American eel

Anguilla rostrata

Kingdom:	Animalia
Division/Phylum:	Chordata - vertebrates
Class:	Osteichthyes
Order:	Anguilliformes
Family:	Anguillidae

Features

The American eel grows to a maximum length of 60 inches. Its average size is 2 1/2 pounds and 16 to 33 inches long. The female is larger than the male. The body is snake-like with no pelvic fins and a small cone-shaped head. The mouth has many sharp teeth. Color varies, but usually is olive or brown on the back, greenish yellow on the sides, and white or gray below. The dorsal fin covers more than half the length of the body. It is continuous with the tail and anal fins. The scales are so tiny the fish appears scaleless. The head is pointed and the lower jaw extends beyond the upper jaw.

Natural History

The American eel prefers fairly deep, mud-bottom waters and is found most often in large rivers. It is able to navigate in extremely shallow, marshy areas because of its snake-like movements. Eels are carnivores, eating fish, invertebrates, and animals washed into the water. American eel females mature in freshwater streams over a period of five to 20 years. They then migrate downstream to the sea in autumn and are joined by the males, which remain in estuaries. A single female may produce from five to 20 million eggs. Eels are presumed to die after spawning. The larvae move via ocean currents for at least a year before they reach the mouths of rivers where they change into worm-like, transparent “glass eels” that are about 2 1/2 inches long and begin their migration up rivers where they mature.

Habitats

Mississippi River; Missouri River; interior rivers and streams

Iowa Status

common; native

Iowa Range

north-central and central Iowa and Mississippi and Missouri Rivers

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.