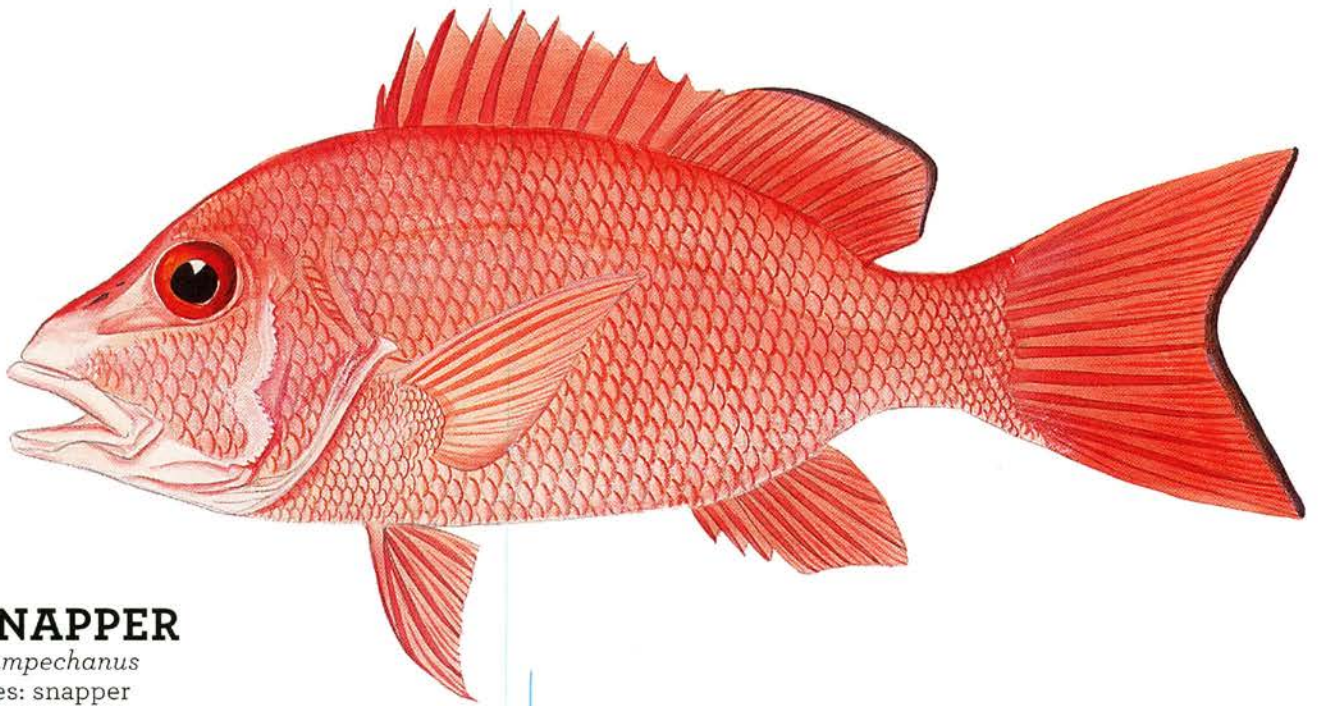


BLUEFISH

Pomatomus saltatrix

Other names: snapper (especially when small),
blue, snap mackerel, skipjack

Bluefish, prized gamefish of the Atlantic coast, also are found in Texas although in smaller sizes. One specimen of 12 pounds was found stunned by cold in Corpus Christi Bay in 1962, but the average is 1 to 2 pounds. This fish is dark greenish blue on the back and shades off to a bluish silver on the sides with silver underneath. The pectoral fin is dark at its base. Bluefish travel in dense schools and are migratory. Voracious feeders, they eat small fish, squid, and shrimp and may go on frenzied feeding sprees. They are strong fighters when hooked. Although they generally are found offshore in the Gulf associated with schools of small dorados, they also move into the surf, particularly near passes. Best fishing is in spring and early summer using live shrimp, finger mullet, plugs or spoons. The flesh is edible but not highly sought.

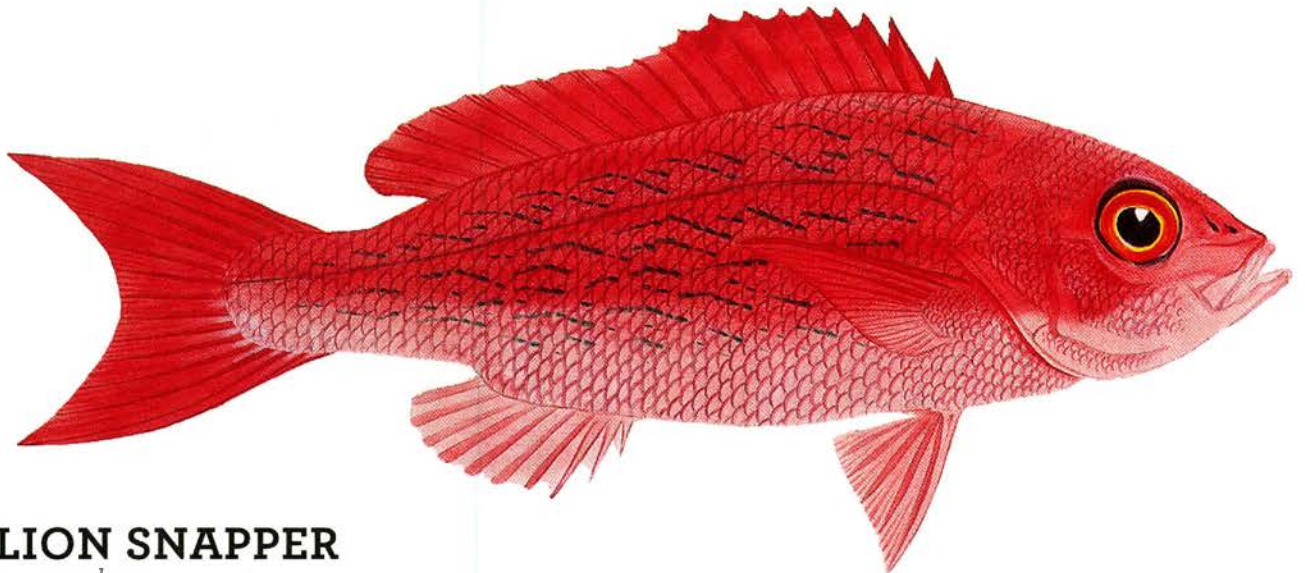


RED SNAPPER

Lutjanus campechanus

Other names: snapper

Red snappers are regarded as one of the best tasting of all fish and they support substantial commercial and recreational fisheries throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Red snapper are a deep rosy red color, with a dark fringe around the dorsal and caudal fins. They occur in all the Gulf waters off Texas. Although larger red snappers generally stay in deeper offshore waters, juveniles stray toward shore, occasionally even being caught around jetties. Snappers of all sizes tend to congregate around some type of underwater structure. Oil rigs, ship wrecks and reefs all provide fishermen with excellent snapper fishing. Snappers are opportunistic carnivores that normally feed on crab, squid, shrimp and small fish. The preferred bait of most snapper fishermen is squid. Since snappers are bottom dwelling fish, heavy weights are needed to get the baits down through the maze of triggerfish and spadefish which live in the water column above the reefs. Red snappers have been reported to reach lengths of 38 inches and weights of over 50 pounds.



VERMILION SNAPPER

Rhomboplites aurorubens

Other names: beeliner

The vermilion snapper's ground color is red to pink, with a series of yellow lines along the sides and yellow orange edges along the dorsal (top) and anal (rear bottom) fins. Found year-round on offshore Gulf of Mexico snapper banks or reefs, it feeds mostly on crustaceans and small fish. It is generally smaller than the popular red snapper, but still good to eat.

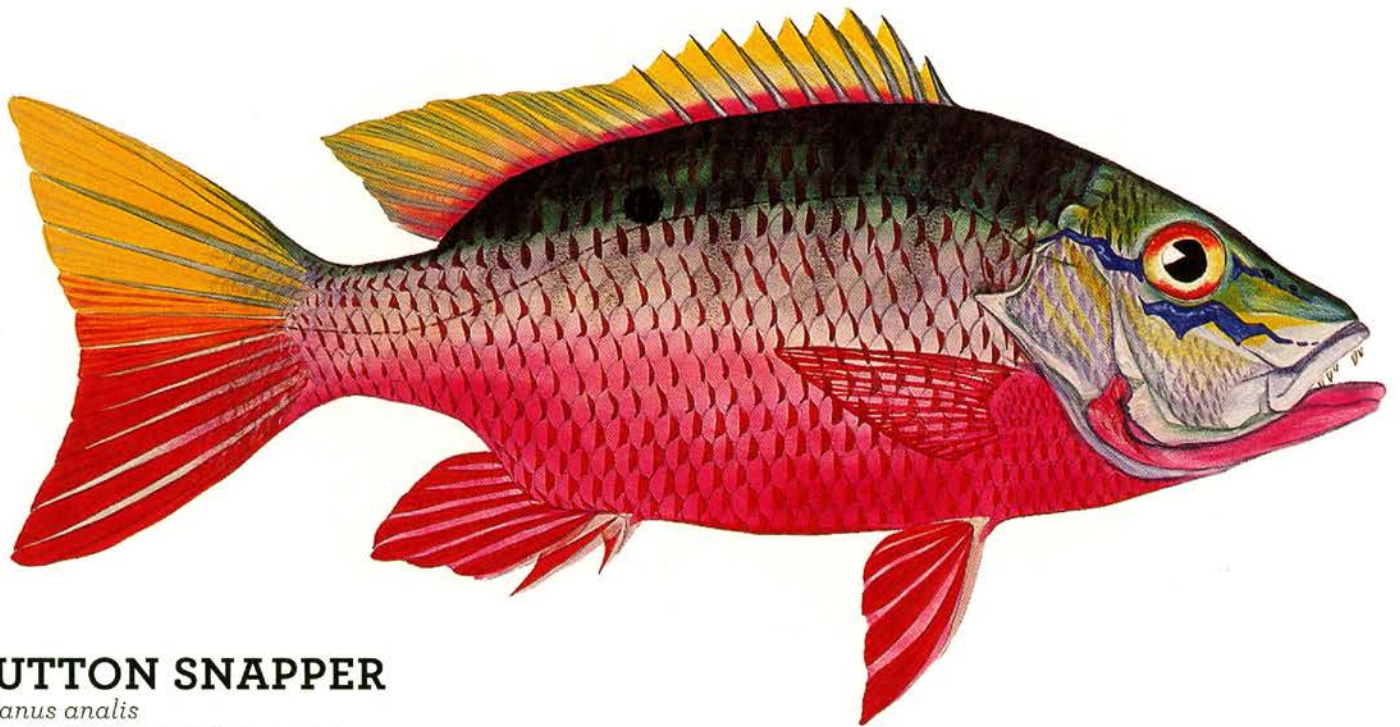


DOG SNAPPER

Lutjanus jocu

Other names: jocu, pargo colorado

Dog snappers get their name from having large canine teeth, which may reach an inch in length. This fish is dark coppery red, with faint vertical bars on the side. There is a light blue streak under each eye and the tail has a tinge of yellow. The average in Texas waters weighs from 25 to 50 pounds but individuals more than 100 pounds have been caught. Little is known of the life history of dog snappers. They are found on reefs in the Gulf in the summer, but usually are not abundant. The large body and mouth indicate fish of various kinds as food. The flesh is reputed to be unsuitable for human consumption, but some consider it edible.

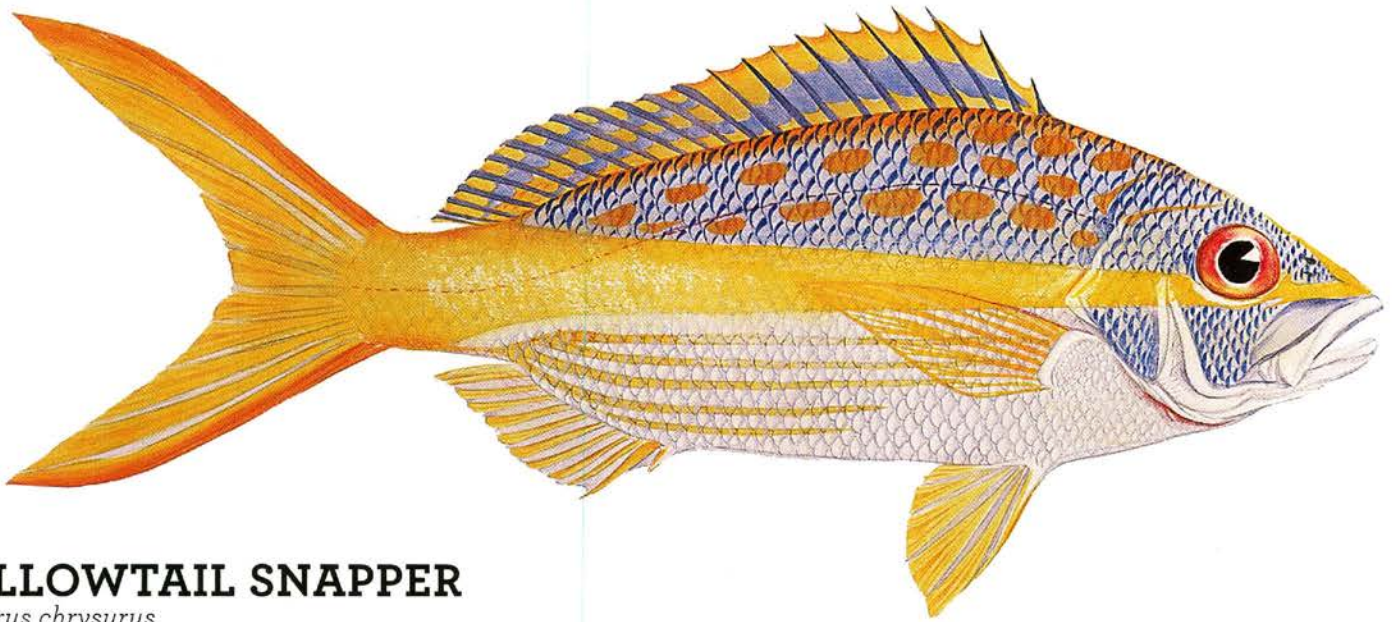


MUTTON SNAPPER

Lutjanus analis

Other names: muttonfish, pargo

Mutton snappers vary greatly in color. They usually are dark olive on the back, shading to pink below, with dark vertical bars or indistinct blotches. Some scales have light blue spots which form faint strips running upward and backward. The dorsal fin is red and yellow; other fins are red. The iris of the eye is red. Young fish have a dark blotch on the side along the lateral line. Average weight is 2 to 5 pounds but the fish may weigh 25 pounds and reach 27 inches. It is a food fish of some importance where found.

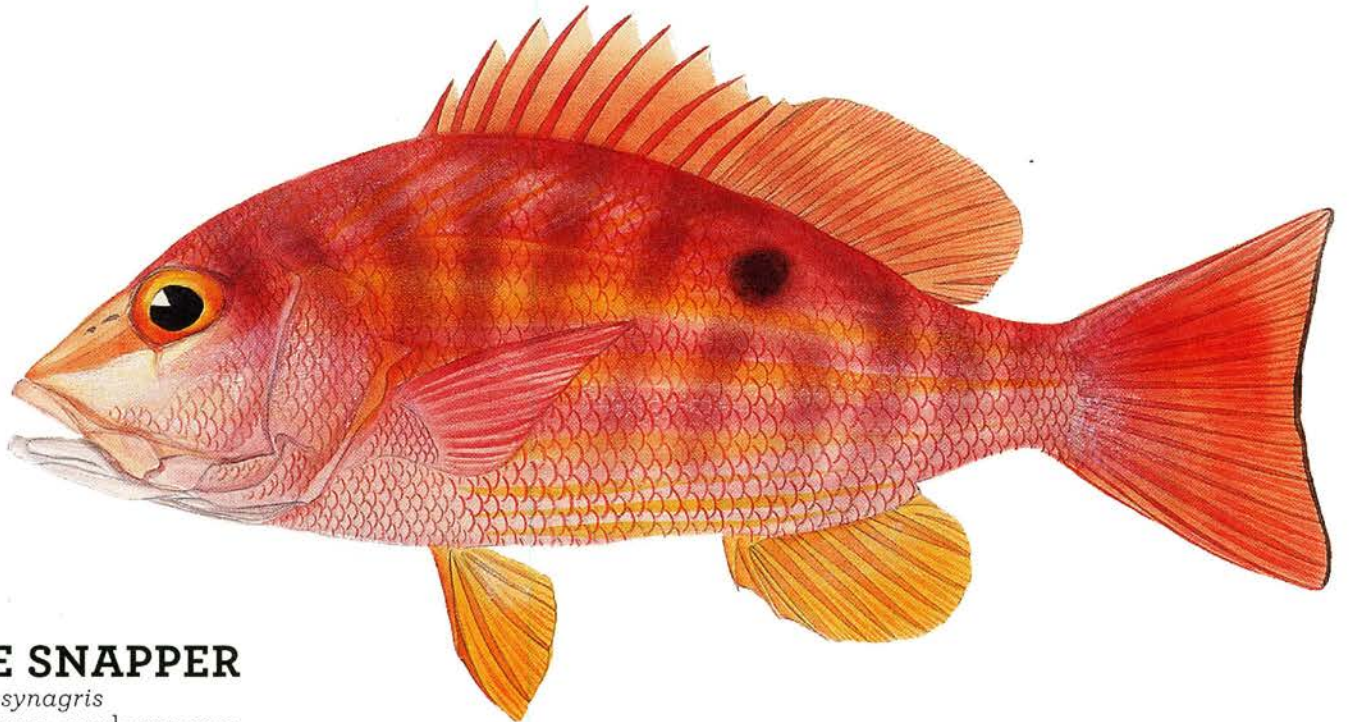


YELLOWTAIL SNAPPER

Ocyurus chrysurus

Other names: rabirubia

Yellowtail snapper are striking fish with a broad, bright yellow streak the length of the body. They are rare in Texas, being found only in deep water where they spawn. Food consists of small fish, shrimp, crabs and squid but in more tropical waters they reportedly feed on vegetable matter. Yellowtail snapper usually are from 1 to 2 feet long and considered to be excellent food fish.

