

# Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Bluegill



WV Dept. of Commerce/Steve Shaluta

**Common Name:** Bluegill

**Scientific Name:**  
*Lepomis macrochirus*

**West Virginia Status:** Common.  
Bluegills live in all major streams in West Virginia.

**Description:** Bluegills belong to the sunfish family, and have spiny-rayed fins. The bluegill has a dark opercular (or ear) fin, with a dark margin. Bluegills also have a dark spot near the back end of the dorsal fin. Identifying sunfish species is tricky, since they can hybridize easily and hybrids can have characteristics of both parents. Bluegills in West Virginia have reached lengths more than 31 inches, and weights more than 2.5 pounds.

**Habitat:** Streams, ponds or lakes with dense aquatic vegetation.

**Diet:** Bluegill fry feed on zooplankton, preferring daphnia. After the zooplankton numbers run low, the young bluegills switch to aquatic insects, and continue to feed on these invertebrates and some other fish for the rest of their lives. Insects and small fish are good bait, and lures that mimic insects and small fish work well, too.

**Range:** Bluegills are native to eastern and central North America, from western New York to Florida, and west to Texas, northern Mexico, and Minnesota. These sunfish have been introduced throughout North America, Europe and South Africa.

**Life History:** Male bluegills build nests, often in colonies, to prepare for spawning which occurs in May and June. The entire colony spawns within hours of each other. Males defend their nests and don't leave the nests to forage. They do not feed their young. A large predator will be mobbed by the males of the colony and any other nearby males and even females that are still carrying eggs in the area. Mobbing begins or intensifies when a bluegill is captured by the predator. Bluegills have not been observed mobbing during egg predation. Instead, eggs are protected by each male on guard at his nest. Catfish, snails, other bluegills, and pumpkinseeds are known bluegill egg predators.

Small males sometimes mimic females to have access to females that have been attracted to larger males' nests. These slick cross-behaviorists manage to pass on their genetic material without building or guarding a nest. Bluegills sometimes hybridize with green sunfish, orangespotted sunfish, redear sunfish, longear sunfish, and pumpkinseeds. These hybrids can be challenging to identify. It is no wonder that a lot of Mountaineers call them all bluegills, sunfish, or brim.

*References: Fishes of West Virginia, Jay R. Stauffer, Jr., Jeffrey M. Boltz, and Laura R. White.*