



July 2026

VLMP NEWSLETTER

Welcome Back
Samplers!
Summer 2026



Fish In Kentucky

Members of the Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program may encounter fish while sampling. Volunteers who have undergone Tier 2 training may even identify and make note of certain species while filling out their survey forms.

Kentucky is home to over 200 native fish species. These range from modestly sized minnows to the blue catfish, which can weigh over 100 lbs. Torpedo-shaped pickerels & pike act as predators, while stonerollers occupy themselves scraping algae from rocks on the riverbed. Each of these native species plays an important role in Kentucky's rivers and lakes.

If you are unsure what kind of fish you have caught, if it's too big, or if it's invasive, it's best to simply release it.

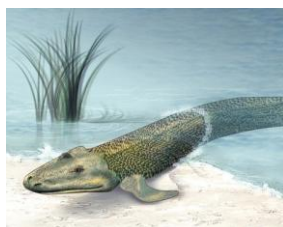
How Fish Got Their Bite

The earliest fish in the fossil record had simple, jawless mouths. These animals fed primarily by using suction. During the Ordovician period, some groups of fish developed the ability to weakly grasp food items with their frontmost set of gill arches, right behind the mouth. This ability continued to develop, eventually transitioning into the first true vertebrate jaws. The now-extinct Placoderms, including the shark-like *Dunkleosteus* (left) were amongst the first major jawed predators.



First Steps

During the Devonian period (419-358 million years ago), one group of fish was developing a suite of adaptations for surviving droughts. Strong lobes on their fins allowed them to clumsily crawl to deeper pools when theirs was drying up, while a primitive lung helped them breathe air when water was stagnant. Some of their descendants doubled down on these adaptations, becoming fully independent of the water, except to lay their eggs. These were the first amphibians.



Leaping Lampreys

Lampreys are small, harmless, eel-like animals that inhabit Kentucky's waterways. These fish are evolutionarily ancient and differ from other fish groups. Most notably, they lack jaws –because they arose before jaws evolved!

Instead, they sport oral discs lined with teeth. Some lampreys use their discs to attach to larger fish, where they then suck blood like leeches. While this may seem scary, it is usually only a nuisance to the host fish, like mosquitoes are to us. Five out of the eight species in Kentucky are actually bottom feeders rather than parasites.