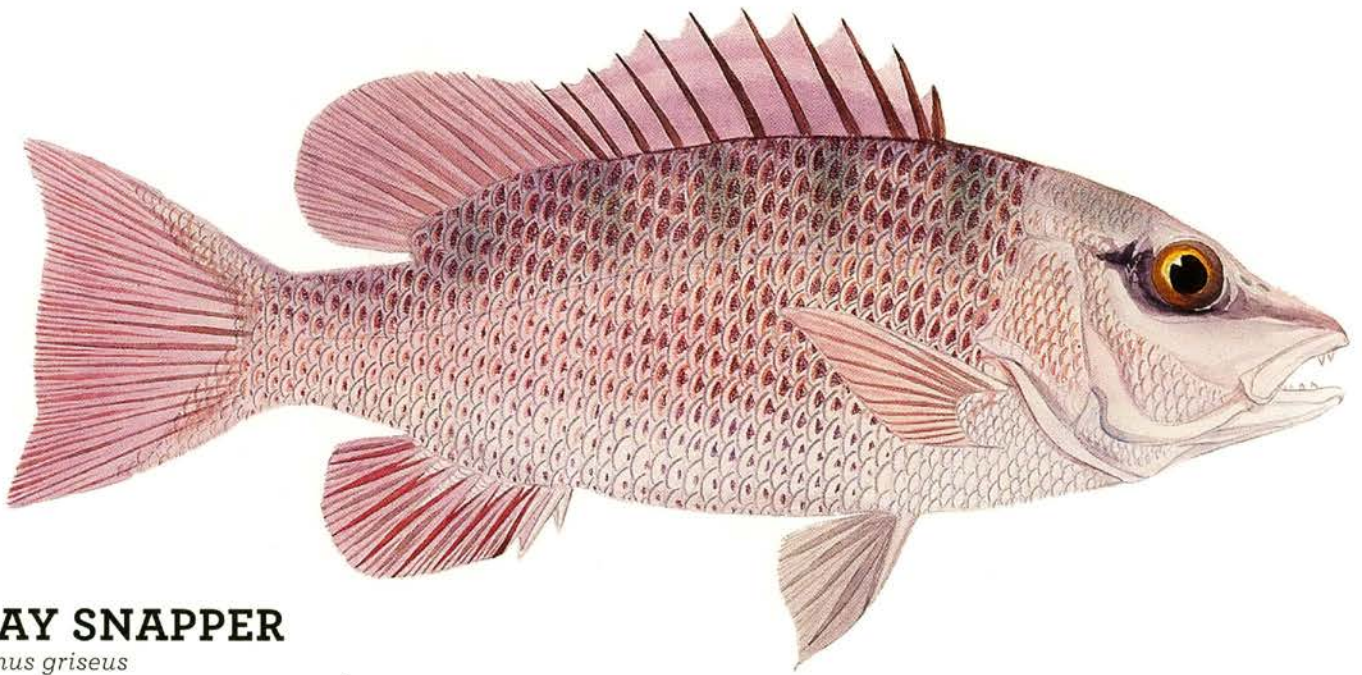


LANE SNAPPER

Lutjanus synagris

Other names: candy snapper

The lane snapper has a pink to red body with a diffuse black spot as large as the eye below the dorsal (top) fin. The presence of seven or eight yellow horizontal stripes along the side help distinguish this fish from the similar red snapper. The species feeds mostly on shrimp, other crustaceans and small fish and attains a size of about 18 inches. It lives on offshore reefs in the Gulf of Mexico and is caught near the bottom while fishing for red snapper.

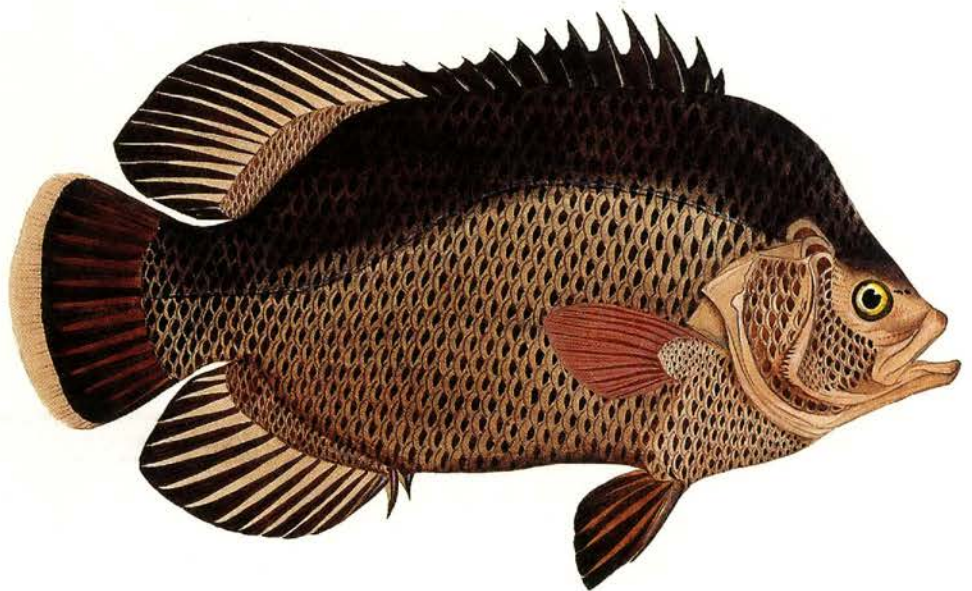


GRAY SNAPPER

Lutjanus griseus

Other names: mangrove snapper, lawyer, pargo

Gray snapper have several color phases depending on habitat. They may be light green on the back with rosy sides and white undersides, with silvery dorsal and tail fins. Another phase is darker with an olive back, coppery sides, dusky dorsal and caudal fins and coppery pectoral, pelvic and anal fins. There usually are faint vertical bars extending partway down from the back. The centers of scales are colored olive on the back and rosy on the sides and are gray or silver at the margins. This fish is more abundant around the West Indies than in Texas waters. There, and in Florida, it has a peculiar habit of feeding on small arboreal crabs found in mangrove thickets. Other food items are blue crabs, small fishes, shrimp and squid. The fish feeds at night but will bite during the day. Fish of 1 to 2 pounds may be caught around passes and channels, using small baits fished on the bottom. The flesh is reported to be excellent.

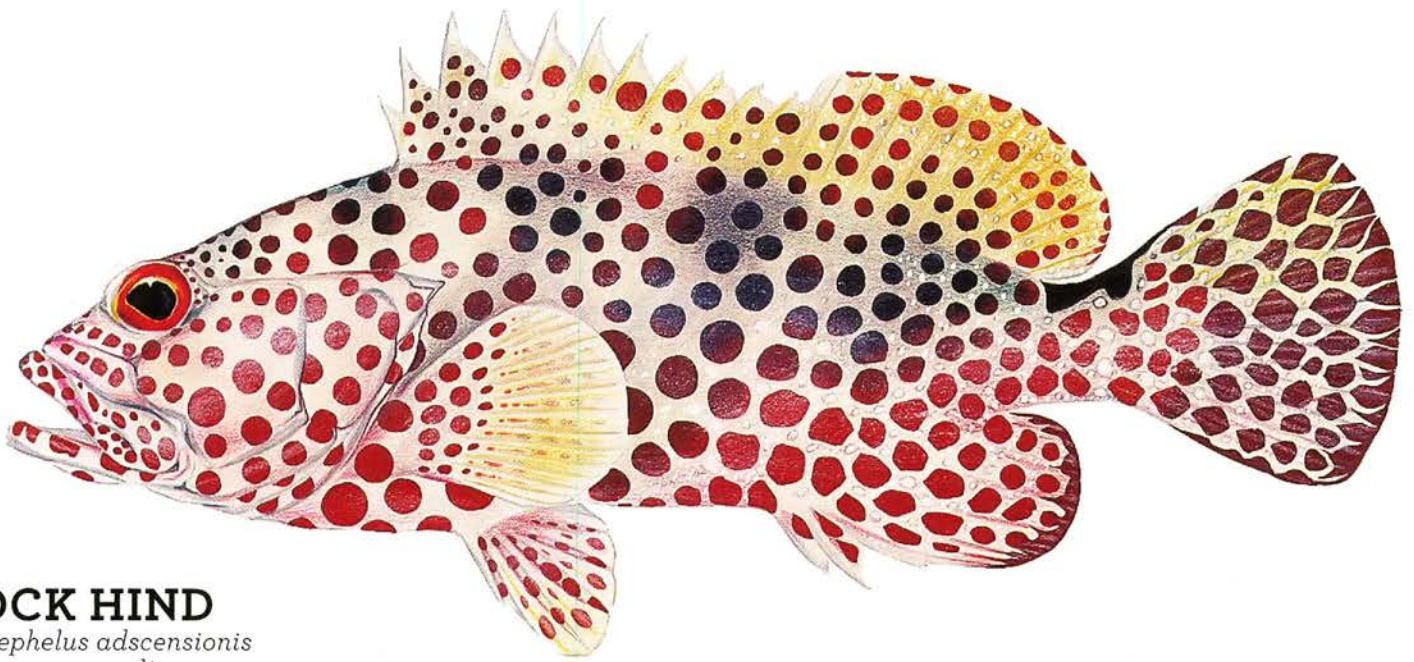


TRIPLETAIL

Lobotes surinamensis

Other names: rockfish, buoyfish, black perch

Tripletails are odd-looking, deep-bodied fish with the soft rays of dorsal and anal fins set well back toward the caudal fin giving a trilobed appearance. Coloration can vary from almost black through reddish bronze to yellow or mottled. This fish often floats on its side at the water's surface, in coloration and movements resembling a dead leaf. The fish are frequently mistaken for floating debris. Tripletails prefer the mouths of rivers, passes and bays opening into the Gulf, displaying some indifference to salinity. They congregate around shipwrecks, buoys, boats, beacons, pilings, jetties and floating objects. Lengths of 3 feet and weights of 30 to 50 pounds are attained, but in Texas the normal range is 5 to 15 pounds. Those seen in bays are usually much smaller. Spawning occurs in spring or early summer and the young drift into shallow areas to grow and feed. Food consists of live shrimp, crabs and small fish. When fishing, similar baits should be used with small hooks.

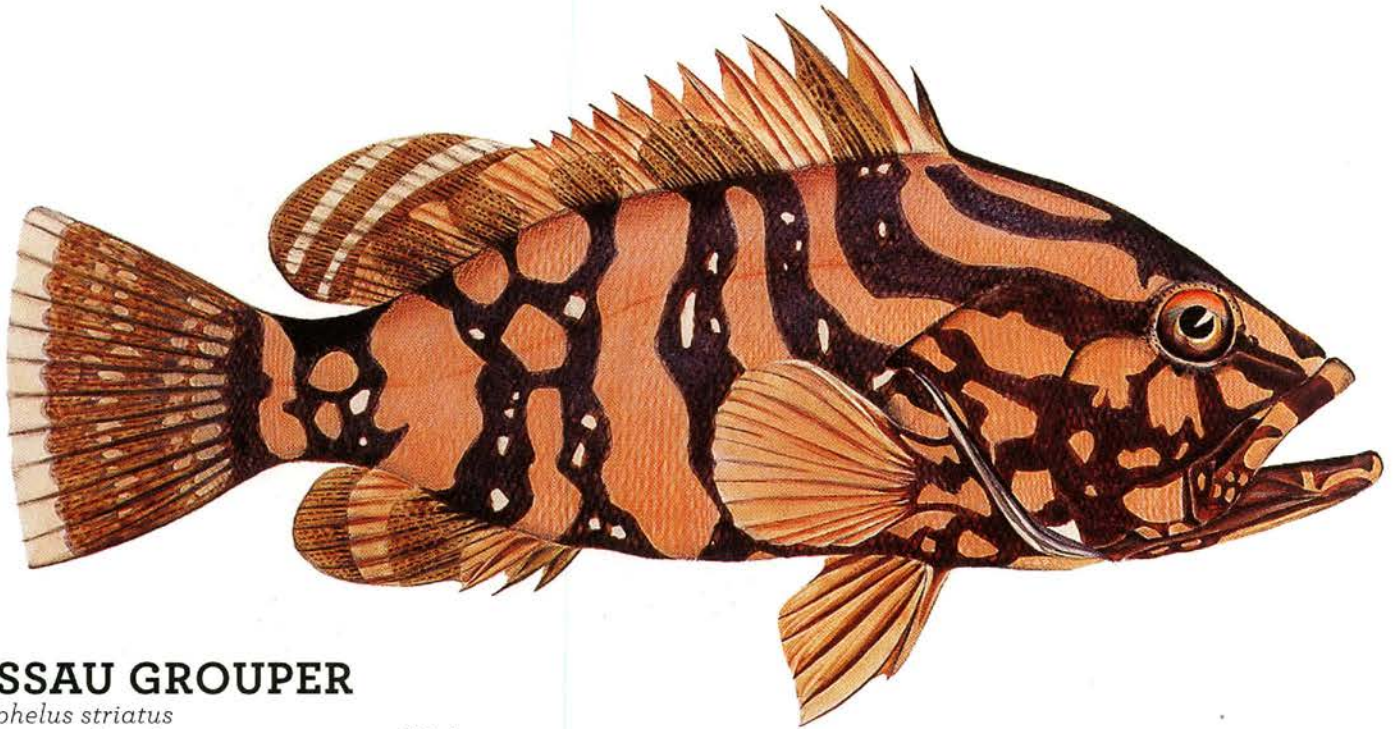


ROCK HIND

Epinephelus adscensionis

Other names: calico grouper,
hind, cabra mora

The rock hind, like most groupers, has varying coloration. The most common phase is an olive background with pale white blotches and small red spots on all the body including the fins. There usually is a dark, saddlelike black blotch at the base of the tail fin. The average weight is 1 to 2 pounds, occasionally reaching 10 pounds. The rock hind lives around coral banks, reefs and rough bottom. The large mouth indicates preferences for large food. The flesh is edible.

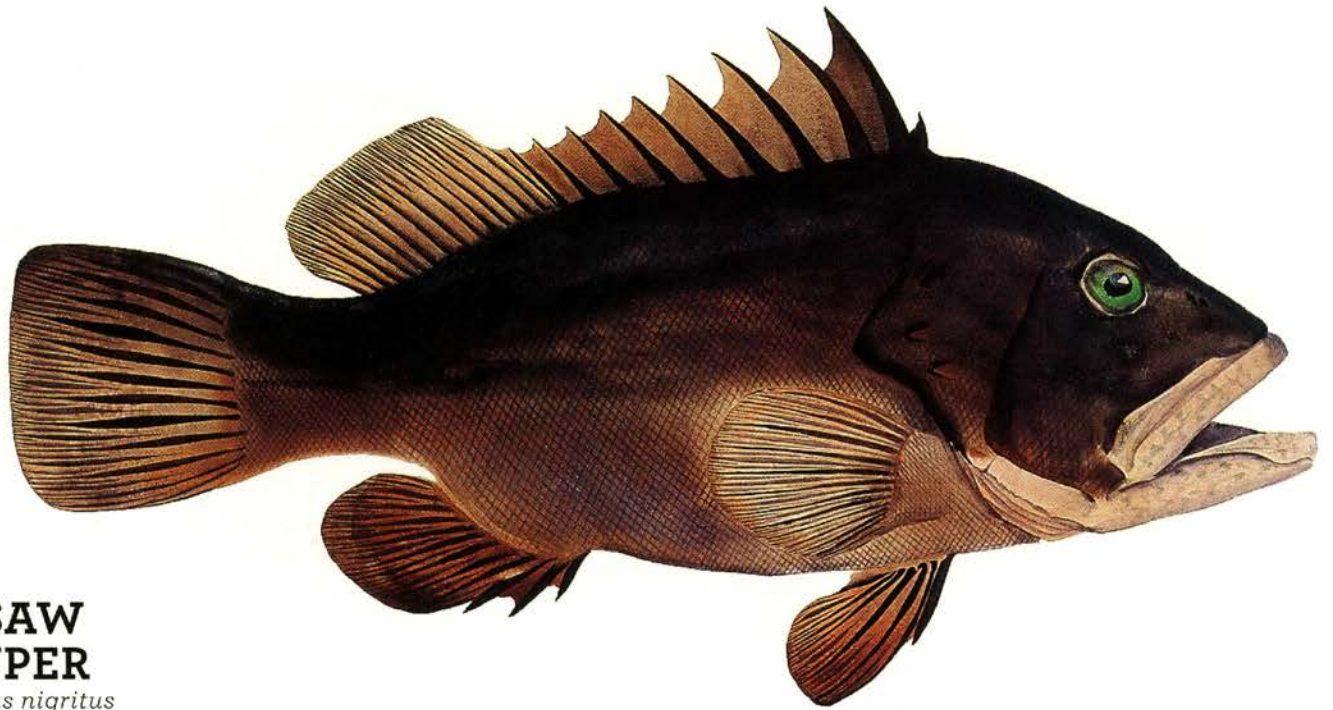


NASSAU GROUPE

Epinephelus striatus

Other names: hamlet, gray grouper, rockfish

The Nassau grouper is rare in Texas but common in Florida and the West Indies. The fish usually has a pale olive-gray ground color that becomes even paler on the underside. There are obscure, whitish blotches along the sides with four or five distinct, irregular, olive-brown vertical bars. The inside of the mouth has an orange cast. This species has a remarkable ability to change color from the above description to solid grayish-white. Average weight is 5 to 10 pounds, possibly up to 60. Little is known of the life history. Its food source is most likely other fish.



WARSAW GROUPEr

Epinephelus nigritus

Other names: warsaw, black jewfish, black grouper

Warsaw grouper are large fish surpassing 100 pounds in weight and averaging 20 to 60 pounds. The fish is brown or bluish black, uniform or with a few light spots. The front part of the dorsal fin is as high as the back portion and the tail fin is roughly square. Large warsaw grouper generally are found only on snapper banks; small ones, however, often are found in the bays near channels. The few stomachs that have been examined were packed with Gulf blue crabs. Little is known of the life history. A sometimes sluggish fighter when hooked, the flesh is edible but may be coarse.

