

# Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Freshwater Drum

By Scott Morrison

**Common Name:** Freshwater drum, white perch, sheepshead, drum, croaker, and grunter.

**Scientific name:**  
*Aplodinotus grunniens*

**West Virginia Status:**

Healthy populations of freshwater drum can be found in most medium and large streams and rivers within western West Virginia. These include the Ohio River, the Kanawha River, the Little Kanawha River, and their major tributaries.

**Description:** Freshwater drum are pearly-gray in color with bronze, blue and silver reflections. Fish from our clearest waters are bronzy, and those from more turbid streams and rivers are yellowish white. Their body is oblong with a somewhat humped or elevated back. They have a rounded tail and a long dorsal fin that extends from the peak of the humped back almost to the tail. They are the only member of the drum family found in freshwater, however there are over 30 saltwater species, including the highly sought-after redfish.



*Two sides of otolith. Notice L-shape on image on left.*

Their pearl-like otoliths, (ear bones) are very large. These hard circular shaped bones have an "L" on one of their flat surfaces. Because of this "L," some people feel these are "lucky bones" and they have a long history of superstitious folklore connected with them. Native Americans are believed to have used them for wampum, ceremonial purposes, and as neck charms to prevent various sicknesses. To this day large freshwater drum otoliths are considered treasures by many Mountain State anglers.

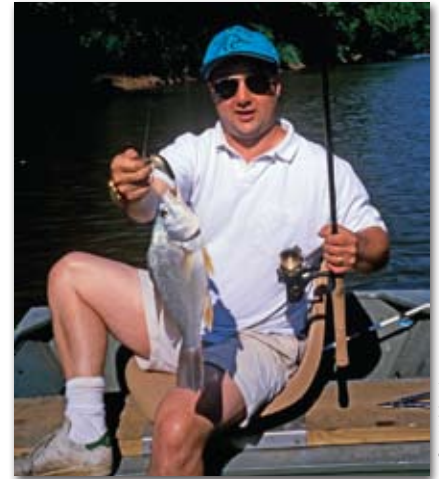
Another notable feature of the freshwater drum is its ability to produce sounds. Grunting or drumming, (from which its name originated) comes from the rapid contractions of abdominal muscles that are connected to the fish's air bladder. Rubbing your fingers on an inflated balloon can produce the same type of sound produced by these fish.

Freshwater drum get quite large. The state record length is 37 inches and the weight record is 27 pounds. A drum must weigh at least 10 pounds or be at least 27 inches long to qualify for a West Virginia trophy fish citation.

**Habitat:** Freshwater drum normally frequent the deeper pools of rivers and streams. During twilight hours they move into shallow water to feed. Although they can tolerate turbid water, they prefer clear water with a silt-free substrate. These fish are almost always found near the bottom. They occur only rarely in West Virginia lakes, ponds or reservoirs and do not thrive in our still-water environments.

**Range:** Freshwater drum are found over a broader latitudinal range (north-south) than any other freshwater fish found within North America. They occur in most river drainages east of the Rockies from Canada down to Mexico.

**Diet:** Like most young fish, small drum eat zooplankton. Larger fish, depending on food availability, will eat aquatic insects, mollusks (clams and mussels), crayfish and minnows. Anglers seeking freshwater drum can use a variety of lures and baits. Lead-headed jigs, tipped with either minnows or soft plastic baits, are very popular along our major river tailwaters (the area just downstream of locks and dams). Small-to medium-sized spinners and spoons also work well. Bait choices include minnows, night-crawlers and any small



*Scott Morrison*

*Angler holds a drum caught in Middle Island Creek.*

worm. Remember, freshwater drum are almost always found near the bottom, so all baits and lures should be fished deep.

**Life History:** Freshwater drum spawn over shallow gravel and sandy areas along the shore. West Virginia spawning generally occurs in June when water temperatures range between 65 and 70 degrees. Young fish grow to about four or five inches during their first year, and a 10-inch drum will be between three and four years old. A 20-inch drum can be anywhere from six and 11 years of age. Females mature at four or five years, while males generally mature one year earlier. Drum can generally be found in large "schools" during the winter and sometimes "school" during the summer.

**Conservation and Potential Threats:**  
No threats within the Mountain State.

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*Illustration by Duane Raver*