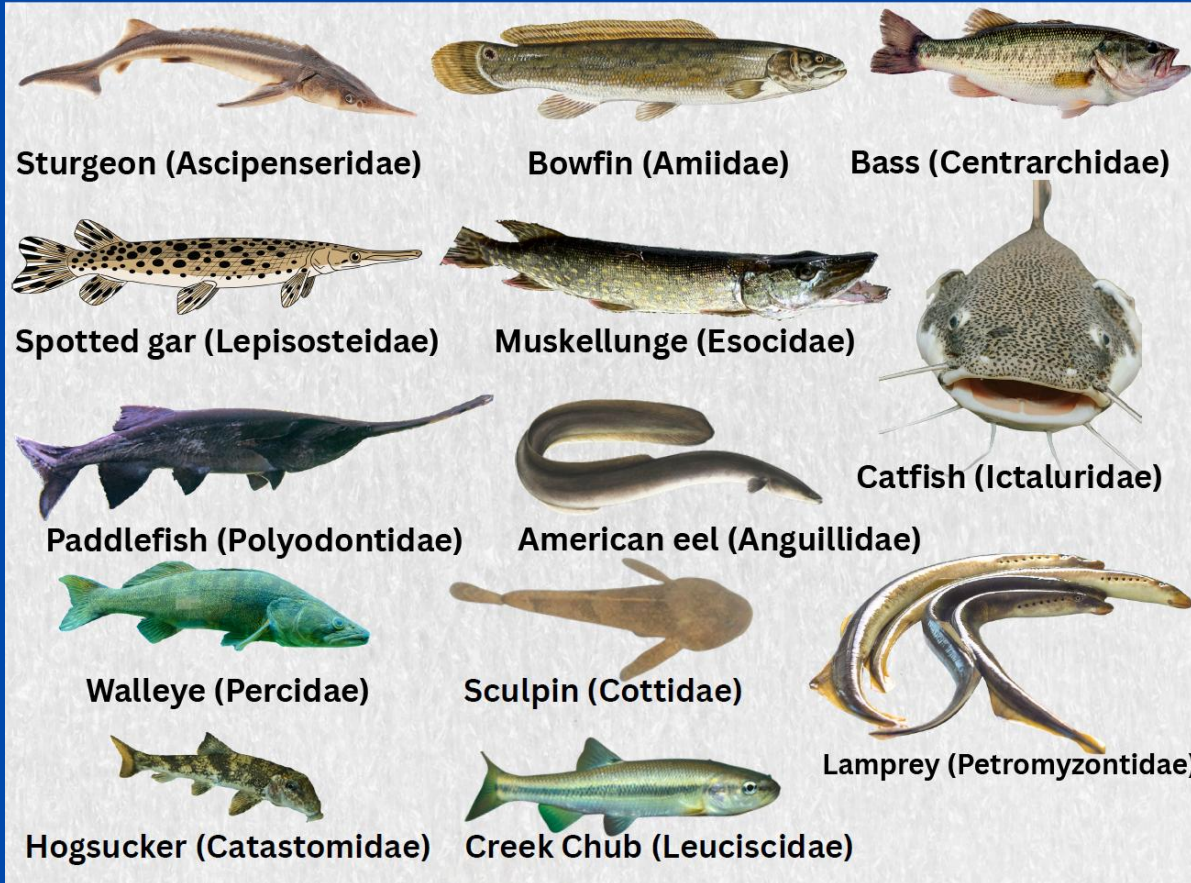
To learn More: <https://eec.ky.gov/Environmental-Protection/Water/Outreach/Pages/VLMP.aspx>

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TEAM
KENTUCKY
ENERGY AND
ENVIRONMENT CABINET
Division of Water

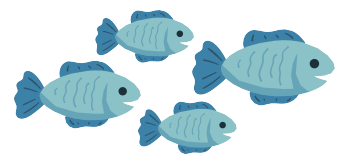


Above: Native representatives of some major fish families in KY

Chub image by Brian Gratwicke - originally posted to Flickr as Creek Chub, *Semotilus atromaculatus*, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8024686>

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What Makes Fish Unique?

Fish represent the oldest group of vertebrates (animals with backbones) still around today. The earliest fossil of a fish-like animal is known from the Cambrian period, between 530 and 486 million years ago!

Fish are also very diverse. There are thought to be over 30,000 species of fish known, with around 41% being found in Freshwater.

Fish Conservation

Despite their ecological importance, many of Kentucky's fish are under threat. Currently, 64 fish species are listed as species of greatest conservation need by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR).

Invasive carp, such as the silver, grass, and bighead carp are a threat to native species, as they compete for the same food sources.

You can prevent the spread of invasive aquatic species by properly disposing of unused bait in the trash. This includes worms, leeches, fish, and other forms of bait, alive or dead.

If you capture an invasive carp in a previously unlisted area, please take a photo of the fish and contact KDFWR. Joshua Tompkins, Fisheries Biologist, 270-226-4192.

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Other threats faced by Kentucky's fish are poaching and overfishing. While offered protections now, the alligator gar has historically faced threats from overharvesting from fishermen and trophy hunters. Even today they are under threat. In Kentucky, alligator gar and both species of native sturgeon are listed as strictly catch and release.



The Alligator Gar

The alligator gar is considered endangered in Kentucky, with no wild individuals having been reported in the state since 1977. Since 2009, the KDFWR has been carrying out a captive propagation & stocking effort across the fish's historic range in western Kentucky. The juvenile gar (known as "fry") are delivered from the Private John Allen Fish Hatchery in Mississippi, before being reared to adulthood in the Pfeiffer and Minor E. Clark Fish Hatcheries and released back into their historic range. Despite their scary appearance, they are not considered dangerous to people.