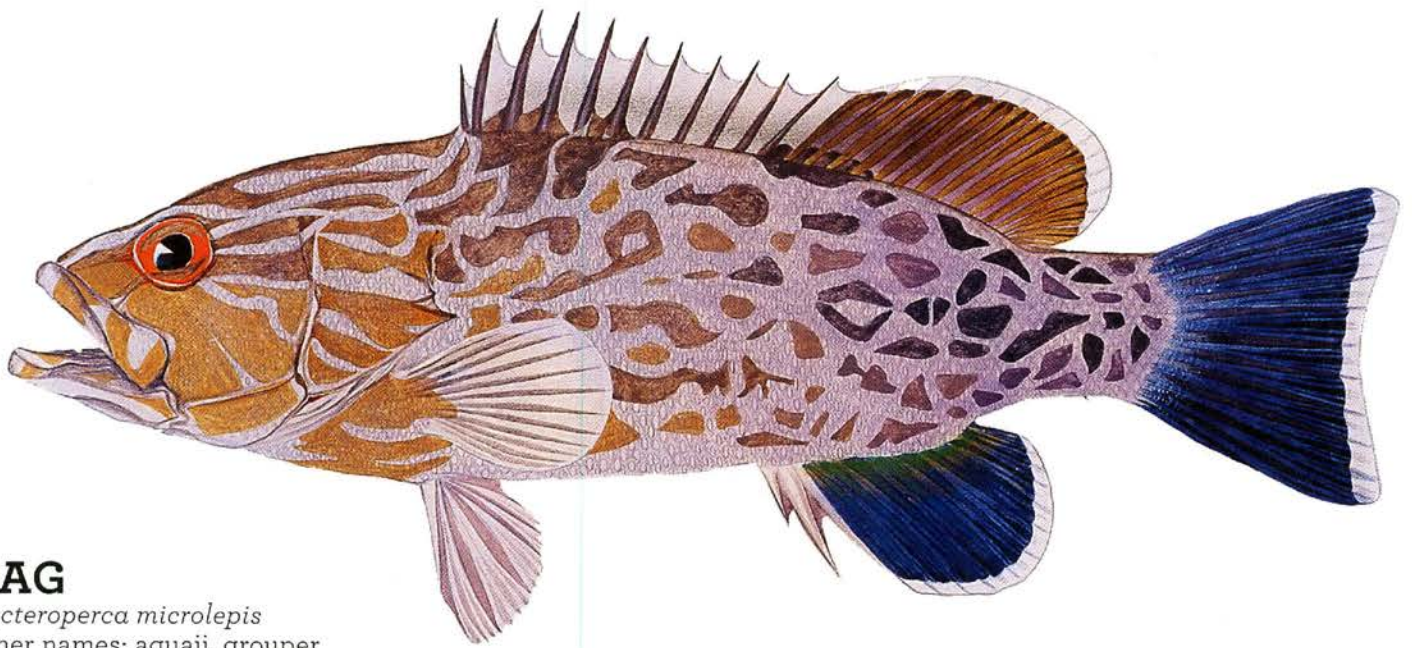


GOLIATH GROUPEr

Epinephelus itajara

Other names: spotted jewfish, giant sea bass

The goliath grouper is one of the largest fish in Texas waters. Specimens of 200 to 300 pounds are not uncommon and several have been caught weighing 400 to 500, although the average is 40 to 120. Coloration ranges from dark to chocolate-brown. Some fish have faint, pale blotches. The fins are dark. Younger fish are mottled and have small black dots. The front part of the dorsal fin is much lower than the back portion and the tail fin generally is rounded. This fish generally is found around jetties, pilings, old wrecks, and in the mouths of rivers and sloughs. It probably eats what it can catch from ambush and is known to take blue crabs. It usually is caught from June to October and may move farther offshore in winter. Favorite baits fished on the bottom include mullet or other large fish and mashed-up stingrays. Fishermen seeking sharks sometimes catch goliath grouper, often after fishing all night. A large specimen is able to tow a small boat, but this method of tiring out the fish should be used only by experienced fishermen.

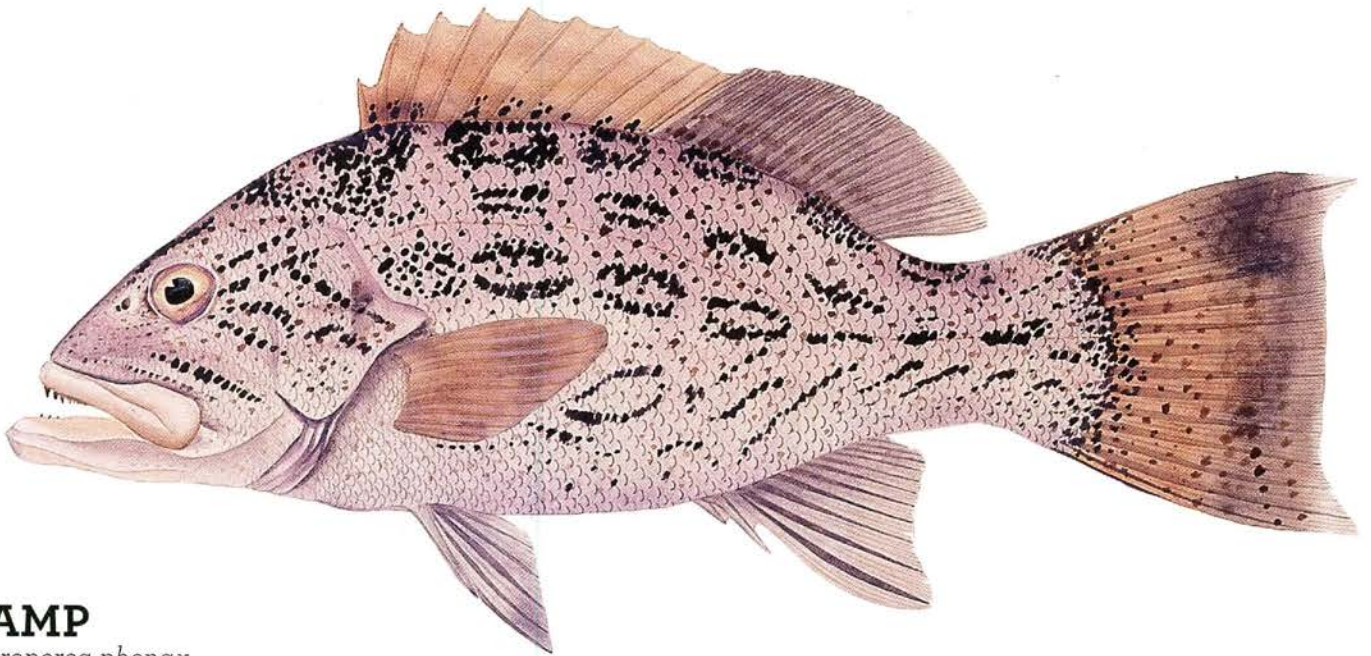


GAG

Mycteroperca microlepis

Other names: aguaji, grouper

Gags usually are uniformly brownish gray, with irregular chain markings of a darker brown on the sides and a brownish or green dorsal fin. The tail and anal fins are bluish or dark shading to white. Color can vary quickly and widely. Adult gags frequent snapper banks but juveniles may be more widespread. In Florida an early spring breeding season was indicated by the capture of 1-inch specimens in May. Juveniles feed on crustaceans, while adults eat small fishes and crabs. Average weight is 1 to 2 pounds and probably does not exceed 20 pounds in Texas, but may be greater in other areas. An important food fish in some regions, it is caught incidental to snapper fishing and is a hard fighter.

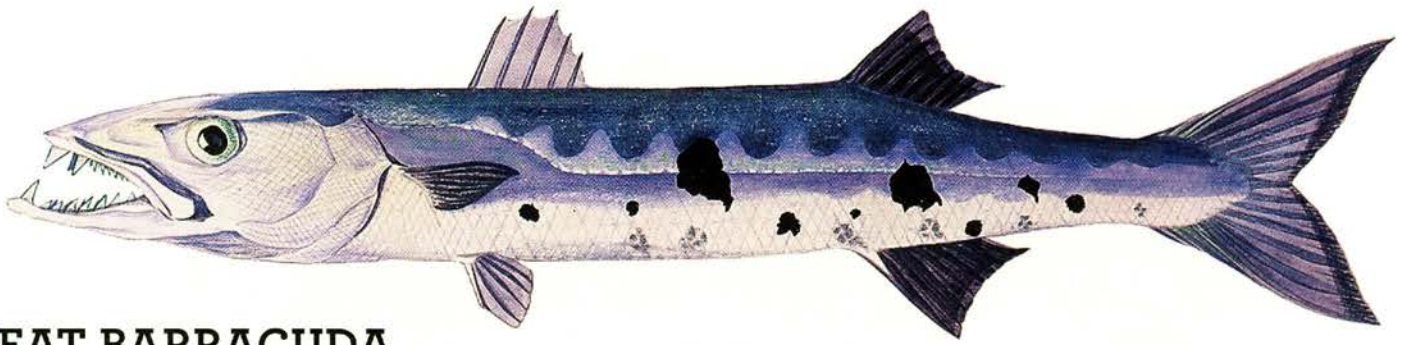


SCAMP

Mycteroperca phenax

Other names: bacalao

Scamp are grouperlike fish which occur on Texas snapper reefs during most of the year, but which never are plentiful. The fish is brown above, dusky, grayish brown on the side and sometimes covered with darker spots. Both sets of paired fins have a narrow band of white, while the vertical fins are dusky with the outer portions bluish black. Scamp reach lengths of 24 to 30 inches and weights of 8 to 10 pounds. Nothing is known of its food, but probably it eats fish and crustaceans like other groupers. Caught incidental to snapper fishing, the scamp is a fine food with excellent flavor.

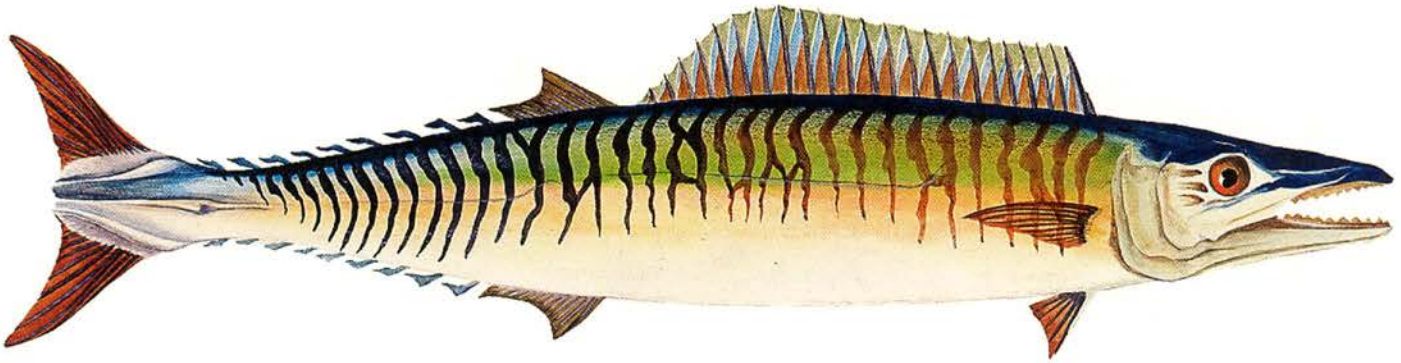


GREAT BARRACUDA

Sphyraena barracuda

Other names: cuda, barracuda, common barracuda

The great barracuda is a savage fish with a frightening array of sharp teeth. Coloration varies from light sea-green to nearly black above, with silvery sides and a white belly, usually with irregular black spots on the sides. The species feeds mainly on fish and puts up a hard slashing fight if caught on rod and reel. Great barracuda are common around offshore oil platforms, wrecks and reefs. These fish have been reported to reach lengths of 57 inches and weights of over 50 pounds. The flesh has a fine flavor, but is not widely sought.

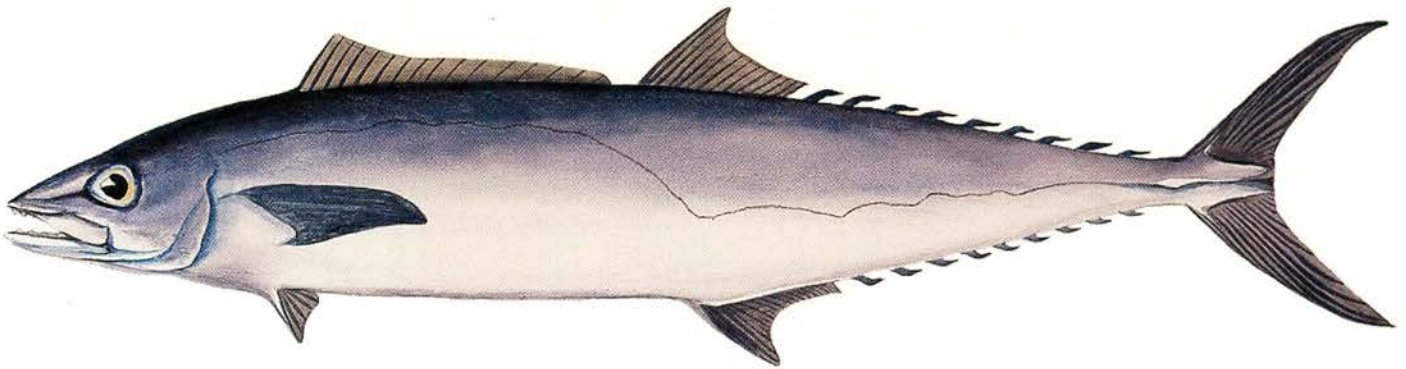


WAHOO

Acanthocybium solanderi

Other names: ono, guarapucu, kingfish

Unlike most mackerels, which tend to travel in schools, the wahoo is a solitary fish. Fishermen usually catch the wahoo by trolling in the deep blue waters far from shore. This is a beautifully colored fish and one of the great game fish of the sea. They feed on smaller fish and many are taken on trolled squid. The Texas record is 112½ pounds, taken off Port Aransas in the summer of 1975. Fishermen who have eaten the wahoo say that it is one of the firmest food fish to be taken off the Texas coast.

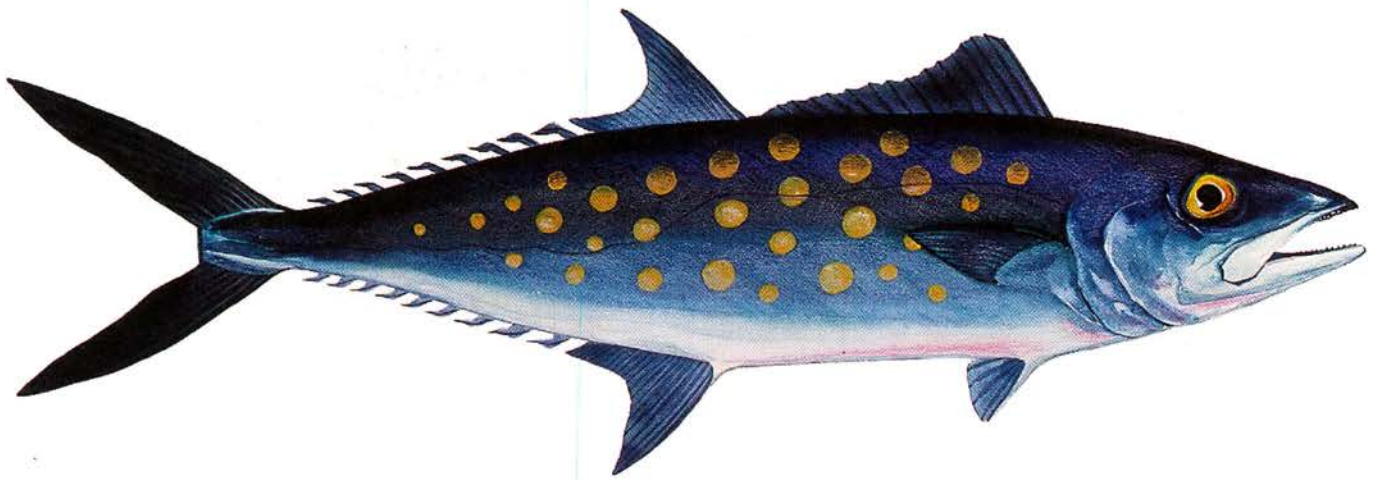


KING MACKEREL

Scomberomorus cavalla

Other names: king, kingfish

The king mackerel is silvery on the sides and greenish above. Large schools migrate along the Gulf coast from early summer until about the first of October. They may be found so close to shore that they are caught by jetty fishermen or they may be found 100 miles offshore. They are caught in murky, clear green or deep blue water. King mackerel are commonly found near shrimp boats that are culling their trawl catch. The fish reach lengths of 66 inches and weights of 70 pounds. They are the most popular offshore gamefish along the Texas coast. Ribbonfish (cutlassfish) are the preferred bait with mullet a close second. Many kingfish are taken on artificial lures.

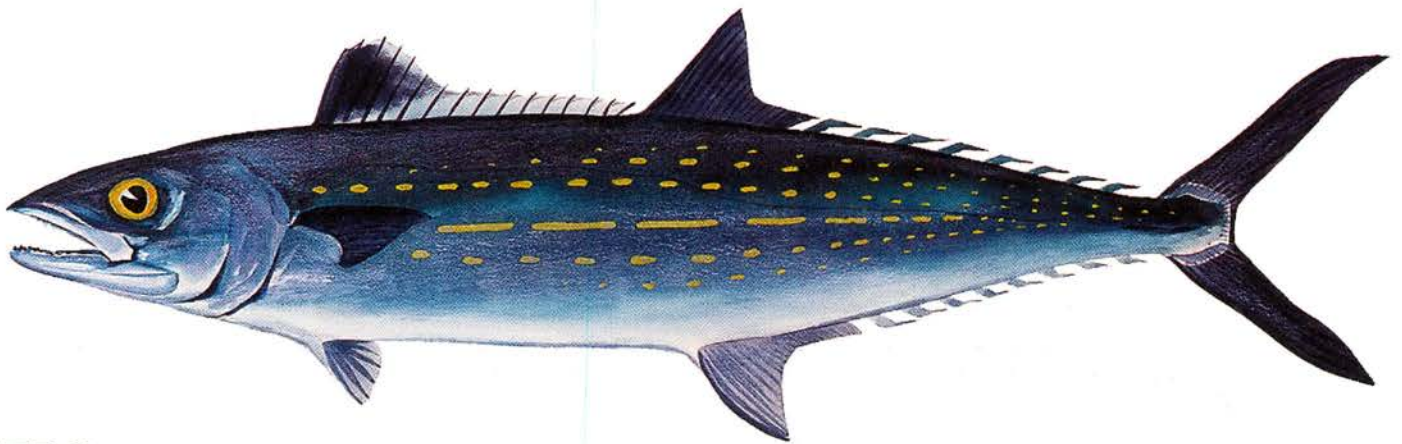


SPANISH MACKEREL

Scomberomorus maculatus

Other names: mackerel

As is the case with all mackerels, Spanish mackerel are fast swimming, oceanic fishes. They have streamlined bodies and stiff fins which enable them to swim constantly at high speeds. Spanish mackerel have silvery sides with distinct yellow spots. The young of this species are common in the surf zone and even in low salinity bays. Although Spanish mackerel are fished commercially in Florida, in Texas they are landed primarily by recreational fishermen. The species reaches lengths of 34 inches and weights of 8 pounds. Adult Spanish mackerel travel in large schools and feed on smaller fish and squid. Most Spanish mackerel are caught by fishermen trolling small jigs. An excellent food fish, many people like them pan fried in butter as a breakfast treat.



