

Striped Mullet

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Mugil cephalus* comes from the Latin *mugil*, meaning “mullet, fish that feeds on organic matter in mud,” and the Latin *cephal*, meaning “head.” They are called “lisa” in Mexico.

DESCRIPTION: Adults typically grow to a length of 9 to 20 inches, although they may grow significantly longer. Distinguishing characteristics include an irregularly round, silvery, torpedo-shaped body; a dark bluish-green back; dark longitudinal stripes on the sides; and a small mouth.

DISTRIBUTION: Striped mullet are distributed worldwide in coastal waters and estuaries of tropical and subtropical seas. In Arizona, they are found in the Lower Colorado River below Imperial Dam, lateral irrigation canals, the lower Gila River and Fortuna Pond. They are present in the Salton Sea in California, on the western coastline from San Francisco to Chile, and throughout the Gulf of California.

HABITAT: Striped mullet are found in highly salty to fresh waters that are warm or temperate. They spend a great deal of time

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close to shore around the mouths of streams and rivers or in brackish bays, inlets and lagoons with sand or mud bottoms.

BIOLOGY: The striped mullet’s diet includes zooplankton, small invertebrates, bottom-dwelling organisms and dead plants and animals. They swim along the bottom, sucking in mouthfuls of mud from which they extract particles of animal and



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vegetable matter and expel the refuse.

Striped mullet typically spawn in the open ocean. The young move inshore to beaches and estuaries for a time, then develop into a silvery “querimana” stage and swim into rivers in large groups to feed and grow. In 1993, the Colorado River experienced high flows and actually flowed into the Gulf of California, a rare event. Within a few months, large schools of querimana were observed in the Yuma area. But immature mullet have been found in waters near Yuma even when no connection with the Gulf of California has existed for years. Mullet in the Lower Colorado River appear capable of at least limited reproduction in fresh water.

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STATUS: Common worldwide in most coastal waters and estuaries of tropical and

temperate seas, this species normally is abundant wherever found. Only a limited market exists for these fish in the United States, probably because of their rather oily flesh. More commonly, they are harvested as bait for the billfish (marlin and sailfish) sport fishery, or for their eggs (roe), which are exported. Mullet are a prized food fish in many parts of the world, especially in Asia, where they are cultivated in freshwater ponds.

Striped mullet are only occasionally caught on hook and line, since they rarely feed on anything other than bottom debris. Anglers targeting other species usually catch them incidentally. The state record for striped mullet in Arizona — a 5-pound, 2.24-ounce specimen — comes from Fortuna Pond near Yuma.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: The only native fish in the Lower Colorado River that is not imperiled, mullet would benefit from a permanent connection of the Colorado River with the Gulf of California. Little is known about their life history in Arizona waters, but it would be a fascinating study topic. 🐟

■ Mark Brown is the fisheries specialist in the Yuma office of the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Striped mullet are included on the list of “things he has eaten.”