



Oyster toadfish

What are they?

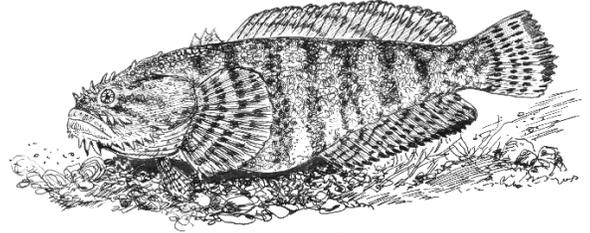
Oyster toadfish are bony fish. They share some characteristics with other fish, like the striped bass. These include a swim bladder, which is a gas-filled chamber that allows fish to float in the water, and gills, which help them get the oxygen they need that is carried by water.

What do they look like?

If there were a contest for the ugliest creature in the Chesapeake Bay, the oyster toadfish would probably win.

They have large eyes that stick out of their heads and enormous and threatening mouths. Instead of scales, these fish are covered completely in a thick layer of slime. Knobby flaps stick out from their jaws, cheeks, and over each eye. These flaps camouflage them, or make it hard for predators to see them. .

Even though adults can reach a length of 15 inches, most of the toadfish found in the Bay are about a foot long or less. They generally have olive-brown backs and paler bellies, making it easy for them to blend in with their surroundings at the bottom of the Bay.



Where can you find them?

You can find toadfish all year long in the Bay. They prefer to live in places where they can easily find protection, such as oyster bars and beds of eelgrass. They like colder water, and stay mainly at the bottom. There, they hide in holes in the soil, under rock piles, or among things that have fallen to the Bay's bottom, like old tin cans or rotting logs.

How do they behave?

Oyster toadfish seem to have a “personality” that matches their looks. They often fight among themselves. If you ever catch one, you will see how hard they can fight. They make their fins very hard and prickly and snap at anything around them.

However, when it comes to their babies, it's another story—especially if you are talking about male toadfish. Males look for an appropriate nest and then lure a female there by calling to them with a kind of foghorn sound. After the female lays her very large eggs and swims away, the males stay and tend the nests. They use their fins to fan dirt and sediment away from the growing eggs.

All oyster toadfish make sounds that seem to mean different things. Males have a kind of mating call. Both males and females grunt when they are threatened. All of these sounds are produced by twitching the muscles around their swim bladder.

Even though they look like they would move very slowly, this is not the case. They can dart out of their holes—and back into them—very quickly if they want to. However, they choose to wait patiently in their hiding places for a potential meal to swim by. When this happens, the oyster toadfish snap open their large mouths and suck in their prey, like a vacuum cleaner.

What do they eat?

Oyster toadfish eat both animals and plants. That is why they are called omnivores. However, their favorite diet includes crustaceans (such as crabs), mollusks (such as snails), squid, worms, and any kind of young fish.

What eats them?

Crabs and large fish prey on oyster toadfish, especially when they are young.

Creature Feature

Oyster toadfish also play an important role in communities outside the Chesapeake Bay region.

Certain toadfish systems make them ideal candidates for medical research. For example, two oyster toadfish went into space. Because their balance system is like a human system, toadfish were sent on a mission to see how the limited gravity in space affects people's balance systems.

Other researchers recently found that toadfish have the fastest twitching muscles in the world. By studying these toadfish muscles, researchers hope to find a way to find cures for human muscles—such as the heart—that aren't working properly.