CERO

Scomberomorus regalis

Other names: spotted kingfish,
spotted cero, cero mackerel

The cero is a mackerel that often is found in schools of king mackerel. It seems to have the same migration habits. The cero does not often weigh more than 20 pounds and sometimes is mistaken for a small king. Faint, rainbow-colored spots are scattered about its body but many times are overlooked. It eats the same foods, strikes the same baits and has the same fine characteristics as a food fish as does the king mackerel.

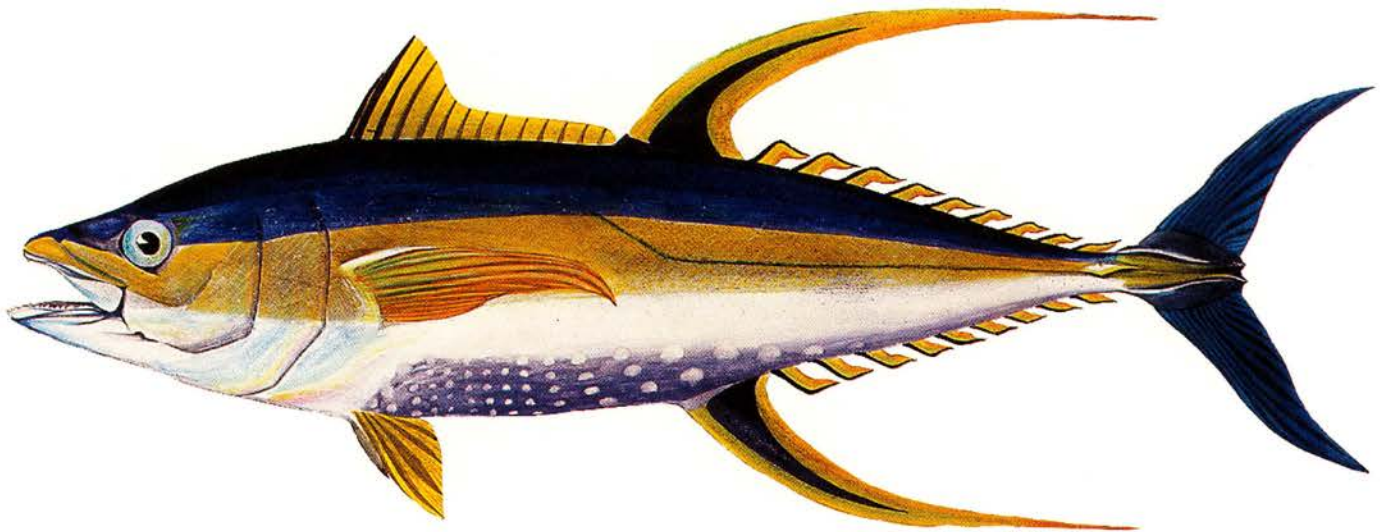


BLACKFIN TUNA

Thunnus atlanticus

Other names: Atlantic blackfin, albacore

Blackfin tuna have bluish black backs shading to silver below. The paired and vertical fins are black. The little finlets in front of the tail are yellow, edged with black. The blackfin is the commonest true tuna in the northwestern Gulf. Like all tunas, blackfins are pelagic, living in the open sea and moving freely. Highest concentrations in Texas are off Port Isabel. Adults reach lengths of 42 inches and weights of 39 pounds. Blackfin tuna feed primarily on other fish. When hooked, they put up a swift, strong surging fight. Most blackfin tuna are caught while trolling jigs and artificial baits on the open sea. The flesh is good.



YELLOWFIN TUNA

Thunnus albacares

Other names: Atlantic yellowfin, yellowfin

The yellowfin tuna is named after the yellowish tint on the breast and fins. Distinguishing characteristics include an elongated second fin along the back and long paired fins behind the head. A large fish, it may reach 260 pounds and average 100. Little is known of its habits, although it ranges from the western Atlantic through the Gulf of Mexico in open, blue water. Food consists of small fish and it has been caught on long lines baited with fish. It is quite edible.



BLUEFIN TUNA

Thunnus thynnus

Other names: bluefin, giant bluefin

Reaching weights in excess of 1,000 pounds, bluefin tuna are truly one of the great fishes of the world. Bluefin tuna are dark steel-blue above and silvery white below. A broad, diffuse iridescent yellow streak runs through the head and part way down the side, and the finlets are tinged in yellow. Sides may be shot with translucent hues of green or red. Bluefin tuna are deep-water, oceanic fishes occurring in all major oceans of the world. They are extremely rare in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico. Due to intensive worldwide fishing pressure, bluefin populations have declined such that they are one of the few marine fishes to be considered rare or endangered by the National Marine Fisheries Service. The food of bluefins consists primarily of other fishes. Anglers troll for this splendid fish in deep offshore waters, using massive rods and reels and suitable baits or lures. Bluefins can be chummed up with small live fish. The flesh is excellent.

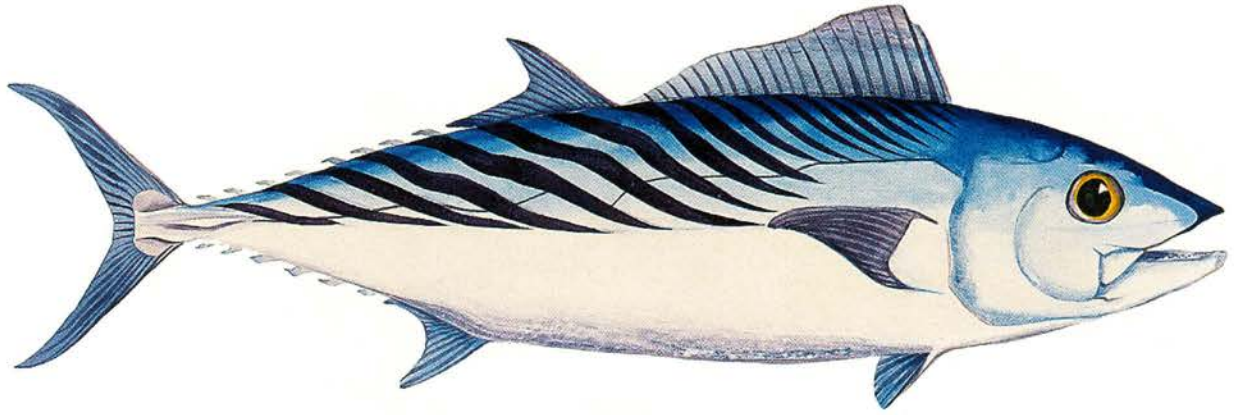


LITTLE TUNNY

Euthynnus alletteratus

Other names: spotted bonito, false albacore, bonito, little tuna

Little tunny or tuna are dark blue or green above, shading to silver below, with irregular blotching on the sides. Dark wavy lines run laterally or diagonally above the lateral line from the middle of the first back fin to the tail. The average size is eight to 10 pounds but 30 or more may be attained. This species often schools in blue water offshore, where it feeds on smaller fish. It swims deep, is very fast and hard-hitting, and is an excellent game fish. Not particularly sought as food, it is considered edible by some.

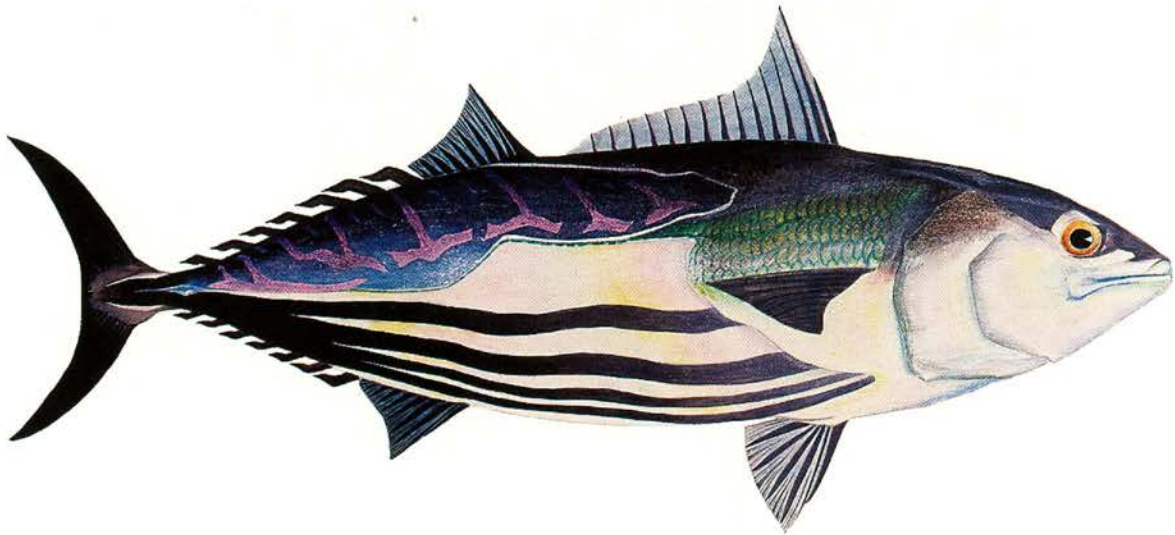


ATLANTIC BONITO

Sarda sarda

Other names: bonita, bone jack

The Atlantic bonito is the species of this group most common to Texas. It is dark bluish above, shading to silvery below. A distinguishing characteristic are the dark stripes running obliquely from near the lateral line to the back. This oceanic fish spawns in June on the Atlantic coast and probably along Texas during warmer months. It feeds on fish and squid and usually near the surface. Weights of 10 to 12 pounds are attained. A hard-hitting game fish, Atlantic bonito are not particularly edible.



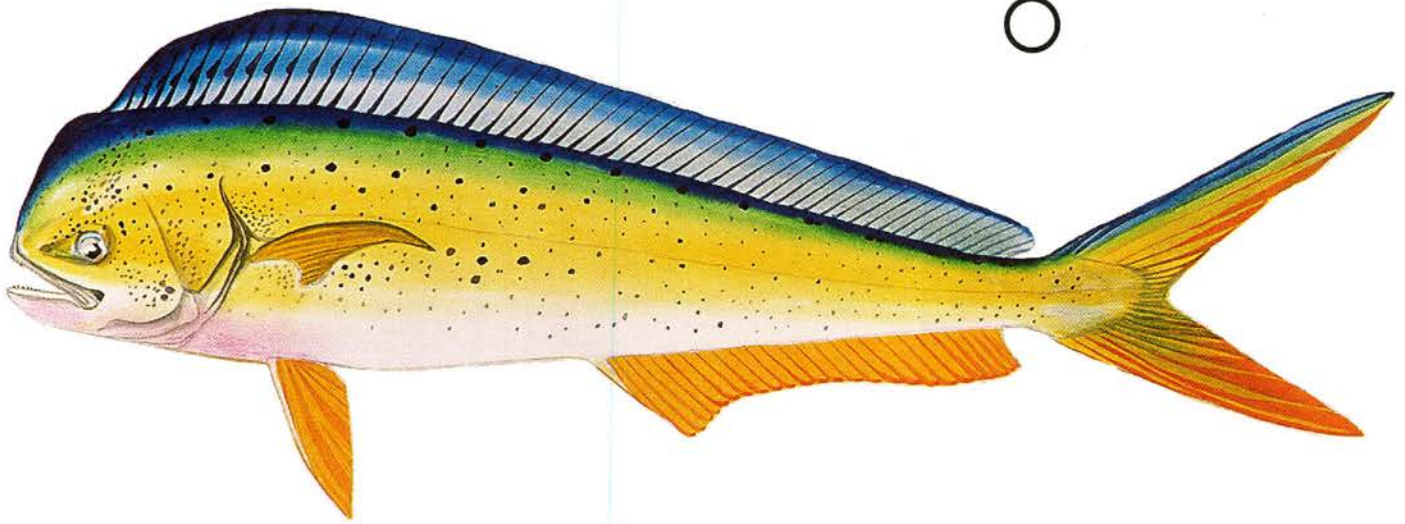
SKIPJACK TUNA

Euthynnus pelamis

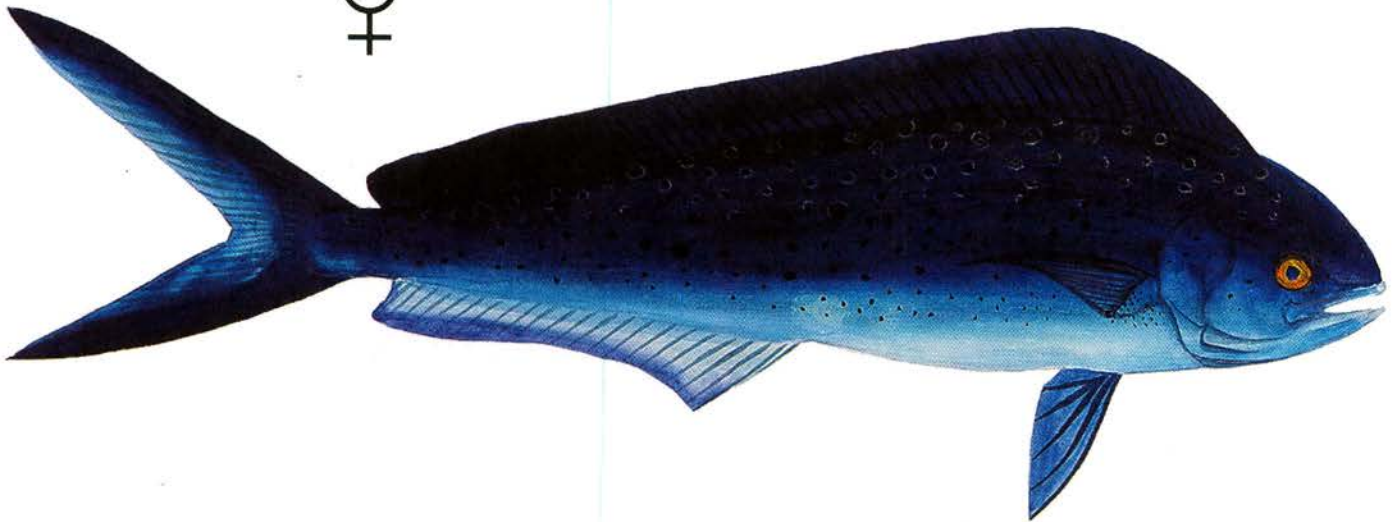
Other names: oceanic bonito, striped tuna, skipjack

Skipjack tuna or oceanic bonito are colorful, open-water fish with dark blue or blue-green backs and silvery sides and bellies. The body has a pinkish cast and dark bluish stripes extend from behind the paired fins to the tail. The finlets may have a purplish cast. Lengths of 2 feet and weights of 20 pounds are reached, but adults average 3 to 6 pounds. Typical pelagic fish, oceanic bonito move about freely preying on such items as flying fish. Little is known of the life history and it is not a food or game fish of great importance in Texas.

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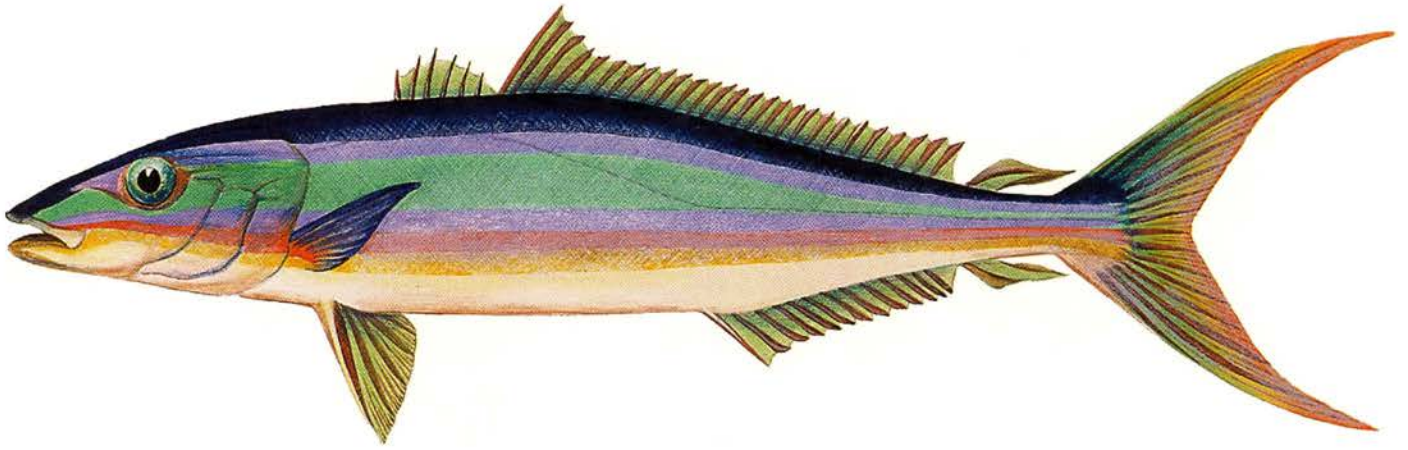


DOLPHIN

Coryphaena hippurus

Other names: dorado, mahi-mahi,
dolphinfish

The dolphin, not to be confused with the bottlenose dolphin (a marine mammal), is one of the most beautifully colored fish in the Gulf of Mexico. Its basic colors may run from yellow to metallic green to green-gold to dark blue. The dolphin is basically a deep-water species, inhabiting the surface of the open ocean. Dolphins are extremely fast swimmers and feed extensively on flying fish and squid. The species is commonly found around floating debris such as grass, seaweed, and trash. The dolphin is a popular gamefish because it tends to leap into the air or "tailwalk" when hooked. Taken in blue offshore waters, dolphins will strike just about any natural bait (and even a feather jig) that is trolled. It is a rapidly growing fish with a short life of 2 or 3 years, growing as long as 67 inches and weighing up to 65 pounds. The dorado is a fine food fish. However, it is very bloody and should be dressed and placed on ice soon after it is caught.

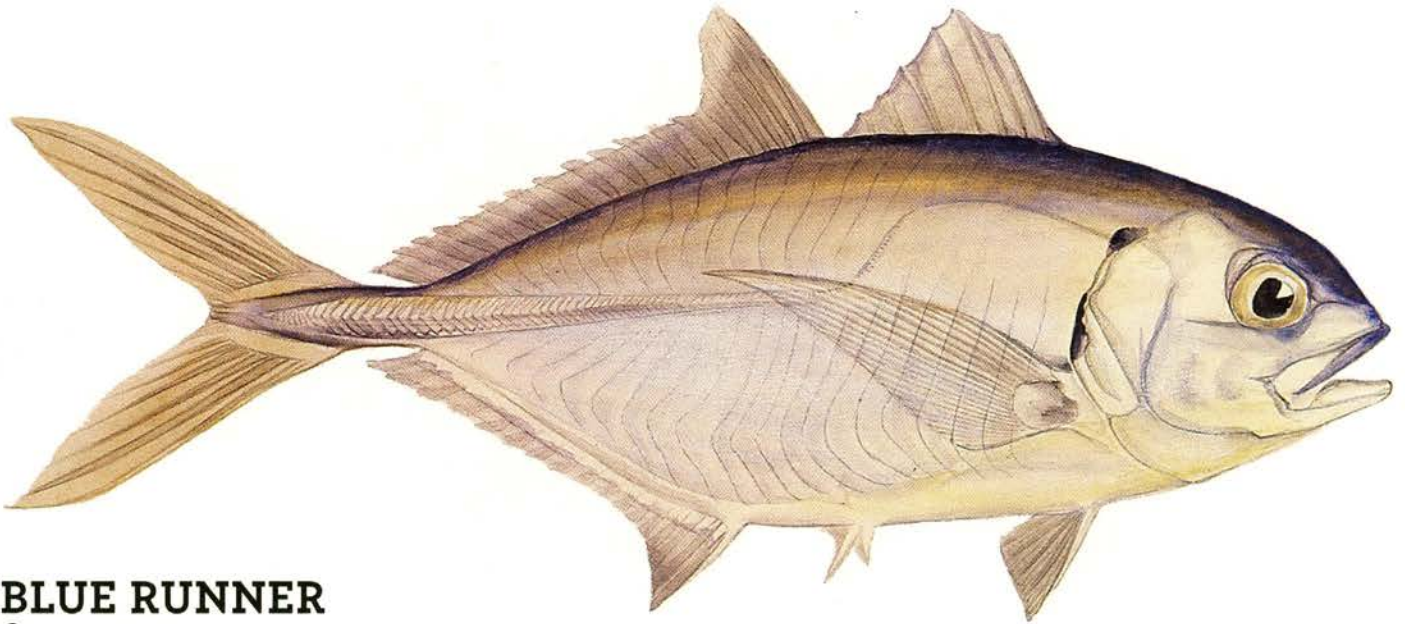


RAINBOW RUNNER

Elagatis bipinnulata

Other names: runner, Spanish jack, yellowtail

The rainbow runner occasionally is caught in Texas. Brightly colored, it is bluish above, tapering to green, yellow and blue streaking on the sides, and yellowish or silvery below with an irregular reddish streak along the head and sides. The back and anal fins each have a single detached finlet composed of two soft rays. The rainbow runner is more commonly found in tropical seas of the world and ranges to 12 pounds in weight and 3 feet in length. Those caught along the Texas coast average 1 to 2 pounds. Little is known of its life history. An offshore pelagic species, it is assumed to spawn in open water and eat small fish and crustaceans. When hooked on lures or live bait, it puts up a fast, hard fight.

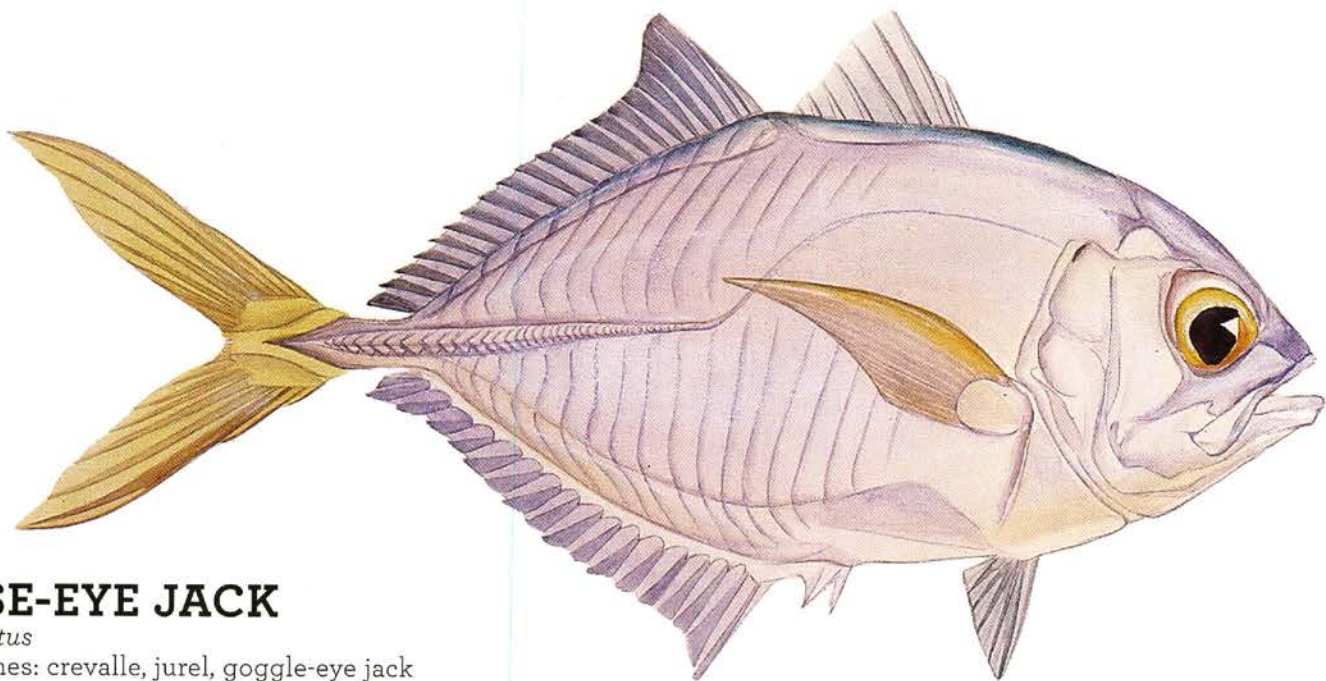


BLUE RUNNER

Caranx crysos

Other names: hardtail,
hardtailed jack, yellowjack

Blue runners are jackfish which have hard bony scutes along the tail and side. Somewhat resembling commonjacks, they have no black spots on the gill cover. The back and upper sides are greenish, shading to yellowish silver below. Fins are almost colorless. The average size is from 2 to 5 pounds, occasionally reaching 6. The blue runner schools around reefs and jetties. It eats small fish, shrimp and crabs. Little is known of the life history. Spawning occurs in the Gulf probably in summer and the young mingle with other juvenile jacks in the surf. Like others of the group, it hits lures readily and is a tough strong fighter, frequently tearing up tackle. Fishing is best in summer. The flesh is edible but not highly sought.

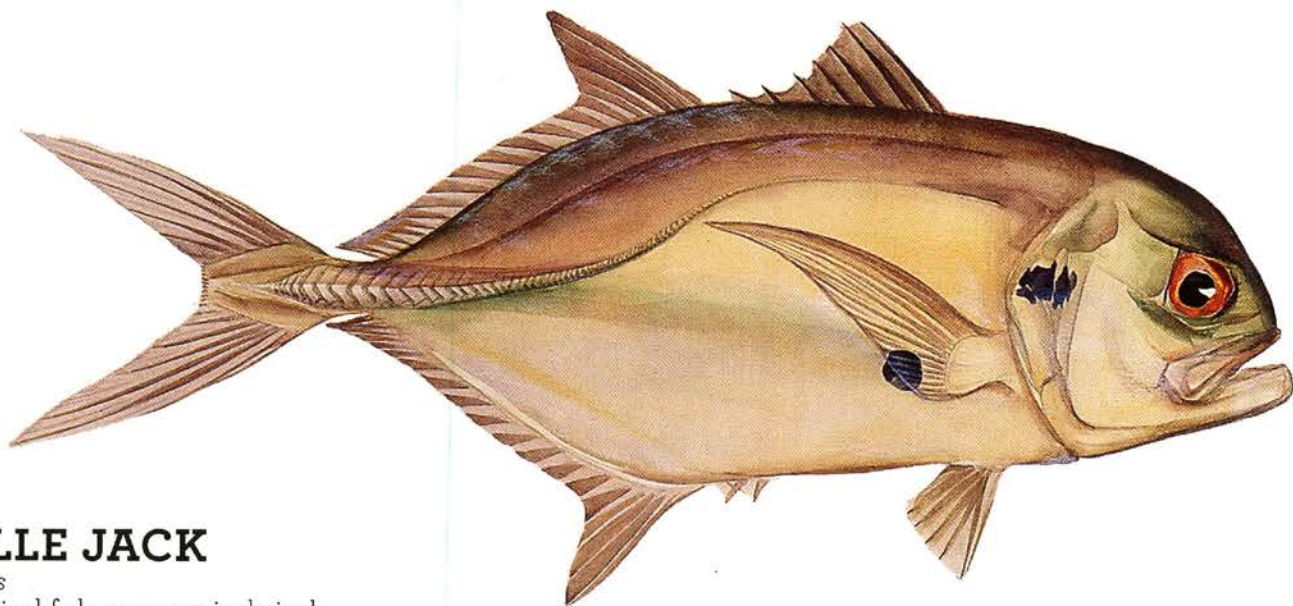


HORSE-EYE JACK

Caranx latus

Other names: crevalle, jurel, goggle-eye jack

The horse-eye jack bears the typical bony scutes of its group along the side and tail. It superficially resembles a pompano but differs in having scutes, two complete back fins and a large mouth. The back is bluish gray, the sides silvery, the underside yellowish silver. All the fins, except the pectoral, are yellowish or dusky. Spawning is in the Gulf in warmer months. Juveniles, which have dark vertical bars, are common in the surf and in bays near passes, moving further into the bay in the fall. The average size caught is about 2 pounds but the fish may reach 2 feet in length and 20 pounds in weight. The usual food is small fish or shrimp but the horse-eye will hit plugs, spoons and various baits. Like all jacks it is a tough tenacious fighter usually avoided by anglers. The flesh is edible but not used to any extent in Texas.

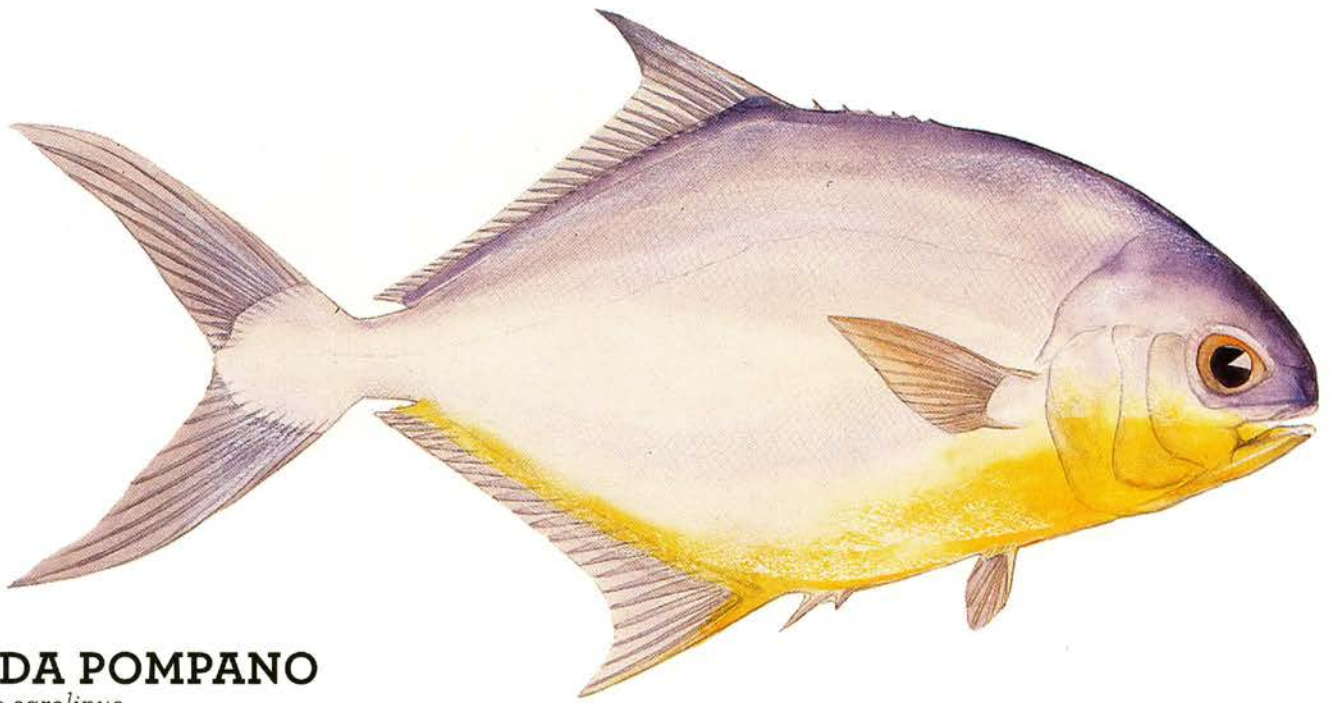


CREVALLE JACK

Caranx hippos

Other names: jackfish, commonjack, jack

Crevalle jacks are pugnacious-looking fish which live up to their looks. A dark spot on the gill cover and a steeply convex forehead separate this species from other jackfish. The strong bony scutes on its tail are common to all jacks. The average weight in Texas waters is 2 to 5 pounds but larger sizes are common and 25 pounds is not unusual. Spawning occurs in the Gulf and juveniles are abundant in the surf, frequently moving into bays. Small jacks which run in schools in the bays may be found around bridges, pilings, reefs or other structures. Larger fish run offshore and around the mouths of passes and rivers but often enter bays in September and October. They eat mullet, other small fish and crabs. Best angling for these strong fighters is from May to August with almost any bait or lure. Once hooked, the common jack is tenacious with hard drives toward the bottom and frequent straightening of hooks. It is edible but not desirable for food.

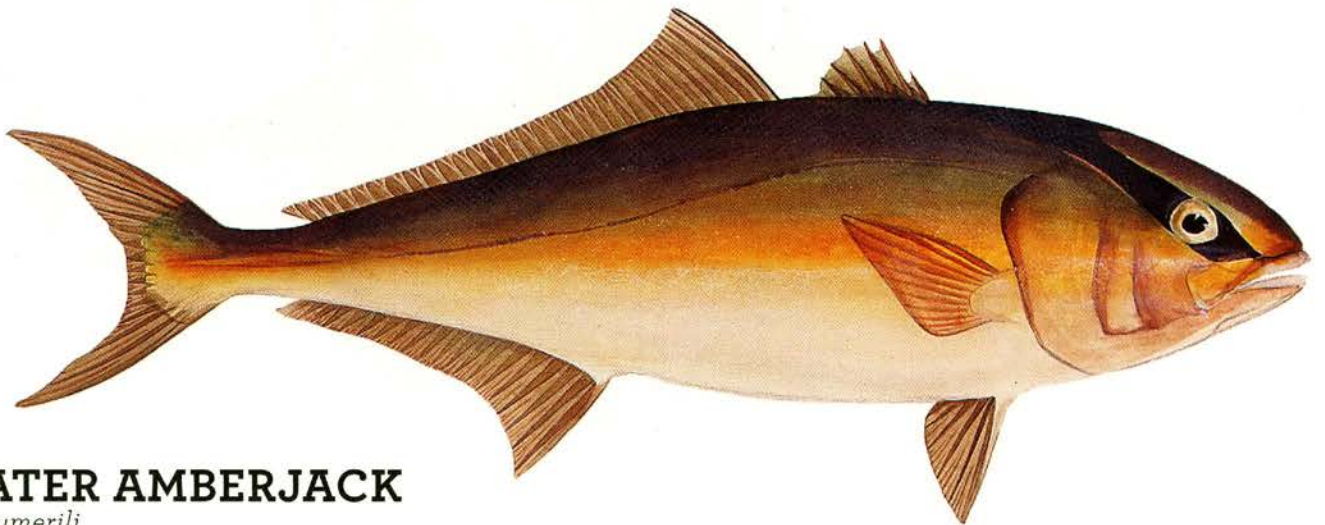


FLORIDA POMPANO

Trachinotus carolinus

Other names: pompano, cobblerfish

Pompano are deep-bodied fish, grayish blue on the back shading to silver on the side with yellow beneath. There is a bluish tint above and in front of the eyes. The side of the tail and the caudal peduncle are smooth in contrast to the similar-looking jack crevalle. Pompano are common along Gulf beaches and passes. In September and October, adults move far into the bays and often are sighted jumping in the wakes of boats. The average size is 2 to 5 pounds, occasionally larger. Food consists of mollusks, beach fleas, shrimp, small fish and various burrowing crustaceans. Spawning is in the Gulf and in the summer the young are present in great numbers in the surf. The best fishing is in summer and fall and the fish may move offshore in winter. Since the mouth of this fish is not large, baits and hooks should be small. Small shrimp, bits of shrimp, other small crustaceans and small lures work well in clear water. Many consider pompano to be the most delicious of all fish, particularly broiled with butter.

