Dedicated to the Memory of Commissioner Enoch S. "Inky" Moore Jr.

PLAY

Pennsylvania • League • of • Angling • Youth

SUMMER 2003

The Sunfish Family

Was the first fish you caught a "sunny"? Sunfish are plentiful in Pennsylvania, living in farm ponds, lakes and rivers. This issue of PLAY focuses on the sunfish family. Scientists call them the Centrarchidae family. Don't worry about the big word–if you read this issue you will learn more about Centrarchidae.

First learn about the sunfish family tree. Did you know that bass and bluegills are in the same family? That is just one of many facts you will learn by reading the article about the life cycle of the sunfish family members.

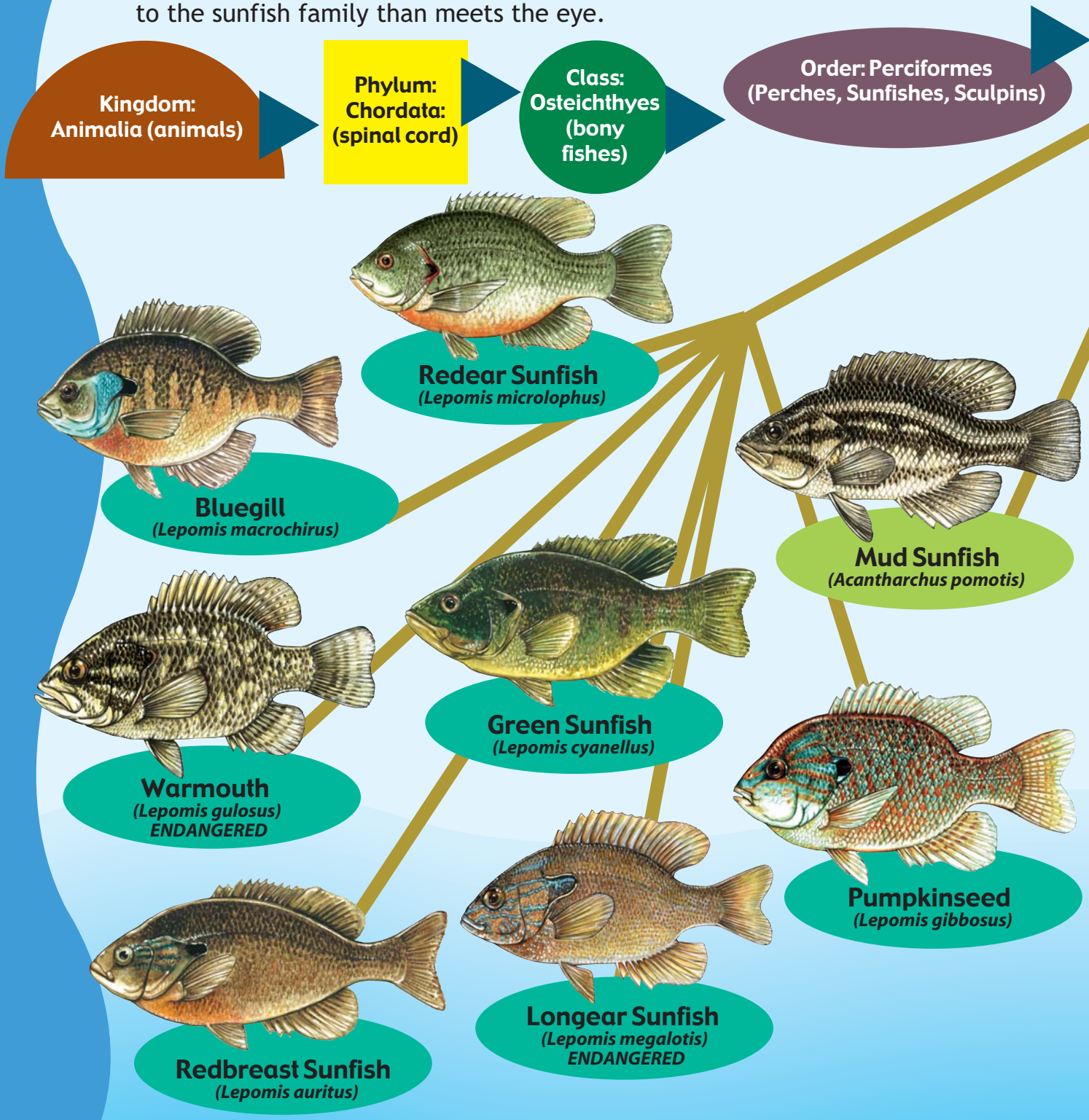
Do you understand why there is a "no-harvest" time for bass from mid-April to mid-June? Can you really tell the difference between a smallmouth bass and a largemouth bass? Be honest! Read this issue and learn the differences. Try the technique described in this issue to catch more sunfish and learn how to take care of your catch. Reading this issue of PLAY will help you have more fun fishing this summer and will put more fish in your skillet.

