

# EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES



EXTENSION



Mammals



Trees



Invertebrates



Reptiles & Amphibians

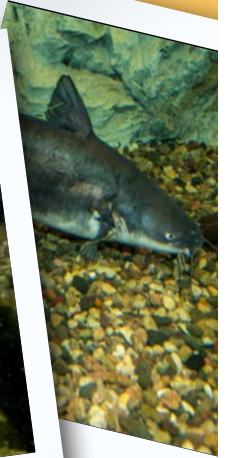


Birds



Fish

# Fish



Fish are a very large and diverse group of aquatic (live in water) animals found all around the world. They are cold-blooded, meaning they do not maintain a constant internal body temperature like mammals and birds do. Most have fins for movement, gills for breathing, and scales covering their bodies, but there are exceptions.

The variety among fish is spectacular. The smallest fish in the world are less than 1 inch long and the biggest (whale sharks) can reach 33 feet in length. Not all are shaped like fish. Some are shaped like tiny horses (seahorse), pancakes (flounder), snakes (eels), and cubes (boxfish). They can be any color of the rainbow, and some can even change their colors. This guide describes a few of the fish found in freshwater ponds, streams, and lakes in Mississippi. Have you seen any of these cool critters?



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Largemouth Bass

(*Micropterus salmoides*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Average length: 12-16 inches
- Average weight: 1-3 pounds
- Olive-green to gray-green
- May have dark blotches along each side that form a dark, jagged line
- Large mouth with a jaw that extends beyond the eye
- Dorsal fin has two separate or nearly separate fins

### HABITAT

**Largemouth bass** live in many different habitats that range from farm ponds to rivers. They gather around cover such as submerged rocks, aquatic vegetation, and woody debris.

### FUN FACT

While the **largemouth bass** is native to the eastern United States, this species has been stocked successfully across the U.S. and in other countries such as Japan.



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Bluegill

(*Lepomis macrochirus*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: bream, brim
- Average length: 6-8 inches
- Average weight: 8-10 ounces
- Dark blue-black to blue-green
- Oval body shape with dark vertical bars running down each side
- Distinctive dark spot at the base of the soft dorsal fin

### HABITAT

**Bluegill** live in freshwater ecosystems such as farm ponds, lakes, slow-moving streams, and even brackish (slightly salty) waters. These fish prefer to be around cover such as woody debris, submerged rocks, and vegetation.

### FUN FACT

**Bluegill** can live as long as 10 years in the wild.





EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Green Sunfish

(*Lepomis cyanellus*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: bream, brim
- Average length: 4-8 inches
- Average weight: 4-8 ounces
- Overall green-toned body
- Large mouth for sunfish
- Yellow color on the edge of each fin

### HABITAT

**Green sunfish** live in farm ponds and lakes as well as streams, rivers, and creeks. This species can tolerate poor water conditions, which allows them to live in many places. These fish like to hang around submerged logs and plants but will also spend time near gravel or sand.

### FUN FACT

**Green sunfish** can lay up to 50,000 eggs in one spawning (breeding) season.



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Black Crappie

(*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: calico bass, speck, slab
- Average length: 8-12 inches
- Average weight: 8 ounces-1 pound
- Silver or dark gray
- Deeper body than the white crappie
- 7-8 dorsal spines

### HABITAT

**Black crappie** like to inhabit shallow-water lakes and sloughs. They tend to spend time where there is clear water. Aquatic vegetation in these waters provides ambush opportunities for black crappie to catch minnows, insects, and insect larvae.

### FUN FACT

Mississippi has a strain called the **black-nose crappie**, which has a distinct black line running between its eyes.



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## White Crappie

(*Pomoxis annularis*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: crappie, white perch, papermouth
- Average length: 8–12 inches
- Average weight: 8 ounces–1 pound
- White to silver color
- Gray-black vertical stripes along each side of the body
- The dorsal (top) and anal (bottom) fins each have 5–6 spines

### HABITAT

**White crappie** like to live in rivers and reservoirs but will enter small streams. In the springtime, **white crappie** will gather into schools, or groups, of fish around aquatic vegetation, woody debris, and other submerged cover.

### FUN FACT

Crappie's scientific name, *Pomoxis*, is Greek and means "sharp cover." This refers to its spiny gill covers.



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Channel Catfish

(*Ictalurus punctatus*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: fiddler, spotted catfish
- Average length: 12–24 inches
- Average weight: 1–5 pounds
- Gray to silver body; young have black spots along their sides
- Long whiskers around the mouth
- Anal fin with a rounded edge

### HABITAT

**Channel catfish** inhabit farm ponds, reservoirs, streams, and large rivers across the eastern United States.

### FUN FACT

Catfish are cavity-nesting species. They like to find crevices, hollows, or other debris where they can build their nests. This behavior in the catfish family has led to the sport of noodling or hand-grabbing.



