



FRESHWATER FISH OF AMERICA

AMERICAN PADDLEFISH

Polyodon spathula (Walbaum, 1792)



Paddlefish. Photo credit: Osmev/Adobe Stock

Natural History

American paddlefish are a very old species of fish. Their ancestors lived in modern day North America about 125 million years ago during the Late Cretaceous period, when some dinosaurs still roamed the Earth. Paddlefish inhabit slow-moving, large, deep, freshwater rivers and reservoirs. They eat by simply swimming around with their mouth open and inside their mouth are structures called gill rakers. As they swim, tiny plankton is trapped by the gill rakers and then swallowed. Although they eat tiny food, they eat lots of it! Paddlefish can also live for a long time with some specimens reported to have lived for 50 years or longer. When paddlefish are ready to reproduce, they can migrate hundreds of miles before spawning.

Conservation

The American paddlefish is considered a vulnerable species in its historical range. At one time, there were very large numbers of these fish but over the past 150 years, paddlefish numbers have dropped greatly due to habitat destruction and overfishing to get their eggs to make caviar. In order to protect the paddlefish, they are now under watch by governments all over the world.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conserves, restores, and preserves paddlefish by monitoring, growing, and stocking them in waters where they live. Many paddlefish are grown in fish hatcheries so people can fish for them without causing harm to their numbers.

There used to be one other type of paddlefish but now the American paddlefish is the only paddlefish left on Earth. The Chinese paddlefish was unfortunately declared extinct in the year 2020 and has not been seen alive since the year 2003.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

SIZE: Large specimens of American paddlefish have been reported to weigh as much as 438 pounds and reach 7 feet in length. The eggs of an adult female paddlefish can easily weigh 20 pounds or more.

HABITAT: Paddlefish live in water deeper than 4 feet in large river basins and their tributaries.

DIET: They feed on plankton, microscopic plants and animals.

<https://www.fws.gov/fisheries>
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Migration Behavior

The American paddlefish is a migratory species. These fish are native to the Mississippi River Basin and have been known to move more than 2000 miles in a river system. They also have the ability to move through brackish water where freshwater and salt water mix together.



Juvenile paddlefish. Photo credit: Sam Stukel/USFWS