



AMERICAN PADDLEFISH

MY SCIENTIFIC NAME

Polyodon spathula

BY THE NUMBERS

I can grow up to 10 feet in length and weigh up to 300 pounds!

HOW TO IDENTIFY ME

I have a long paddle-like snout or **rostrum** which can be over one-third of the total length of my whole body. I have no scales.

WHY I MATTER AND REASONS FOR MY DECLINE

I have long been used by humans as a delicious source of meat. My eggs also have been sold as **caviar**, a gourmet food for people. Caviar is extremely valuable, which can make us the target of illegal fishing.

Our populations are declining dramatically because of loss of habitat, overfishing and barriers to fish movement, like dams. The construction of dams and reservoirs decreases water flow in the river and interrupts our life cycle. We need large amounts of flowing water in order to **spawn** or reproduce.

MY STATUS

American paddlefish are found in 22 states and protected by federal or state laws in many of these states. You can only fish for us in 13 states.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Paddlefish are an ancient species of fish. Fossils of this odd-looking fish date back 400 million years. This means paddlefish lived before dinosaurs.
- The skeleton of the paddlefish is made of cartilage, except for the jaw bone.
- Young paddlefish grow fast, about one inch per week.
- They are one of the largest freshwater fishes in North America, and they can live for over 50 years.
- They feed primarily on **zooplankton**, which are tiny aquatic animals. Paddlefish have small undeveloped eyes, but their **rostrum** is covered with sensory receptors that help them detect swarms of zooplankton, which they swim toward, with mouths open and ready to eat!
- Paddlefish can travel up to 2,000 miles in a river system. Adult paddlefish tagged in Oklahoma have been recaptured as far away as Tennessee! (Figure 1)
- Paddlefish need large amounts of flowing water in order to **spawn** or reproduce.
- Because of their smooth skin, paddlefish are sometimes mistaken for a species of catfish. They are nicknamed spoonbilled catfish even though they are not related to any catfish species.



Figure 1 – Historic range of the American paddlefish. Credit: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Fish illustration by Laury Zicari, USFWS, Retired.



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MORE ABOUT US



A few federal and state fish hatcheries raise paddlefish to help boost their populations in rivers. Biologists collect wild paddlefish and bring them back to hatcheries where they collect eggs from the females and **milt**, or sperm from the males. The eggs are fertilized by the milt, hatched and are raised until young paddlefish are about 12 inches long. Young paddlefish are often marked with a small wire tag so that biologists can monitor them after their release into the rivers.



Paddlefish are toothless. You may expect a large paddlefish would eat large prey, but they feed on tiny aquatic animals. They swim with their mouth open, using comb like structures called **gill rakers** to strain zooplankton from the water. Since they do not have teeth, paddlefish are not caught using bait on a hook. Instead they are “snagged” with a large three-pronged hook.

Biologists study paddlefish to better understand their needs for survival. We tag fish and follow them using **telemetry**; a remote way to collect data that is transmitted to a receiver. The information helps us learn more about paddlefish migration and how they use their river habitat.



YOU CAN HELP ME

Get to know me, if you don't already. Help make me visible to people who don't have the chance to see me by sharing your stories about me. Get involved in efforts to help conserve my habitat and maintain my populations into the future.



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