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Blue Catfish

(*Ictalurus furcatus*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Average length: 12–30 inches
- Average weight: 1–10 pounds
- Silver-gray to blue; light-colored underbelly
- Long whiskers around the mouth
- Anal fin with a straight edge (like a comb)

### HABITAT

**Blue catfish** can survive in many habitats, but they prefer open waters such as large reservoirs, backwaters, main channels of rivers, and floodplain lakes.

### FUN FACT

Like many other members of the catfish family, **blue catfish** have whiskers, or special structures around their mouths, that help them find food along the bottom.



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Bowfin

(*Amia calva*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other name: dogfish, mudfish
- Body size: 10–25 inches
- Weight: 1–5 pounds
- Olive, dark green, or brown
- Bony head with very sharp teeth
- Eyespot on the tails of adults

### HABITAT

**Bowfin** live in habitats that range from backwater creeks to farm ponds. This species hangs around underwater cover including logs, grass, and rocks where they can ambush prey.

### FUN FACT

The **bowfin** is an obligate air breather. This means they get their oxygen from the atmosphere rather than the water. This allows them to survive in water that has low oxygen.





EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Longnose Gar

(*Lepisosteus osseus*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: longnose garpike, bonypike, needle-nosed gar
- Average length: 2–3 feet
- Average weight: 1–10 pounds
- Olive-brown to green with a light underbelly
- Spots on the dorsal, anal, and tail fins
- Long, thin snout

### HABITAT

The **longnose gar** lives in areas such as rivers, streams, reservoirs, bayous, and estuaries. This species likes slow-moving water and will come up to the surface to breathe air.

### FUN FACT

The **longnose gar** and its relatives (spotted gar, shortnose gar, alligator gar) have extremely tough scales that act like a suit of armor.



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Grass Carp

(*Ctenopharyngodon idella*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: white amur, carp
- Average length: 2–3 feet
- Average weight: 5–20 pounds
- Gold to olive-brown body
- Large fins with rounded head

### HABITAT

The **grass carp** is an introduced species that inhabits rivers, ponds, and other murky bodies of water. Since this fish feeds on vegetation, it is common to see it in very shallow water where plants can grow.

### FUN FACT

Although this is can be an invasive species, the ability of **grass carp** to eat aquatic vegetation can be useful. In these cases, a type of **grass carp** that cannot reproduce is released.



EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## Mosquitofish

(*Gambusia affinis*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: Gambusia
- Average size: 1–2 inches
- Average weight: 1 ounce
- Gray to brown body
- Flattened head with a rounded tail
- Upward-facing mouth

### HABITAT

**Mosquitofish** like shallow waters and can live in places other fish will not. In larger bodies of water, they will congregate in areas that are sheltered from predators.

### FUN FACT

This species is named after the food it eats.

**Mosquitofish** have been introduced in many places to eat larval (baby) mosquitos and help combat mosquito problems.

For more information on common wildlife and plants or incorporating nature into the classroom, please contact [Leslie.Burger@msstate.edu](mailto:Leslie.Burger@msstate.edu) or (662) 325-6686.

EkoKids is produced by the Mississippi State University Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Aquaculture and the MSU Extension Service for use by educators and youth leaders.

Photo credits: 1) Largemouth bass, istockphoto.com; 2) bluegill, Ryan Hagerty, USFWS; 3) green sunfish, Sam Stukel, USFWS; 4) black crappie, Sam Stukel, USFWS; 5) white crappie, Duane Raver/USFWS; 6) channel catfish, Sam Stukel, USFWS; 7) blue catfish, Brett Billings, USFWS; 8) bowfin, Ryan Hagerty, USFWS; 9) longnose gar, Brett Billings, USFWS; 10) grass carp, Ryan Hagerty, USFWS; 11) mosquitofish, Ryan Hagerty, USFWS

Publication 3044–F (05–24)

By **Alexander J. Binny**, Extension Program Assistant, and **Leslie Burger**, PhD Assistant Extension Professor, Wildlife, Fisheries, and Aquaculture.

Copyright 2024 by Mississippi State University. All rights reserved. This publication may be copied and distributed without alteration for nonprofit educational purposes provided that credit is given to the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

Produced by Agricultural Communications.

Mississippi State University is an equal opportunity institution. Discrimination in university employment, programs, or activities based on race, color, ethnicity, sex, pregnancy, religion, national origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, genetic information, status as a U.S. veteran, or any other status protected by applicable law is prohibited.

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. ANGUS L. CATCHOT JR., Director

Fish

EKOKIDS:  
SCHOOLYARD  
NATURE GUIDES

MISSISSIPPI STATE  
UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION