



The Northeast's Dirty Dozen

Fishinar 6/13/2013, Jonathan Lavan – Instructor

Skate Family:

1. **Winter Skate** – The winter skate and the little skate are very similar in appearance. Both skates have a very rounded snout. The winter skate is distinguished by the presence of 1-4 ocellated spots on the back. Unfortunately these spots are not always visible. The winter skate is also generally larger (43" in length, wing-span of 30"), whereas the little skate grows to about 21", with a wingspan of 12". These skates will be entered as skate sp. on the survey form, unless the 1-4 ocellated spots are visible, confirming the winter skate ID.

Cod Family:

Atlantic members of the cod family are very important food, commercial, and sport fishes. Most species of cod have barbells that extend from the lower jaw. Species presented here can be divided into three groups depending on the number of dorsal fins. The first three species of cod have three dorsal fins. **(ID Hint: Think 3 = C-O-D)**

2. **Pollock** – This fish is often seen schooling near coastal areas and around shipwrecks and large boulder reef areas. Pollock look similar to Atlantic cod but its body is not as tapered and its lower jaw sticks out further. Pollock also tend to be seen free swimming, whereas cod tend to be more reclusive.

ID Hint: The lateral line of the pollock is straight like a "pole".

Sculpin Family:

This family is composed of fish with large bulbous heads, usually with numerous spines and/or skin flaps and large protruding eyes. They generally rest on the bottom, blending with the background. Their typically thin, elongated bodies, make their bulbous heads especially prominent. Many sculpins can change color to blend with their background so be careful when using color to aid in identification

3. **Sea Raven** (really in the Sea Raven Family now, but OK to say Sculpin family)

The sea raven is easy to identify by its jagged, non-continuous dorsal fin, large mouth with sharp teeth and the feather-like appendages on the top of the head and under the chin. The sea raven is found in several solid color variations, including red, yellow, maroon and brown.

ID Hint: Stark ravin' mad

4. **Longhorn Sculpin** – Another fish with a large head and protruding eyes, however the longhorn sculpin's mouth is noticeably further in front in relation to its eyes than on the shorthorn sculpin. The longhorn sculpin gets its name from the extremely long spine

which extends straight back on its operculum or gill cover. The mouth placement and presence of a long spine on the cheek, combined with a general body pattern of black, brown and white lateral bands, all help to distinguish this fish from the shorthorn sculpin. The longhorn sculpin can be found at any depth during a SCUBA dive and is usually seen sitting on the bottom.

Sea Bass Family:

Most members of this family are found in warm, tropical waters but there are a few species that are common in the colder waters of the northeast. Sea bass are carnivores and have one continuous dorsal fin. Seabasses are also hermaphrodites – meaning they change sex. All seabasses are born female and change sex later in life to become males. Seabasses are also highly sought after by both commercial and recreational harvesters.

5. **Striped Bass** – Easy to identify by its full body and long horizontal black lines running the full length of its body, the striped bass is typically found near shore in and around breakwaters, jetties and sand beaches at times of high tide. Striped bass can reach sizes of up to 70 pounds and more. These fish are very bold and will approach divers.
6. **Black Sea Bass** – The black sea bass has a flat head and high back. They are usually black to dark brown in color. The white margins on the top and bottom of the tail fin distinguish this species of sea bass. Their reflective eyes appear red similar to that of a cat. Black sea bass feed primarily on crustaceans.

Wrasse Family:

The Wrasse family is distinguished by not using their tail as the primary mode of propulsion. These fish have sharp dorsal spines, sharp teeth and blunt noses. They feed on crustaceans by breaking open their shells with their powerful jaws and sharp teeth.

7. **Tautog** – This species features a blunt face, resembling a parrotfish from southern waters. It has brown and black blotches on its grayish side, with one continuous sharp edged dorsal fin. The tautog can reach 5-10 pounds and are hunted by spear fishermen near shore. This fish is sometimes referred to as the blackfish. This slide shows the blotchy colored juvenile next to the adult phase.
8. **Cunner** – The cunner is a smaller version of the tautog (6-10"). This very common fish is found at all depths throughout The Gulf of Maine and is probably the most common fish that divers will observe. They have rather pointed heads, which help distinguish it from the blunt headed tautog and the base of the tail is thick. This fish is often referred to as the sea perch. Their dorsal fin is very sharp and can cause a nasty cut. They have a white chin.

Gunnel Family:

They have long snake-like bodies and one continuous dorsal fin.

9. **Rock Gunnel** – The rock gunnel is an elongated fish that can reach a length of 1 foot. The black spots that run on regular intervals along the dorsal fin are the distinguishing marks for this species.

Flatfish (general Flatfish info...)

This ID group contains fishes that spend their adult life laying flat on the bottom. These fish all start their lives with eyes on both sides of their heads. As they mature, one eye migrates through the skull to the top of the fish. Flounders are called either right-eyed or left eyed, depending on which eye moves. Flounders can be found along all bottom habitats including mud, sand and rock and they are found at all depths. Flounders are bottom dwellers that are masters of camouflage and can quickly blend into the benthic habitat. This is important to remember – the coloration of the flounders you will see in the following slides will not necessarily be the same as what you see during a dive. Therefore, rather than focus on coloration and patterns, use fin and mouth placement and shape, the shape of the lateral line (straight or curved), right or left handedness, and size.

Left Eye Flounder Family:

10. Windowpane Flounder – The windowpane flounder is a left-eyed flounder that has a strongly arched lateral line and big lips. It appears very thin and almost rounded. The characteristic feature on the windowpane is that the first few rays in the dorsal fin are free, making it appear “frilly”. It is the only flounder with a dorsal fin extending beyond its mouth. The body is often covered with many dark brown spots. This maximum size is 18”.

ID Hint: This flounder is paper thin and appears almost translucent as a windowpane. The rays of the dorsal fin are like the crossbars in a windowpane.

11. Summer Flounder (aka Fluke) – This is a left-eyed flounder species with a large mouth and a beefy jaw. Teeth can sometimes be seen. Both ventral fins are alike and each separated from the anal fin by considerable distance. This flounder is the most variable in color. It can range in color from grey, blue or green to orange, pink brown to almost black. They average 2-5 lbs in size and reaching up to 3 feet in length. Tail shape angles to a rounded point. Summer Flounder have larger ocellated dark spots scattered on upper surface.

ID Hint: Think of the spots as sun spots – and the angled tail like the ‘fluke’ of a whale’s tail.

Right Eye Flounder Family:

12. Winter Flounder – The winter flounder is by far the most commonly encountered flatfish in the Gulf of Maine. This fish is also the flounder of choice for spear fishermen. This is a very robust flounder with rounded, but small, puckering lips that protrude directly in front of both eyes. This flounder reaches up to 25” in length (but spearfishing pressure has reduced the number of large fish a diver may encounter), has a straight lateral line and is a righteye flounder. Each scale is outlined in black.

ID Hint: Think of the black outline around each scale as a winter coat.

Questions? Feel free to contact me at jonathan_maureen@yahoo.com

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