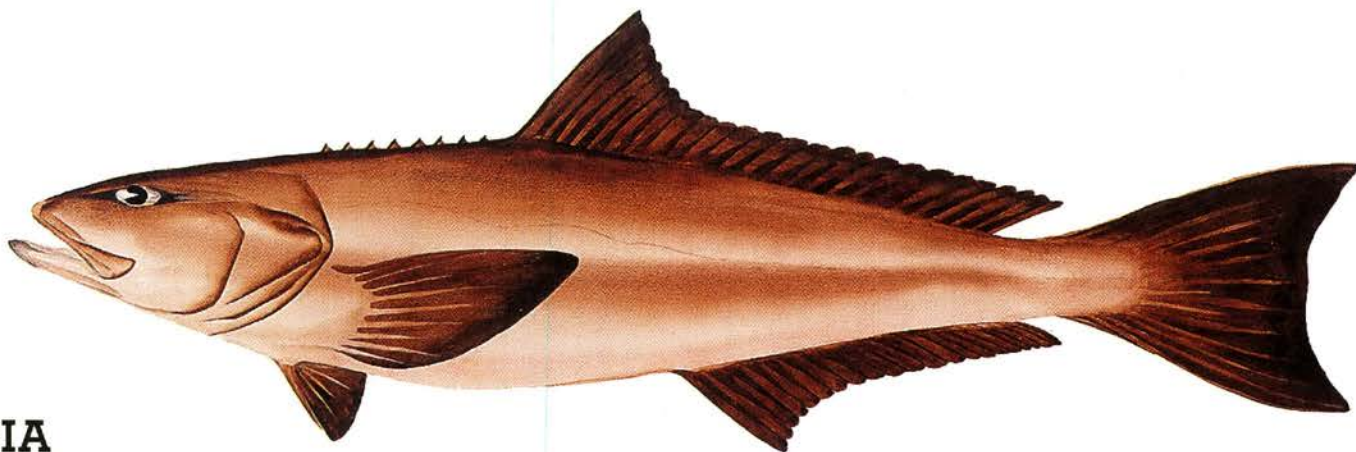


GREATER AMBERJACK

Seriola dumerili

Other names: amberjack

The greater amberjack is one of the largest members of the jackfish family. More slender than most jacks, it does not have finlets and the keel at the base of the tail is slight and soft. The back is bluish-purple, the sides yellowish and the underside silver. Amberjacks have a distinctive dark band on the sides of the head which angles from the front of the back fin, through the eye to the mouth. Greater amberjack occur throughout the tropical and temperate Atlantic Ocean. In Texas waters, they are most often found around reefs and oil rigs. Although there is a small fishery directed toward amberjacks, most are caught incidental to snapper fishing operations. Adults reach lengths of 66 inches and weights of over 100 pounds. Amberjack are opportunistic carnivores, normally feeding on other fishes and squid. Ribbonfish on large hooks is the bait of choice. The flesh is edible but not especially sought after.

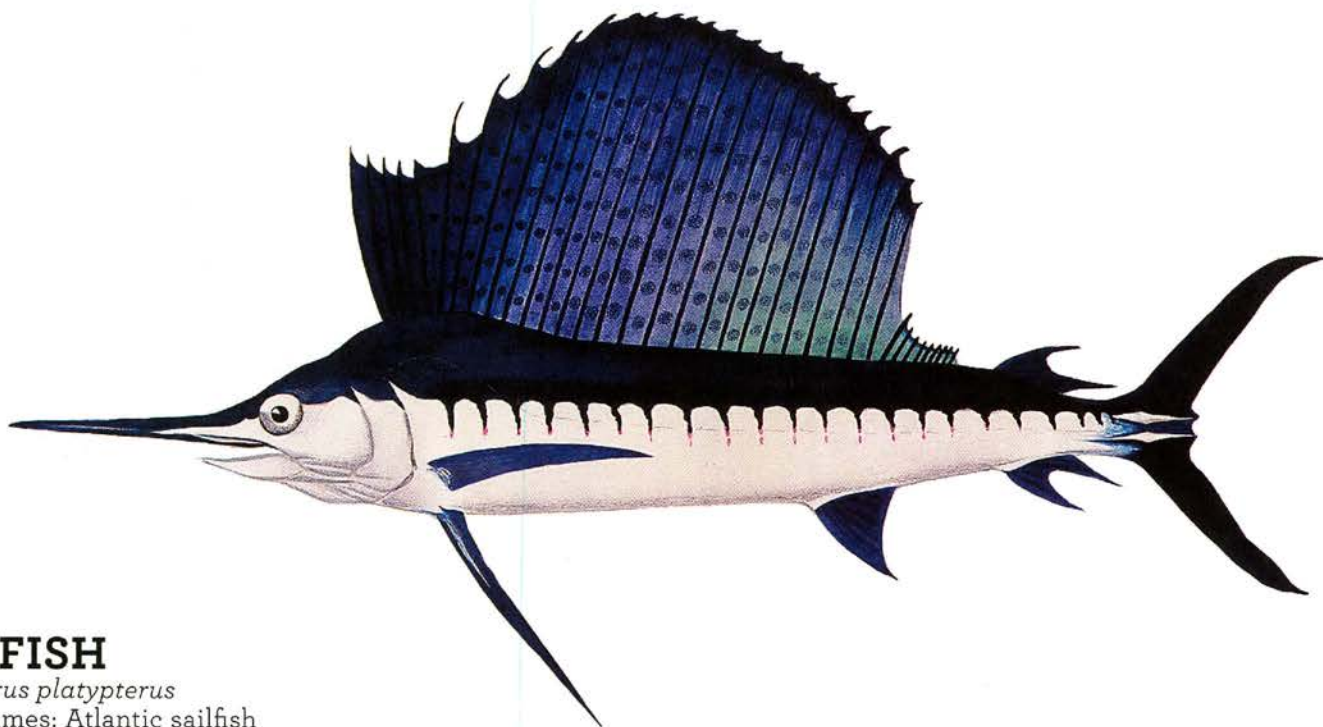


COBIA

Rachycentron canadum

Other names: ling, lemonfish, crab eater

The cobia, called ling in Texas, is chocolate brown in color, darker above, and often have a dark lateral band from the snout to the base of the tail. The dorsal fin has eight or nine free spike-like spines in front of the long soft fin. Cobia have been described as having a shark-shaped body with the mouth of a catfish. In Texas waters, cobia reach lengths of 70 inches and weights in excess of 100 pounds. Food consists of shrimp, squid, crab and other fish. The flesh of cobia is considered excellent eating, and they are a highly sought sport fish. Although small cobia occasionally venture into the bays, large fish are caught exclusively in the Gulf. Cobia tend to congregate under floating or stationary objects. One of the best places to look for cobia is underneath a shrimp boat culling its catch. Because of their opportunistic feeding habits, cobia will hit a wide range of natural and artificial baits. Charcoal broiling or deep-frying are recommended cooking methods.

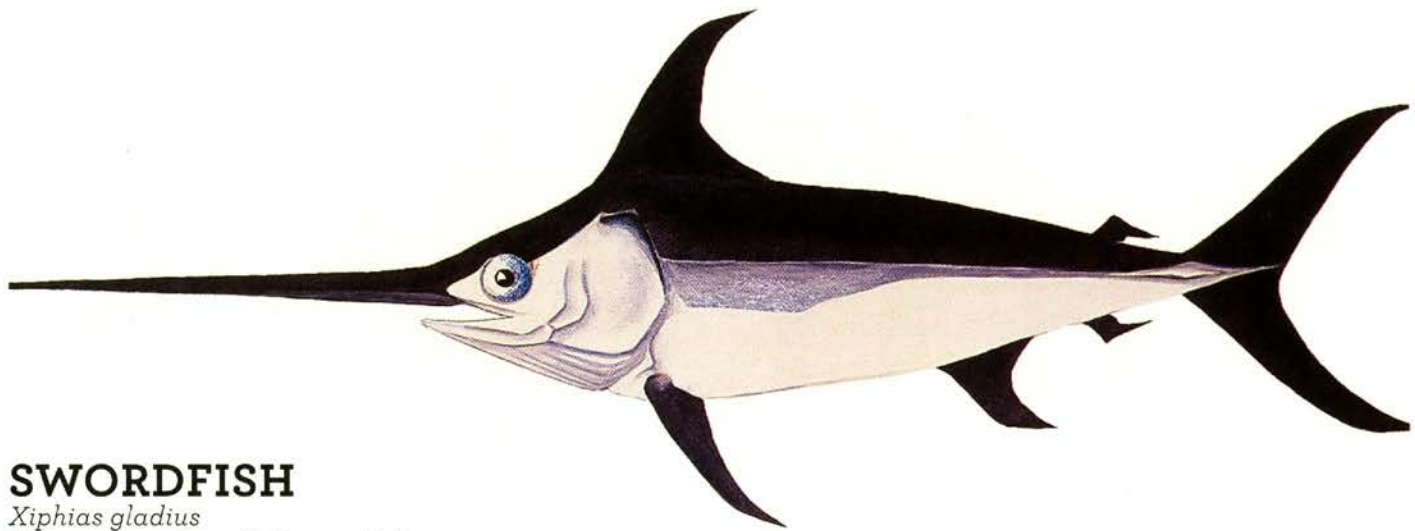


SAILFISH

Istiophorus platypterus

Other names: Atlantic sailfish

The sailfish is aptly named for its unusually large dorsal (top) fin, which extends most of the length of the body. The "sail" is dark blue, with black dots in rows between the spines; sometimes it is folded down into a depression in the back where it cannot be seen. The back is bluish black, fading to silver on the side and abdomen (belly). Sailfish are blue-water fish, rarely straying close to shore. The elongated spearlike upper jaw, the torpedo-shaped body and the large, forked tail mark this as a swift-moving, powerful fish. Sailfish first appear off southern Texas in early May and usually leave by November. They apparently avoid water temperatures below 50°F, and their movements seem to be correlated with water temperatures in the 75°-80°F range. Adults reach lengths of 97 inches and weights of 95 pounds. They have voracious appetites, normally feeding on squid and other fishes. Sailfish are a highly prized gamefish, with a well-deserved reputation for lightning runs and spectacular jumps. They will hit most types of trolled baits, such as mullet and cutlassfish and lures. The flesh is edible, but not highly prized.



SWORDFISH

Xiphias gladius

Other names: broadbill swordfish

This is a solitary fish with large, bright blue eyes. Adults are bronze on the back, shading to silver below. Younger fish are usually dark blue above. While swordfish superficially resemble marlins, they are quite distinct and only remotely related. Swordfish possess a flattened, serrated bill and black belly fins. The bill is proportionally longer in the swordfish than any other billfish. Swordfish are large and pugnacious, reaching lengths of more than 15 feet and weights of more than 1,000 pounds. Although swordfish swim near the surface in some areas, off Texas they are restricted to the cold waters found only at great depths. The primary food is squid. Although the flesh is excellent eating and highly sought, swordfish do not support any type of commercial or recreational fishery in Texas. The species has a reputation for unprovoked aggression, occasionally attacking boats by ramming the hull with the bill.

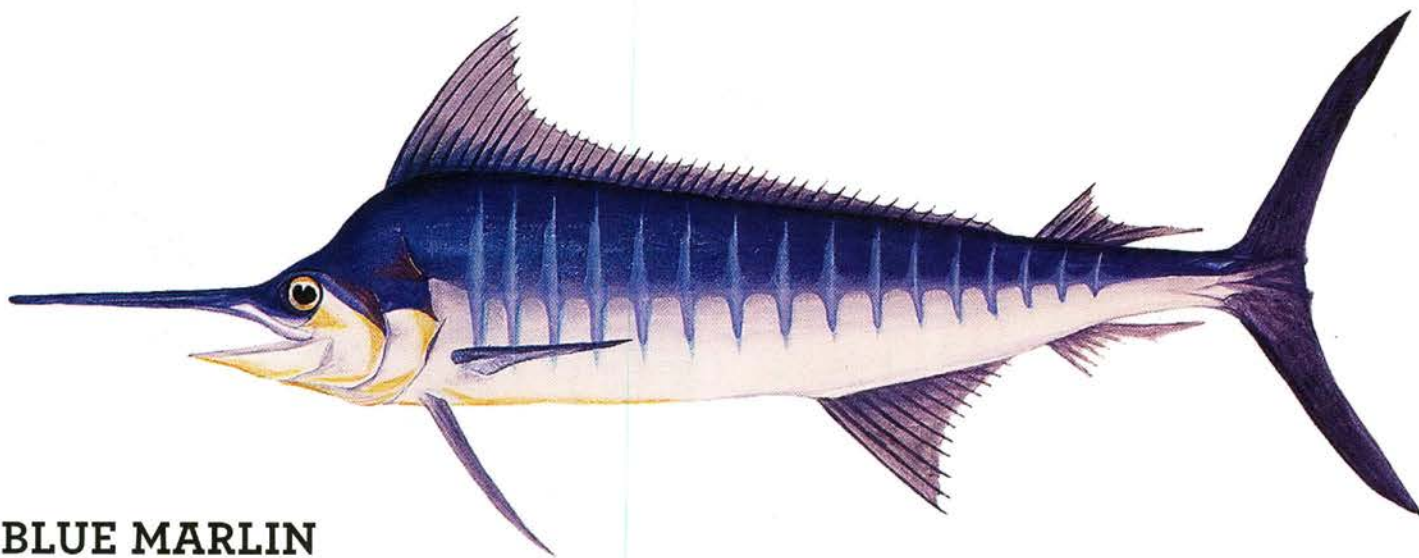


WHITE MARLIN

Tetrapturus albidus

Other names: billfish

The white marlin is greenish blue above and silvery-white below. Light blue vertical bars may be present. The dorsal (top) and anal (rear bottom) fins are rounded and the lateral line is conspicuous, separating it from other Atlantic billfishes. The bright blue dorsal fin has black or purple spots on membranes between fin rays. White marlin reach lengths in excess of 7 feet and weights of over 100 pounds. They are opportunistic carnivores, eating anything they can capture. Hence they are a fisherman's dream, readily hitting almost any kind of natural or artificial bait. White marlin strike hard and make fast runs with many jumps. The species is not particularly common in the Gulf of Mexico, with the only real concentration of fish occurring off the mouth of the Mississippi River during midsummer.



BLUE MARLIN

Makaira nigricans

Other names: espondora

Blue marlin are the largest marlin in the Atlantic Ocean and are revered as one of the world's great gamefish. Blue marlin have steel-blue upper parts fading to a silvery white on the abdomen (belly). Narrow dark vertical bars are usually present on the sides. The sharply pointed dorsal (top) and anal (rear bottom) fins and rounded body distinguish the blue from the white marlin. Blue marlin have a worldwide distribution. In Texas waters, they are most common in the Gulf of Mexico off Port Isabel during July and August. Adult blue marlin have been reported to reach lengths in excess of 10 feet and weights of nearly 2,000 pounds. Females are bigger than males, with males seldom exceeding 300 pounds in weight. Fish and squid compose the majority of the diet, with tuna and bonito being the favorites of big blues. Most are caught by trolling fish baits such as mullet, flying fish and strip baits. The majority of the marlin fishing in Texas occurs along the 100-fathom curve. Sport boats seldom fish the open sea where the largest blues are reported to be.

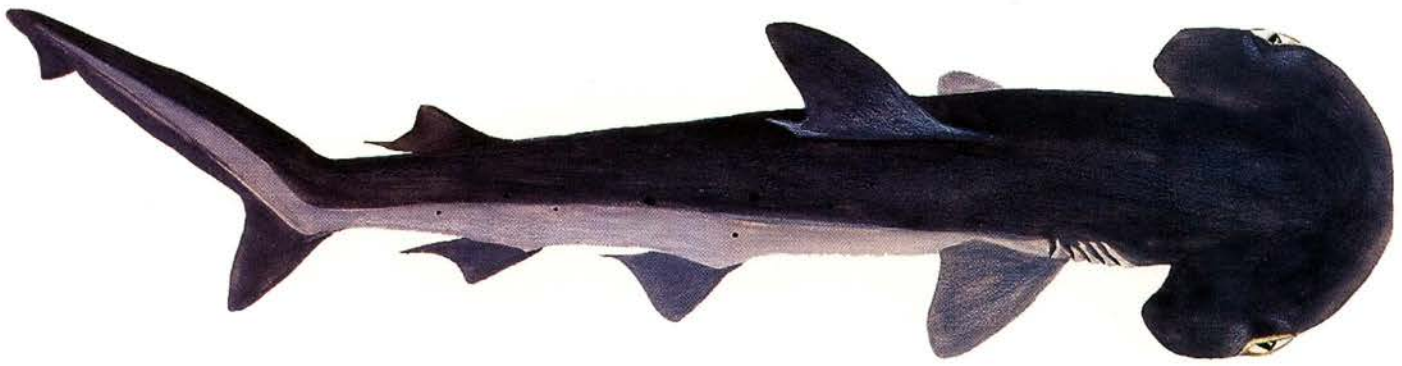


GREAT HAMMERHEAD

Sphyrna mokarran

Other names: hammerhead

The great hammerhead is the largest of the five species of hammerhead sharks. All of these unique animals possess hammer-shaped appendages at the end of the snout. The eyes and nostrils are located at the outer ends of this "hammer," giving the shark an advantage in visual and perhaps olfactory (smell) perception. The curious head also serves as a planing device which allows them to maneuver and turn with great speed. The great hammerhead reaches lengths of nearly 20 feet. The color is usually brownish gray above and paler below. Hammerheads feed primarily on fish, shrimp, crabs, stingrays and small sharks. Although hammerheads are not overly aggressive, they have been known to attack humans. Most are active fighters when hooked by reef anglers and boat fishermen. The flesh is edible, although not choice, and the skin makes a durable, handsome leather.

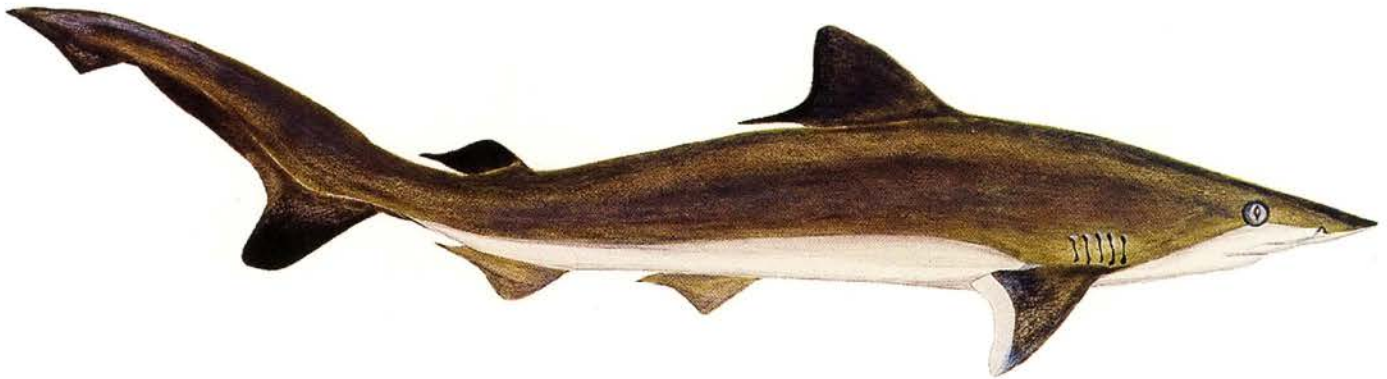


BONNETHEAD

Sphyrna tiburo

Other names: bonnetnose, shovelhead, shovel-nosed shark

The bonnethead is one of the most common sharks in the Texas bays and Gulf surf. The shovel-shaped head with no notch in the middle distinguishes this species from the other members of the hammerhead family. The bonnethead is gray or grayish brown on the back and paler on the undersides, with some individuals having a few small round spots on the sides. This shark matures at 3½ to 4 feet and gives birth to six to nine fully developed young. Few bonnetheads are found over 5 feet in length, although the maximum size is probably 6 feet. They are found in the tropical warm-temperate waters of the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico out to at least 25 fathoms. They feed primarily on crabs, shrimp, mantis shrimp, small fish, mollusks and squid. The bonnethead is more sluggish than other members of the hammerhead family but readily bites on almost any kind of bait. They often follow fishing boats, picking up fish or other discarded scraps.