When you are done with this issue of PLAY, pass it on. Remember that subscriptions to the PLAY newsletter are free to kids ages 8 to 12. Teachers and youth group leaders can also get PLAY newsletters. Contact the Fish & Boat Commission for more details on this program. Don't forget to check out the Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us. The site is loaded with information on reptiles, amphibians, fish, fishing, boating and water safety.

CATCH US ON THE WEB! www.fish.state.pa.us

Sunfish Family Tree

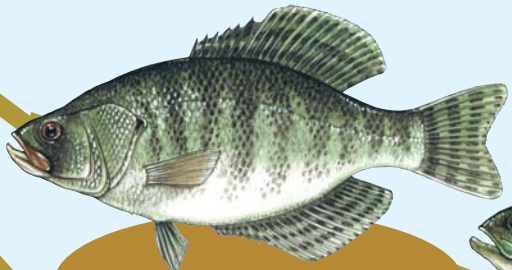
When Pennsylvanians fish for sunfish family members, the first to the hook is likely a bluegill or pumpkinseed. However, plenty of other "sunfish" are waiting to bite, and some may not look like the bluegills in your pond. Cruising the waters of Pennsylvania are 17 sunfish family species. Did you know that largemouth bass and smallmouth bass are members of the sunfish family? Some sunfish are even endangered, including the banded sunfish, longear sunfish and warmouth. Other common fish such as crappies and rock bass are also sunfish. There is much more to the sunfish family than meets the eye.



- Males construct and guard a nest.
- Pan-shaped (body of the fish compressed vertically).
- Rough-edged (ctenoid) scales.
- Two-section dorsal fin with spiny rays near the front.
- Most prefer warmer water temperatures (70-85 degrees).

Family: Centrarchidae (Sunfishes)

Blackbanded Sunfish
(Enneacanthus chaetodon)

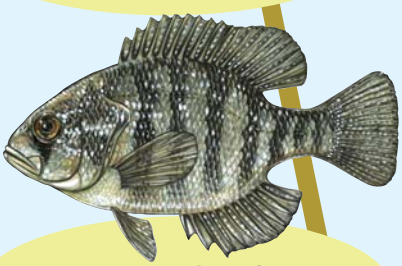


White Crappie
(Pomoxis annularis)

Black Crappie
(Pomoxis nigromaculatus)

Bluespotted Sunfish
(Enneacanthus gloriosus)

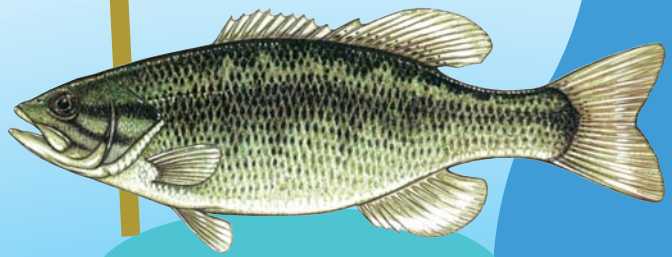
Rock Bass
(Ambloplites rupestris)



