

Bluegill

Lepomis macrochirus

Commonly referred to as “brim” or “bream,” the bluegill is the most common of all the sunfishes. It is a member of the sunfish or panfish family, which also includes the crappie and largemouth bass. Other species of sunfish sometimes mistaken for bluegills are redears, pumpkinseeds and warmouths. Because it is one of the true sunfish species that grow large enough to be acceptable to fishermen, the bluegill has introduced many people to the sport of fishing. Its size, coupled with its tenacious fighting ability and voracious appetite, make it a favorite of many anglers.

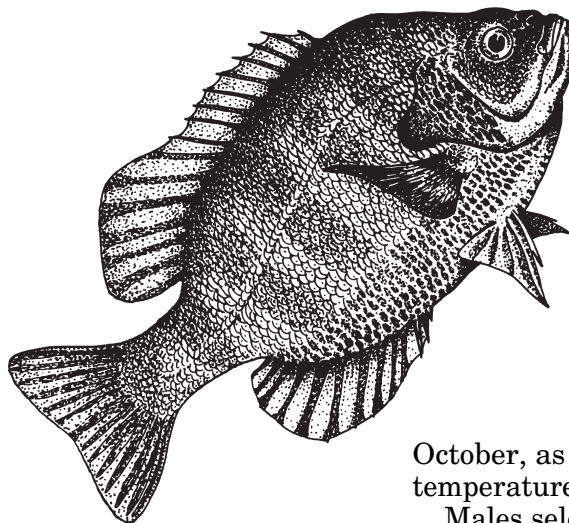
According to a recent statewide survey, the popularity of sunfish fishing ranks behind only largemouth bass and crappie angling.

History and Status

Bluegills are native to North Carolina. They are highly adaptable and can be found in streams, rivers, ponds and reservoirs throughout the state. They especially flourish in Piedmont farm ponds and in ponds and slow-moving rivers along the Coastal Plain. Because of their prolific nature, bluegills are not considered threatened or endangered in North Carolina.

Description

Bluegills are characterized by a small head and mouth and a hand- or pan-shaped body. The body is often an olive-green color with several broad, dark vertical bars on the side. The throat and belly are often yellowish or orange in color. The lower jaw and gill



cover is powder-blue, hence the name “bluegill.” There is a black blotch at the base of the dorsal (top) fin. The earflap is entirely black, helping to distinguish the bluegill from other sunfish species that often have an orange or red spot on the earflap.

Bluegills tend to breed with other sunfish species, resulting in hybrids with the external characteristics of both parents. In populations where hybridization occurs, identification is often difficult.

Habitat and Habits

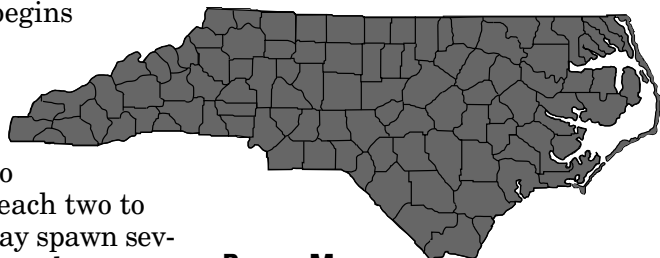
Bluegills prefer protected areas with clear, quiet water and a bottom covered with sand, gravel or mud. Warm, shallow, productive lakes or ponds support the largest populations, but they can also be found in slow-moving streams and rivers. Bluegills prefer water temperatures between 60 and 80 F.

The spawning season for North Carolina bluegills begins around May when water temperatures reach about 70 F. Bluegills usually mature and begin to spawn when they reach two to three years. They may spawn several times throughout the summer and even continue through


October, as long as the water temperatures remain favorable.