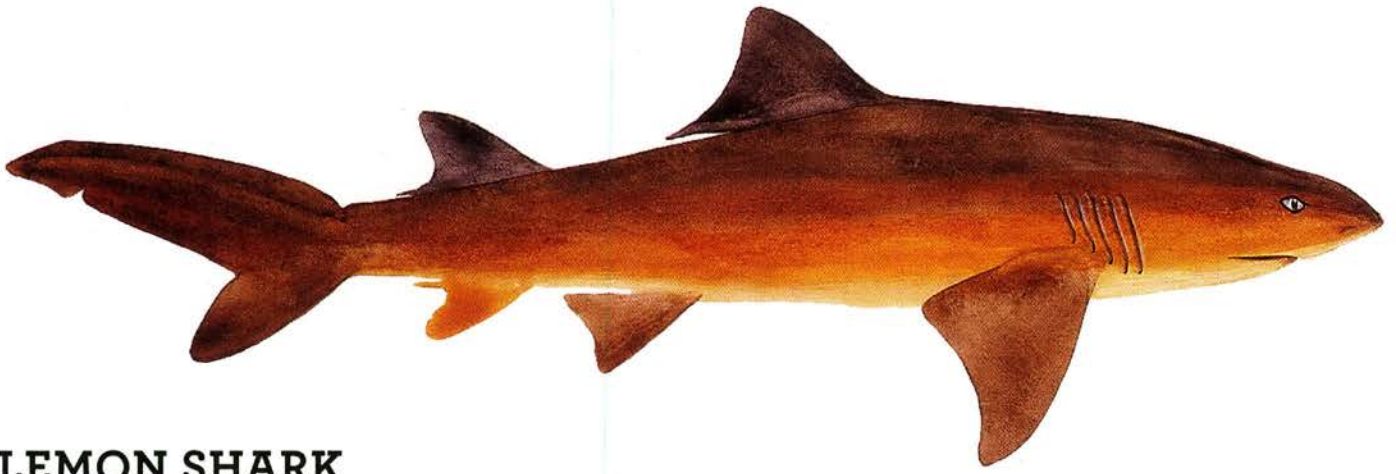


ATLANTIC SHARPNOSE SHARK

Rhizoprionodon terraenovae

Other names: sandshark

This is one of the most common inshore species of shark in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico, with young often appearing in the surf zone and in saltier bays during summer. The color is brownish olive above and dark brown below with dark edges on the back and tail fins. The slender body tapers to a narrow pointed snout with wrinkles extending around the corners of the mouth. This is a harmless shark, even though it is in the same family as some of the man-eaters. Sharpnose sharks are born fully developed and grow to a length of about 36 inches. Atlantic sharpnose sharks are found throughout the tropical and subtropical Atlantic, with highest abundances occurring in the West Indian-Caribbean region and in the Gulf of Mexico. They are scavengers and use a highly developed sense of smell to find food items such as squid, shrimp and small fish. Sharpnose sharks are often caught in large numbers on the offshore snapper banks, and many anglers consider them a nuisance, stealing bait intended for other species. The flesh, however, is excellent eating and anglers who discard them are throwing back one of the better tasting fish that they will catch.

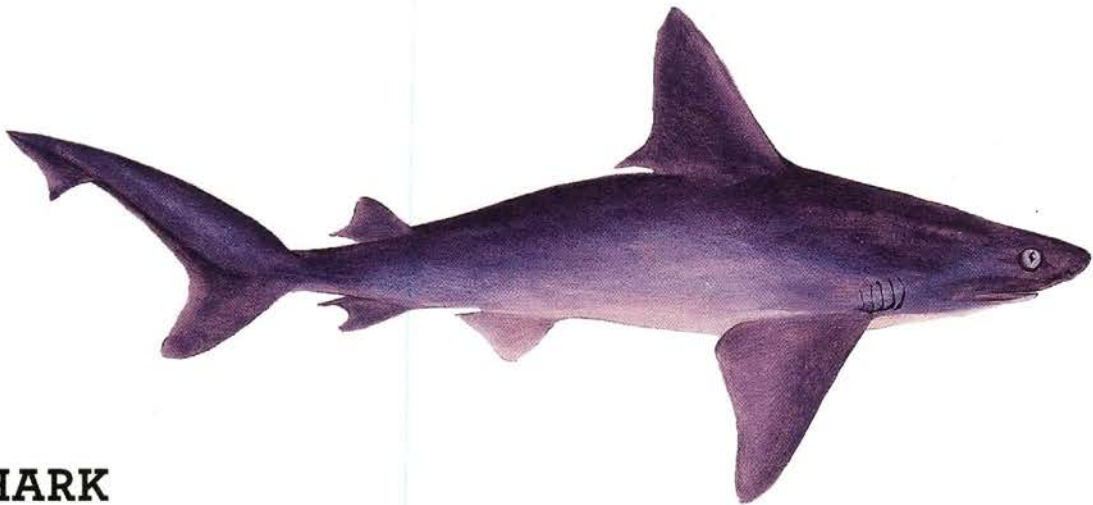


LEMON SHARK

Negaprion brevirostris

Other names: requiem shark

The lemon shark is the only shark in Gulf and Caribbean waters that has the combination of a short, rounded snout, both back fins nearly equal in size, and straight symmetrical teeth with smooth cusps or points. The color is usually yellowish brown above, with the lower sides tinged with yellow or greenish olive and the belly often white, pale yellowish, or graying olive. The lemon shark is abundant at depths down to 20 fathoms and cruises offshore waters near the surface. It is a common inshore species often found around docks and piers. The young are born in the spring and summer in shallow water and measure 24 to 26 inches. Adults mature at 7 feet and reach a maximum length of about 11 feet. Lemon sharks are found alone or in loose schools predominantly of one sex. They have voracious appetites and feed primarily on fish and crustaceans. Young and half-grown lemon sharks often are found feeding on schools of mullet and readily are hooked on cut bait. Adults show a definite preference for hooks baited with fish.

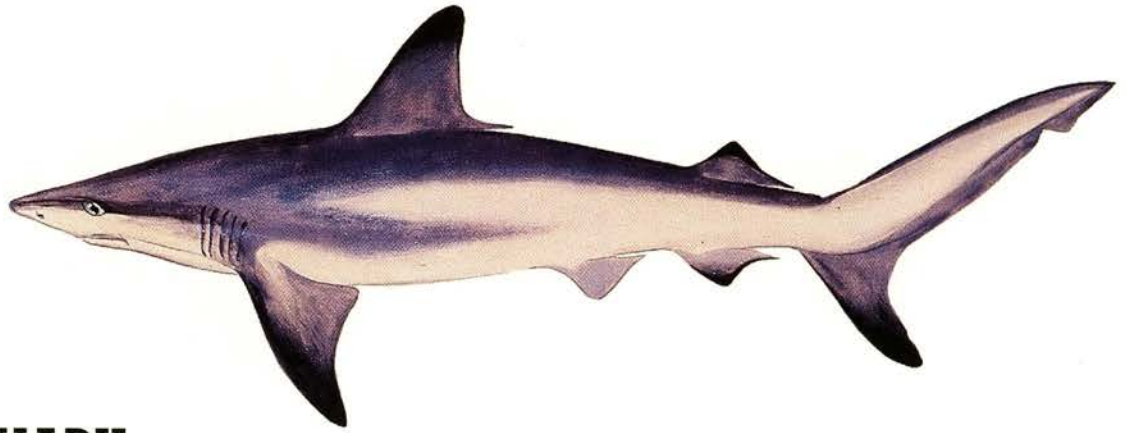


BULL SHARK

Carcharhinus leucas

Other names: cub shark, ground shark

Bull sharks can be recognized by their heavy body, wide head and blunt, rounded snout. They are gray above and white below. Adults have no conspicuous fin markings while fins on the young may have darker edges. Bull sharks are different from other species in that they live in both fresh and salt water. They have been known to ascend rivers for many miles and some of their kind are landlocked in Lake Nicaragua. Bull sharks are found in most of the subtropical and tropical oceans of the world and are a common species in our waters. They are generally slow-moving fish, but can be fast and aggressive when feeding. The bull shark grows to at least 10 feet in length and may weigh over 500 pounds. They feed on a wide variety of marine life, but seem to prefer smaller sharks. They are known to show a preference for shark meat when it is used for bait and are one of the most common shark species caught by Texas anglers.

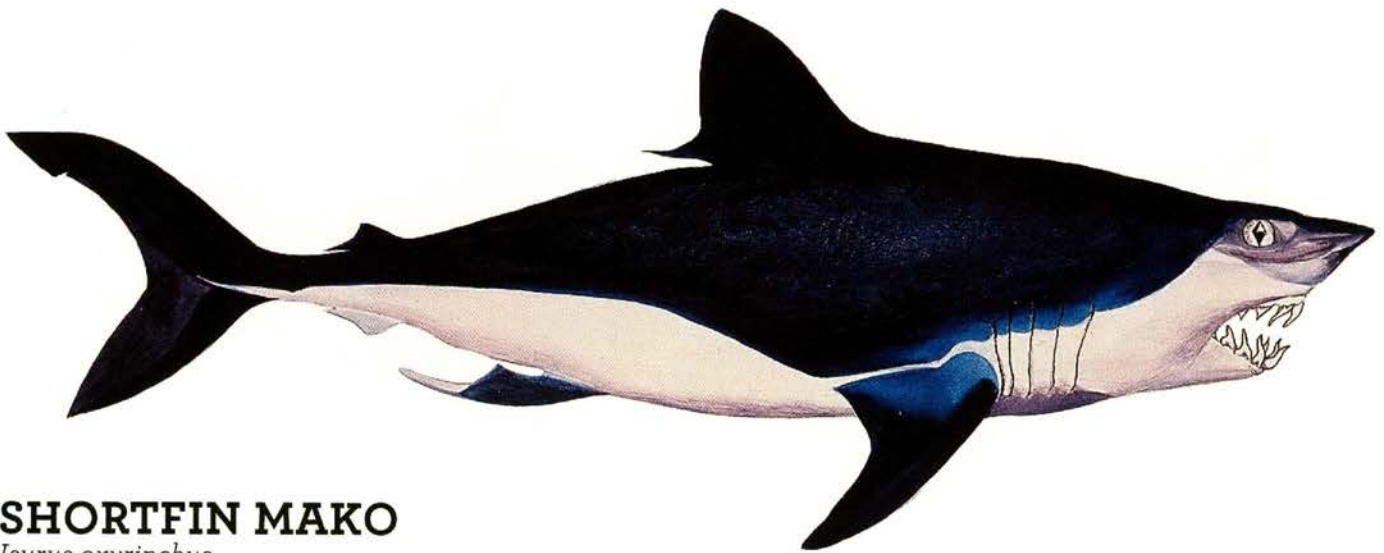


BLACKTIP SHARK

Carcharhinus limbatus

Other names: sandshark, spinner shark, spotfin, ground shark

The conspicuously black-tipped fins give this species its name. However, it should not be confused with its larger cousin, the spinner shark, whose fins are similarly marked. The blacktip can be distinguished from the spinner by its shorter gill openings, relatively larger eyes and finely serrated teeth. It is dark gray, bluish or dusky bronze above; white or yellowish white below. The blacktip inhabits the warm waters of the Atlantic and is common in the Gulf of Mexico. In the spring, a female gives birth to four to six young, with an average size of 21 to 23 inches. These are small sharks, reaching about 6 to 8 feet in length. They sometimes travel in schools, feeding on small fishes of all kinds. This species is very active, often leaping out of the water, making it an exciting game fish. The blacktip frequently is caught by hook and line in Texas and is one of the most common sharks taken by the offshore party boats. It is considered a fine eating fish by many fishermen.

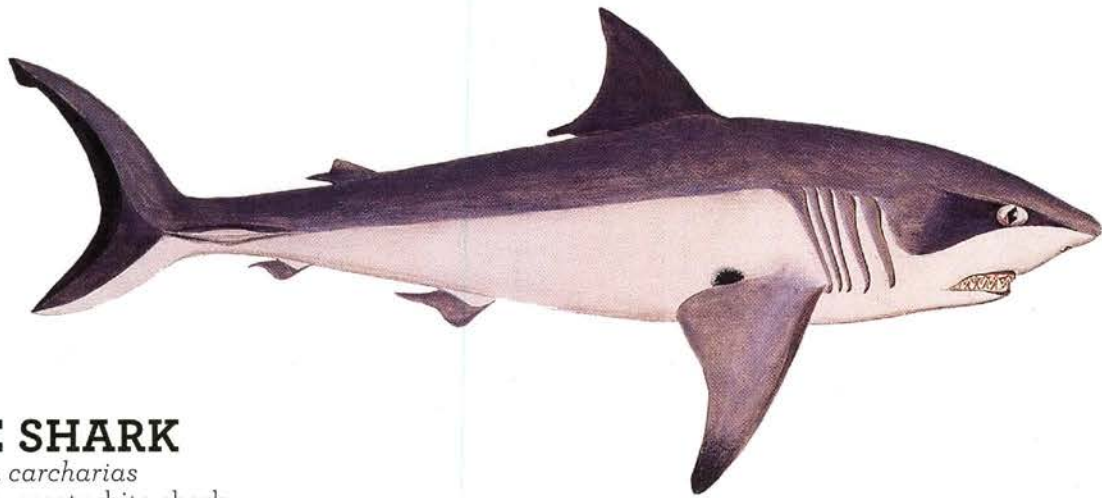


SHORTFIN MAKO

Isurus oxyrinchus

Other names: mako, sharp-nosed mackerel shark

The shortfin mako, a close relative to the great white shark, is a slender, fast-swimming species with a deep blue-gray back and white underside. Its jaws, which can be opened at about a 90-degree angle, contain wicked teeth that are smooth-edged and daggerlike. It is widespread on both sides of the Atlantic, ranging from the North Sea to South Africa and from New England to Brazil. It is also found in the Indo-Pacific, and off the coasts of New Zealand and Australia. The young are born alive and are 2 feet long at birth. There usually are two to five pups to a litter. Adults grow to about 12 feet in length, but most are less than 10 feet long. It is generally found in the open ocean; however, it does venture close to land on occasion. It preys on schools of mackerel, herring and other fishes. Makos are well-known for their speed, power and leaping ability when hooked, and they can clear the water by as much as 15 feet during such aerial acrobatics. They not only are sporting fish but also fine table fare.

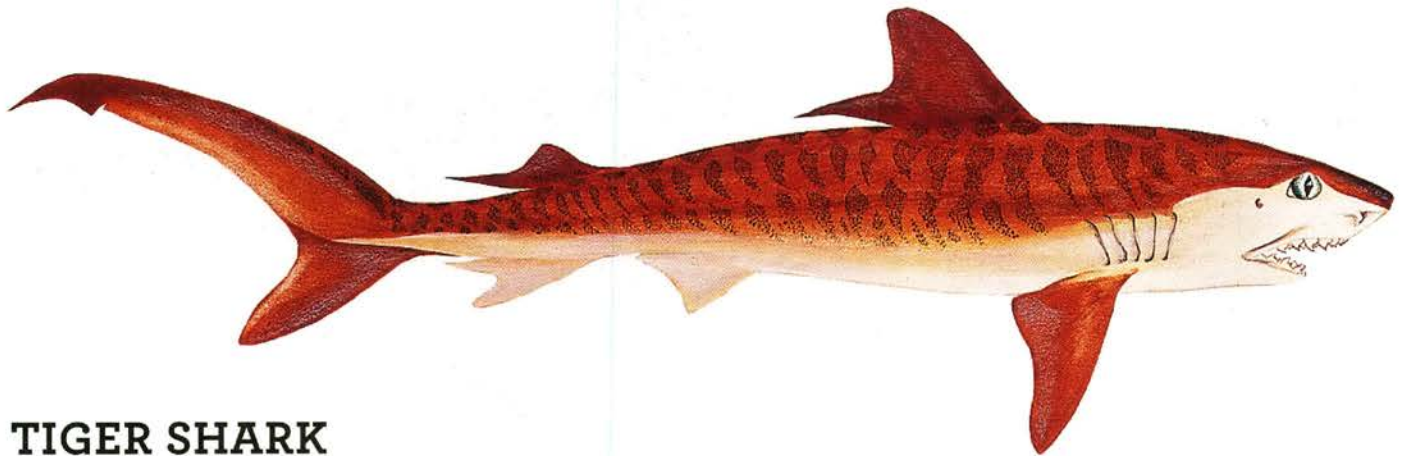


WHITE SHARK

Carcharodon carcharias

Other names: great white shark

Formerly called the great white shark, this is the largest meat-eating shark, reportedly reaching lengths in excess of 30 feet and weights in excess of 10 tons. Although white sharks are not the only species of shark known to attack humans, they are certainly among the worst offenders. Large white sharks regularly eat human sized prey, such as seals, sea lions and dolphins. Fortunately white sharks favor cold, temperate waters and are not common off Texas. White sharks are gray, dark blue or brown on their upper body and white or grayish white underneath. The color fades with age to a leaden white or dun shade. The tips of the fins are black and there is a black spot behind the pectoral fin. Fishing for white sharks is not for the faint of heart, since these large, aggressive predators have been known to attack boats, especially when hooked. Although white sharks have a worldwide distribution, they are not particularly common anywhere. They are most often encountered in the cool waters off southern Australia and northern California. White sharks are most often caught using large chunks of dead bait and extremely heavy tackle.