Banded Sunfish
(Enneacanthus obesus)
ENDANGERED

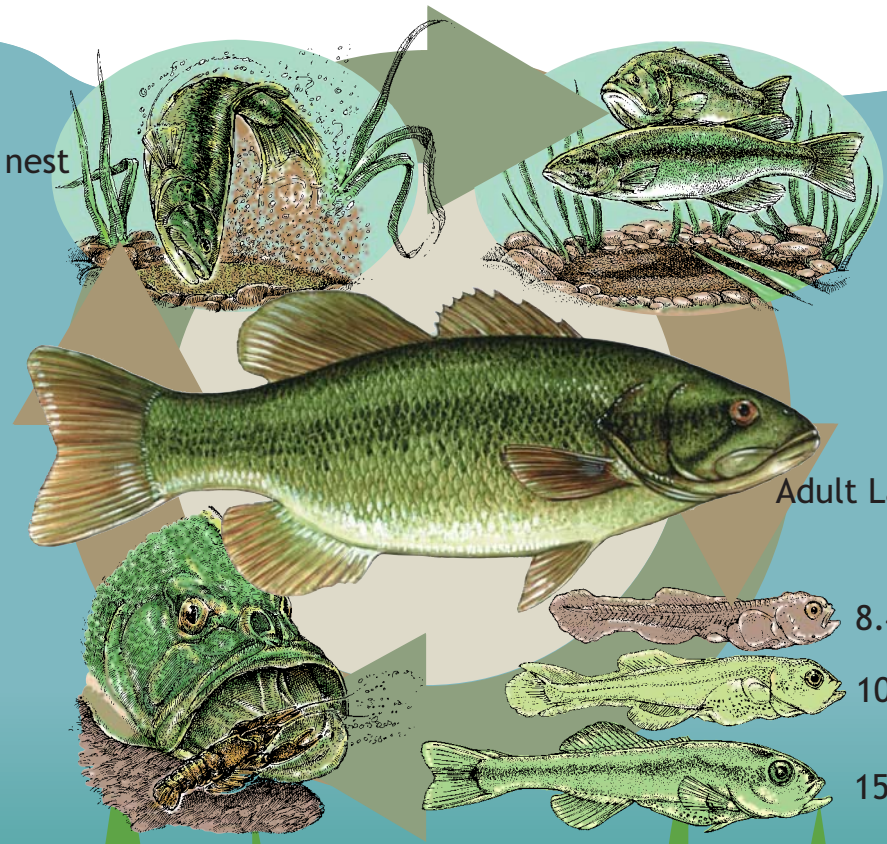
Largemouth Bass
(Micropterus salmoides)

Smallmouth Bass
(Micropterus dolomieui)



Spotted Bass
(Micropterus punctulatus)

Life of a Sunfish



The life cycles of sunfish family members are similar. The only difference may be the habitats they prefer. Members of the sunfish family are nest-builders. All sunfish start life as an egg laid in a nest. The male fish builds the nest and guards the eggs and young fry. Other fish love to eat the eggs and young fry. Male sunfish are aggressive when guarding the nest. The female sunfish lays her eggs in the spring after the water reaches about 70 degrees.

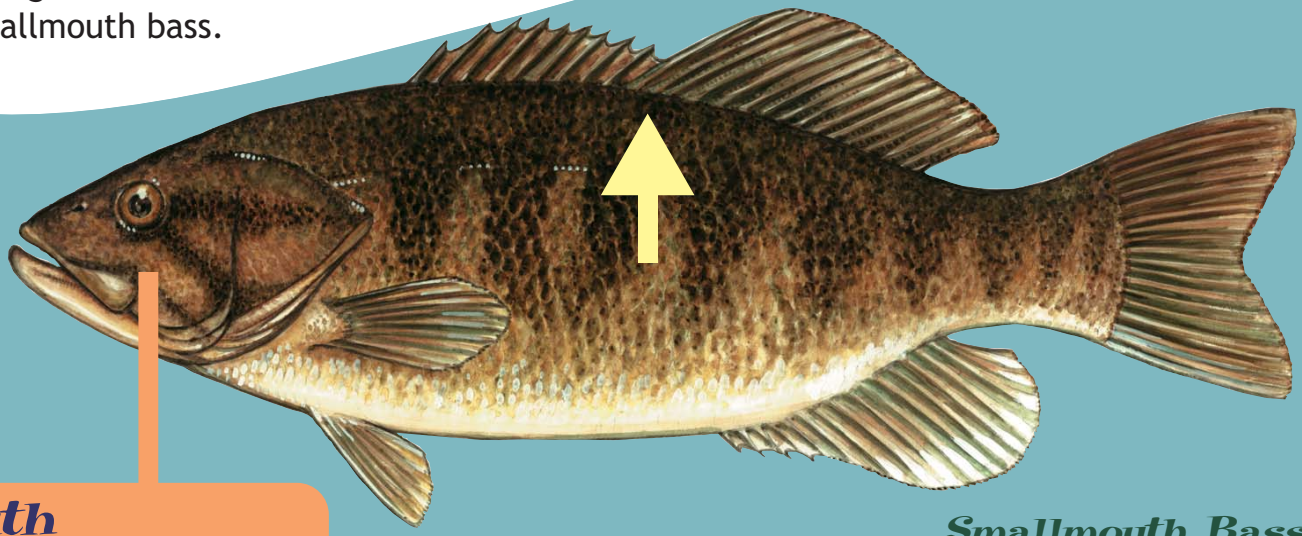
This is a good time to catch the males, but you must release them for the good of the nest. It is the law that no bass can be harvested from mid-April to mid-June. Without males to guard the nest, other fish will eat the eggs and fry.