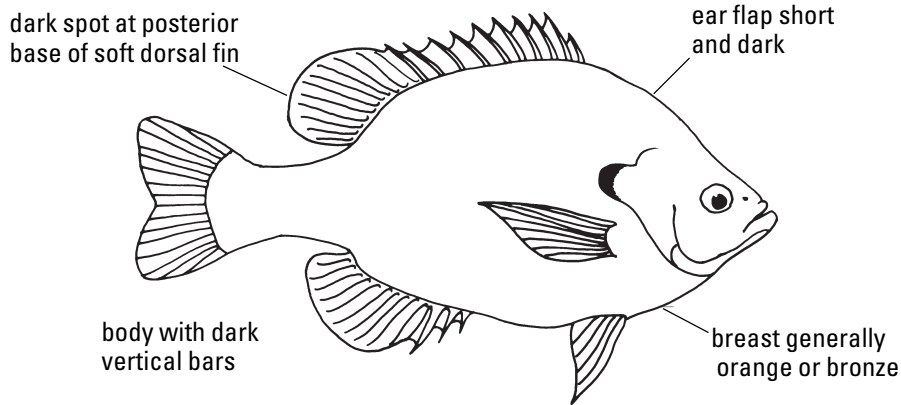
Males select the nest site, usually in an area where the bottom is covered with sand, gravel or mud and is protected from the wind. The male creates a nest 1 to 2 feet in diameter by fanning the bottom of the lake or river with his tail to form a shallow depression. Nests are usually located in 1 to 6 feet of water. Often, several nests will be located within the same area because spawning bluegills tend to form nesting colonies. Sometimes these colonies are segregated by the size of the bluegill. The female will lay 2,000 to 60,000 eggs in a nest and then abandon it. The eggs hatch within one to two days depending upon the water temperature. During this time, the male guards the nest, protecting the eggs and the hatched young from predators.

The bluegill is a prey species. Therefore, its reproductive rate and frequency is higher than that of a predator species such as the



Range Map:

Found statewide 



largemouth bass. If predation on these small fish is low, its numbers can be greater than the habitat of a pond or small lake can support. When this happens food becomes scarce, populations are stunted, growth is slow and fish rarely, if ever, reach a harvestable or desirable size. The current world record is held by an angler who caught a bluegill that was 15 inches long and weighed 4 pounds, 12 ounces.

The bluegill eats mainly aquatic insects, zooplankton and small fish. However, it may also consume some aquatic vegetation, snails or fish eggs. Because of its small mouth, it can only eat small minnows or the young of other fish. Bluegills tend to swim in schools and occupy shoreline habitats 1 to 20 feet deep. The schools are usually located near some type of shelter such as docks, weedbeds or bridges. Larger bluegills usually occupy deeper areas and are often loners.

Range and Distribution

Originally, the bluegill ranged throughout much of the eastern half of the United States. They are still found in every county in North Carolina. Introductions of this fish have extended their range to the west to include every state except Alaska.

People Interactions

Natural mortality in bluegills is high, although angling also contrib-

utes to mortality. Bluegills are a highly sought-after game fish and they provide excellent fishing particularly in small ponds and coastal rivers throughout North Carolina.

Bluegills are most active in the early morning or late afternoon and can readily be caught during these times. The schooling nature of the bluegill can make for some fast and furious fishing.

References

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Credits

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BLUEGILL

Classification

Class: Osteichthyes
Order: Perciformes

Average Size

Length: 3 to 5 in. up to 10 in.

Weight: 2 to 4 oz. up to 4 lbs.

Food

Zooplankton, aquatic insects and small fish. Also snails, mollusks, mites, fish eggs and plants.

Spawning

The spawning season for bluegills usually begins around May and continues through October. Eggs usually hatch within 1 or 2 days depending on water temperature.

Young

Newly hatched bluegills are called fry. A pair of bluegills can produce from 2,000 to 10,000 young. The fry begin to swim within a short time. Males protect the fry for several days after hatching.

Life Expectancy

The maximum life span for the bluegill is 8 to 10 years.