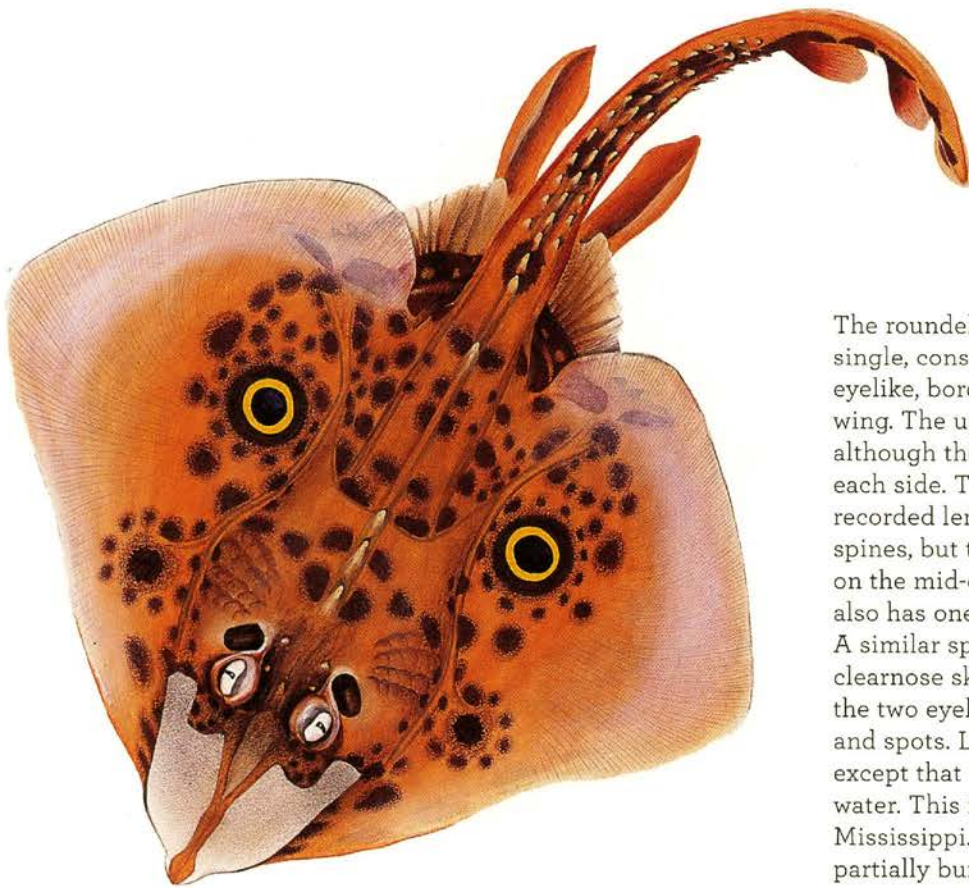


TIGER SHARK

Galeocerdo cuvier

Other names: leopard shark

The tiger shark is distinguished from other sharks by its serrated teeth that curve backward, forming a notch midway from tip to base, and by the short snout, pointed tail and vertical brown stripes on its sides and back. The stripes, which give the fish its name, are more pronounced in young specimens and fade away with age. The darker upper body is grayish brown and the lower portion is paler grayish white. Tiger sharks are found in most of the warm oceans of the world. They reproduce at any time during the year. As many as 80 eggs may be carried by the female and the young are about 2 feet long at birth. They are known to reach 18 feet in length, but the majority are less than 12 feet long. Tiger sharks primarily feed on fish but will eat almost anything, including carrion and their own kind. Tin cans, pieces of coal, sacks and other strange objects have been found in their stomachs. They are known to attack boats when provoked and rank second to the white shark in recorded attacks upon man.



ROUNDEL SKATE

Raja texana

Other names: Texas clearnose skate, Texas sharpnose skate

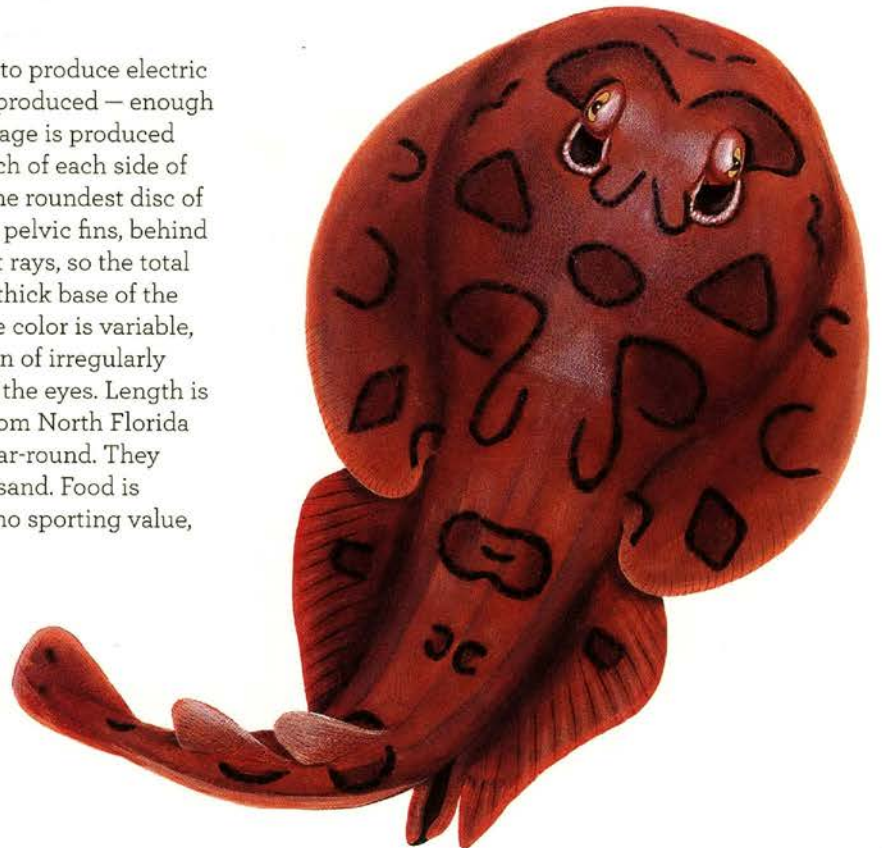
The roundel skate most easily is identified by a single, conspicuous spot, which is dark-centered and eyelike, bordered with yellow on each disc-shaped wing. The upper wing is a rich, chocolate brown color, although the snout area has a translucent area on each side. The eyes are on top of the head. Maximum recorded length is 21 inches. Skates do not have spines, but this skate is armed with a row of thorns on the mid-dorsal line, continued on the tail, which also has one irregular row of thorns on either side. A similar species very common to the east coast, the clearnose skate (*Raja eglanteria* Bosc), does not have the two eyelike spots but has distinctive dark bars and spots. Little is known of the skates' life history, except that most have been taken from shallow water. This is the most common skate west of the Mississippi. Skates either lie flat on the bottom with partially buried wings, or swim close to it. The skates capture prey by swimming over and settling down upon it, preventing escape. Food is bottom-oriented crabs, shrimp, and small crustaceans, as well as worms. Skates are unimportant as human food.

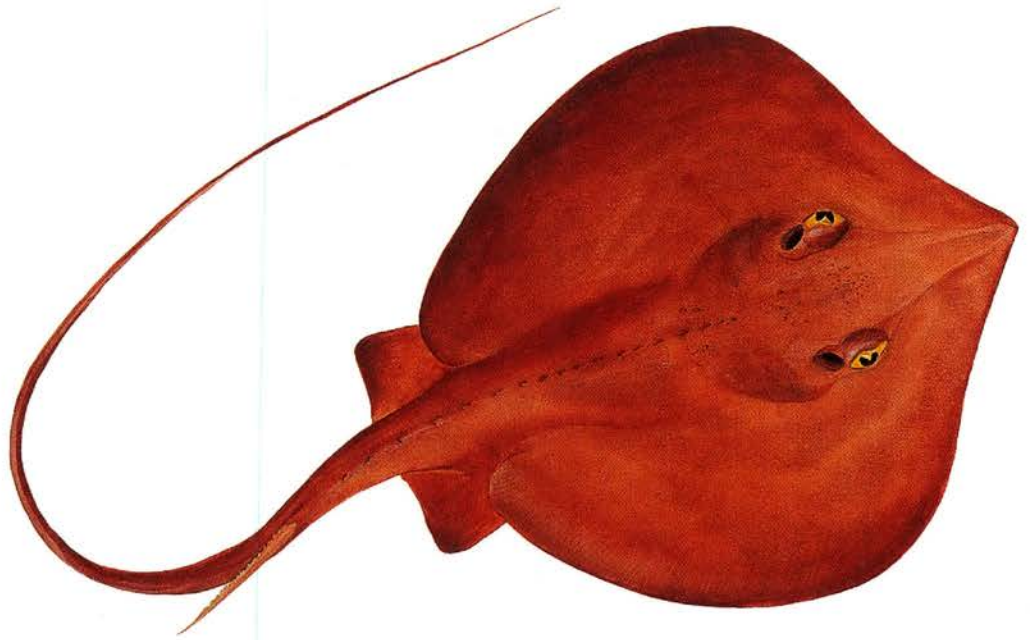
LESSER ELECTRIC RAY

Narcine brasiliensis

Other names: electric ray, torpedo, crampfish

The lesser electric ray is best known for its ability to produce electric shock. Although rarely used, up to 37 volts can be produced — enough to knock down a man if the ray is stepped on. Voltage is produced through two specialized organs which occupy much of each side of the disc-shaped wing. The lesser electric ray has the roundest disc of the rays to be found in Texas waters. However, the pelvic fins, behind the discs, are extended laterally more than in most rays, so the total outline is more teardrop-shaped. Notice the wide, thick base of the tail, also. There are no scales, thorns or spines. The color is variable, a uniform light brown or the more common pattern of irregularly shaped dark blotches with a dark band anterior to the eyes. Length is about 15 inches. The rays are distributed widely from North Florida to South Brazil and are present in Texas waters year-round. They prefer shallow waters where they lie buried in the sand. Food is mainly marine worms. The lesser electric ray has no sporting value, although the flesh is edible.





ATLANTIC STINGRAY

Dasyatis sabina

Other names: stingaree

The Atlantic stingray is the most common inshore stingray, occurring in waters with salinities that range from fresh to hypersaline. The Atlantic stingray is the smallest of the three species of stingray in Texas, with adults reaching a wingspan of 24 inches. The body shape is rhomboidal with a triangularly pointed snout. The eyes are on top of the head. The body color is brownish above, lighter on the edges and white underneath. Stingrays live on or near the bottom and feed on worms, crabs, shrimp and small fishes. They are common in the bays during summer and migrate to the Gulf during the winter. They have a poison-producing spine protruding from the tail about a third of the way down its length. Most stingray "attacks" occur when a wader or bather steps directly down on the ray, pinning it to the bottom. The stingray then whips its tail around, sticking the spine into the foot, ankle or lower leg of the person standing on it. The best way to avoid being hit by a stingray is to shuffle your feet as you walk through the water. Stingrays are not typically sought by anglers. Most are caught by drum and croaker fishermen, using dead bait on the bottom. The flesh in the wings is edible, and is usually punched out into round, circular shaped chunks resembling scallops.



SPOTTED EAGLE RAY

Aetobatus narinari

Other names: eagle ray

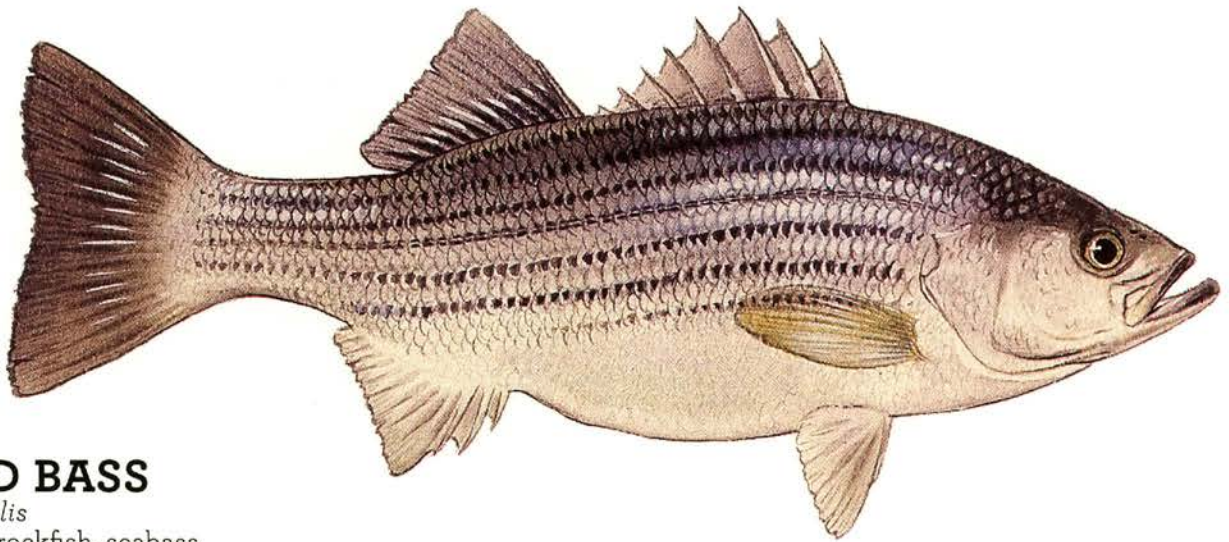
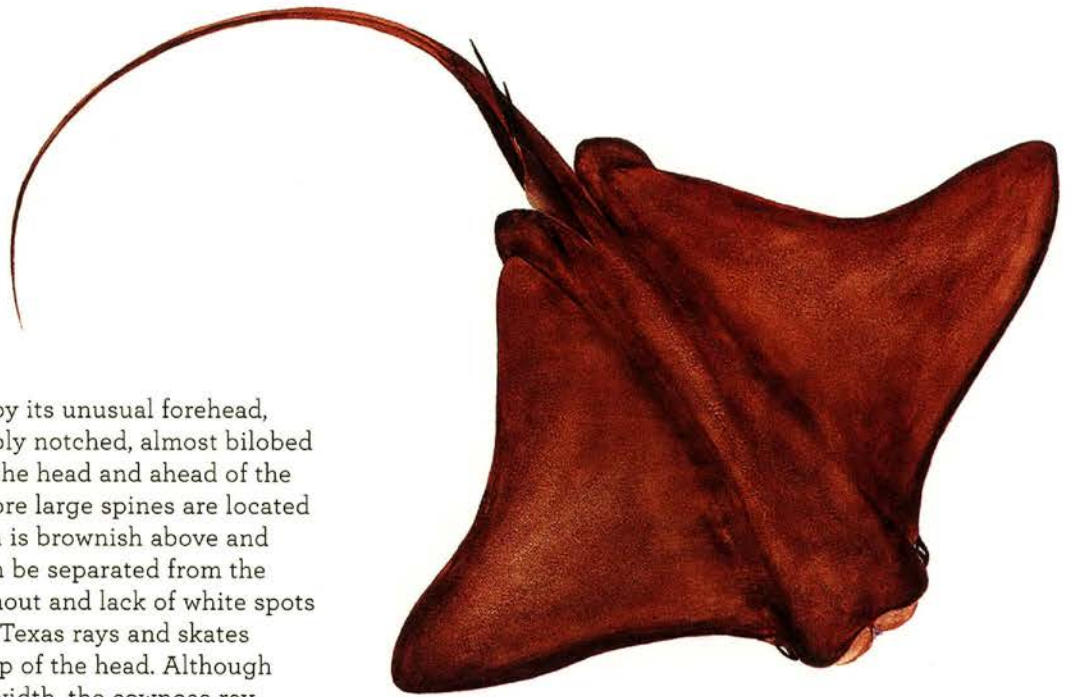
The spotted eagle ray is a dark brown color with regularly arranged white, green or yellowish spots over the top surface. The eyes are located on the side of the head. The snout is duckbill-like with a sharp forehead rise. The tail is black and armed with one or more large barbs which cause acute pain and occasionally death in humans. This huge ray attains at least 7½ feet in width and 500 pounds in weight. Young are 8 to 14 inches wide at birth. It has a large range, being found in the Pacific, Atlantic, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. Although seen in open sea, it favors coastal waters with little surf action, such as coral reefs, salty lagoons and sandy beaches. Large rays may be seen swimming alone, in pairs or in large schools. They may even leap from the water. These rays have towed moderate size vessels for relatively great distances at high speeds, so great is their strength. Feeding on the bottom, the bill is used to dig up clams and oysters; crabs, shrimp and fish also are eaten. The foraging activities of a single eagle ray can create havoc in an oyster or clam bed.

COWNOSE RAY

Rhinoptera bonasus

Other names: cowfish

The cownose ray is distinguished by its unusual forehead, which projects partly over the deeply notched, almost bilobed snout. The eyes are on the side of the head and ahead of the fusion of wings to body. One or more large spines are located near the tail base. The smooth skin is brownish above and lighter below. The cownose ray can be separated from the spotted eagle ray by the bilobed snout and lack of white spots on the top surface, and from other Texas rays and skates because of their eyes located on top of the head. Although the average size is about 2 feet in width, the cownose ray may reach 7 feet in width and weigh 100 pounds. It is found from southern New England to Brazil and along Texas Gulf beaches and bays. In May, these rays are numerous in the Laguna Madre. The species prefers to browse across mud and sand flats in shallow water where it feeds on snails, oysters, crabs and, where available, lobsters and clams, grinding them between large teeth. Two to six young, up to 14 inches wide, are born alive in the spring and summer.



STRIPED BASS

Morone saxatilis

Other names: rockfish, seabass

Striped bass have been introduced into Texas lakes, bays and coastal rivers and may be caught by saltwater fishermen. Distinguishing features include seven or eight uninterrupted black stripes on the sides and deep olive-green color on the back, shading to silver on the sides and white on the abdomen. Two razor-sharp points on the gill cover separate this species from white bass, which have only one point. Mature adults may weigh from 6 to 60 pounds. Striped bass run up rivers to spawn in fresh water in early spring. Fast running water is necessary. The young reach lengths of 10 to 12 inches the first year and begin to spawn when 2 to 4 years old. This fine game fish hits live bait and deep running lures in fresh water and is caught on surf rigs on the Atlantic coast. It is expected that similar methods will work in Texas. Fishermen catching striped bass in Texas bays should contact the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department so the fish can be measured. These fish are edible and should be used when caught.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Nancy McGowan

Red drum

Striped bass

Annette M. Neel

Black drum

Spotted seatrout

Sheepshead

Southern flounder

All other illustrations by Henry Compton

NOTE: Both the common and the scientific names listed for the species contained herein are established by the American Fisheries Society.



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