In water temperatures close to 70 degrees, eggs may take only a few days to hatch. The newly hatched young continue to be nourished by the egg yolks.

In a few days the yolk sac is absorbed and the young fry leave the nest. The fry school and seek the protection of aquatic vegetation. The fry feed on plankton and tiny aquatic insects. In their first year, the fry grow into juveniles and start feeding on small fish. As juveniles, birds, turtles and other larger fish often eat the young sunfish. Although there are about 4,000 eggs laid in each nest, only a small number live to maturity. At three or four years of age, the fish are mature and start the cycle for the next generation.

Know Your Bass!

Do you know your bass? Some anglers do not know how to tell a largemouth bass from a smallmouth bass.



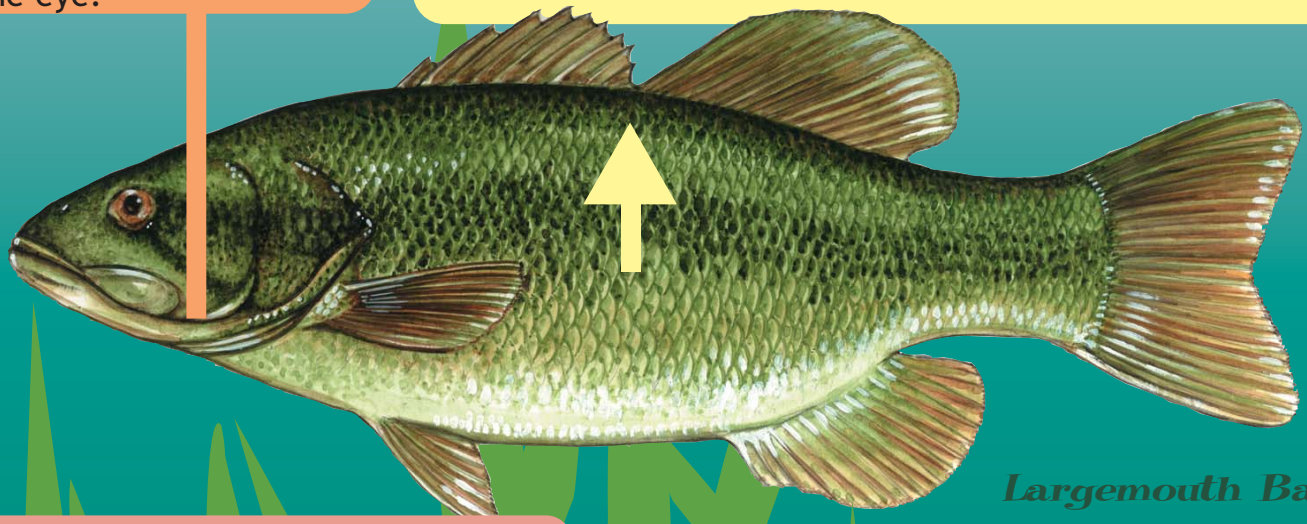
Smallmouth Bass

Mouth

The mouth of a largemouth bass extends past the eye. The mouth of a smallmouth bass extends only to the middle of the eye.

Dorsal fin

The fin on the back or top of the fish is called the dorsal fin. On a largemouth bass, the dorsal fin appears almost separated. Smallmouth bass have one, undivided dorsal fin.



Largemouth Bass

Color

Largemouth bass are most often greenish. Smallmouth bass are brownish to bronze. They are sometimes called "bronzebacks." Color is not always a good test because colors may vary depending on age and habitat.

Body markings

Bass can also be identified by the distinct markings on their bodies. The largemouth bass has a dark, horizontal stripe that runs from the gill to the tail. The smallmouth bass has vertical bars on its sides. However, these markings may be very light. In fact, older fish sometimes lose their markings completely.