

Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Skipjack Herring



Jim Negus

Common Name:

Skipjack, McKinley shad

Scientific name: *Alosa chrysochloris*

West Virginia Status: common in the Ohio and Kanawha rivers.

Description: Skipjack are members of the herring family. They have a deep bluish-silver back, their sides are less bluish and more silvery, and their bellies are silver or milk-white. Their entire body can have a silvery sheen with blue-gold reflections. On some fish, a single row of one to nine very faint spots extends from the upper gill slit backwards along their upper sides. They have a rather large tarpon-like mouth with a protruding lower jaw, and yellow eyes.

Habitat: Skipjack are large river fish that avoid muddy or milky waters as much as possible. They like swift water and generally are not found along the bottom. Large schools of skipjack can be found below our dams on the Ohio and Kanawha rivers, where they attack schools of minnows and young gizzard shad. In these feeding situations, they sometimes “skip” along the water surface. This characteristic is responsible for their common name.

Range: The skipjack herring ranges widely throughout the eastern United States. They occasionally venture into brackish and marine environments along the Gulf Coast. Their distribution extends from Florida to Texas and as far north as Minnesota and Pennsylvania.

Diet: Like most young fish, small skipjack eat zooplankton and switch to insects and small fish when they become larger. Anglers can catch skipjack on small- to medium-sized spinners and spoons, although agitator bobbers with small flies are the tackle of choice for this herring. Remember, skipjack are almost always found near the surface. Although edible, they are not generally valued as food fish. However, cut skipjack fillets are treasured by some flathead catfish anglers who use them for bait.

Life History: Not much is known about West Virginia skipjack herring. Studies elsewhere, however, have shown that skipjack spawn in the spring, and sometimes make long upstream migrations. Female skipjack can produce more than 100,000 eggs annually. Young fish grow to about five or six inches during their first year. They mature after two to three years. Adult skipjacks are usually 12 to 17 inches long. The West Virginia State Record length is 18.9 inches, while the weight record is 2.61 pounds.

Conservation and Potential Threats: No species-specific threats within the Mountain State.

Scott Morrison is the district fisheries biologist stationed in Parkersburg.

Lock and dam tailwaters are good places to fish for skipjack.



David Fattaleh