

## Menhaden – The Breadbasket of the Bay

### What are they?

Chances are that, if you spot a fish in the Bay, it's most probably a menhaden. These fish—the most abundant in the Bay—are cousins to herrings, shads, and sardines.

### What do they look like?

Menhaden can be fifteen inches long by the time they are adults. They have a deeply forked tail. Their silvery sides have a large spot, followed by rows of smaller spots.

### Where can you find them?

Young menhaden are often found in the Bay's shallow waters, while older fish often swim in deeper, open waters.

In the spring, summer, and fall, the menhaden live throughout the Bay. In the late fall, most of them return to the ocean. They then spend the winter near Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

### How do they behave?

Menhaden swim rapidly with open mouths. While they swim, they filter food particles from the water. They strain hundreds of gallons of water to find their microscopic food.

In the spring, summer, and fall, menhaden swim in large schools near the surface of the water. They take turns leading the school. When one fish gets tired, another menhaden takes the lead.

### What do they eat?

Menhaden feed on both phytoplankton (very small floating plant life) and zooplankton (very small floating animal life). Young menhaden prefer zooplankton. Adults like phytoplankton, but will also eat zooplankton.

### What eats them?

Menhaden are called the “breadbasket of the Bay” because so many other fish and animals like to eat them. However, those animals don't include humans. Menhaden are very oily and most people don't like the way they taste.

The animals that do like their taste include:

- Striped bass (also called rockfish)
- Bluefish
- Sea trout
- Sharks
- Mackerels
- Gulls and osprey

### Creature Feature

The native peoples of the Chesapeake region called menhaden *munnawhatteaug*, which means “fertilizer.” We know they used fish as they planted corn, squash and beans. The fish would make the crops grow well. Many people today think the fish they used to do this were menhaden.

