# Sheepshead Minnow Cyprinodon variegatus





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

## **Sheepshead Minnow**

Cyprinodon variegatus

### APPEARANCE

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

#### **Distinguishing Characteristics**

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

#### LIFE HISTORY

Range:	Along the Atlantic Coast and the Gulf of
	Mexico and south along the South
	American coastline
Diet:	Plant material, algae, detritus (decom-
	posing dead/animal matter), mosquitoes
	and smaller fish
Predators:	Red drum, spotted seatrout, Atlantic
	croaker, turtles and some wading birds
Sexual maturity:	At three months
Spawning season:	In colder water, spawning occurs
	February through October; in warm
	waters, spawning can last throughout
	the year.
Nests:	Males construct nest pits in bay bottoms
	to attract females.
Eggs:	Females can spawn several times during
	the spawning season at 1-7 day inter-
	vals, depositing between 100 to 300
	eggs per spawning period.
Incubation:	From 4 to 12 days, depending on
	temperature
Young:	Larvae have a total length of 0.16 inch-
	es (4 mm) when hatched and are yel-
	lowish in color. Hatching typically occurs
	during spring and summer.
Life span:	Unknown

### HABITAT

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

#### BEHAVIOR

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

#### NOW YOU KNOW!

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

#### SHEEPSHEAD MINNOWS AND PEOPLE

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

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