



threespine stickleback

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Common Name	threespine stickleback
Genus & Species	<i>Gasterosteus aculeatus</i>
Family	Gasterosteidae (sticklebacks)
Order	Gasterosteiformes (silversides and tubesnouts)
Class	Actinopterygii (ray-finned fishes)

Diagnosis: Threespine sticklebacks are characterized by 3 dorsal spines and bony plates on the side. They have a bony keel along the side of caudal peduncle. Pelvic fins have 1 spine and 1 ray. The color is silver-green to brown above, with a silver side with dark mottling. Large males are black with red on fins and large females have pink throats and bellies. Maximum length is 10cm.



Ecology: Many populations of threespine sticklebacks take 2 years to mature and experience only 1 breeding season before dying. In spring, males defend territories where they build nests on the bottom. This is the species known for the famous sequence of territorial, courtship and mating behaviors described by Niko Tinbergen. Diet consists of small insects and other invertebrates.

Habitat & Distribution: The range of threespine sticklebacks is Arctic and Atlantic drainages from Baffin Island and west side of Hudson Bay to Chesapeake Bay, Virginia; Pacific drainages from Alaska to Baja California. Eastern freshwater populations found far inland, including Lake Ontario. This species prefers shallow vegetated areas, usually over mud or sand.

Status: Threespine sticklebacks have gained access to the upper Great Lakes from the Ottawa River and Lake Ontario through the Nipissing Canal. Specimens have been collected near Chicago and are close to inter-basin connections. Once in the Great Lakes, this species spread rapidly. The species could spread rapidly in the impounded regions of the upper Mississippi River.

USGS Fact Sheet: <http://nas.er.usgs.gov/queries/factsheet.aspx?SpeciesID=702>