

Zooplankton – Wandering Animals

What are they?

Zooplankton are “wandering animals.” Their name comes from the Greek words for animal (*zoi*) and wanderer (*planktos*). There are a number of animals that are classified as zooplankton.

Zooplankton range in size. They can be very small. Some are less than 8/1000 of an inch. They can also be quite large. Shrimp, fish larvae, and jellyfish are some of the larger kinds of zooplankton.

Very young crabs and oysters are also considered to be zooplankton. These larvae are not yet able to swim on their own.

One kind of zooplankton is called a copepod. There are over 50 species of copepods in the Bay.

What do they look like?

Zooplankton comes in many different shapes and sizes.

Where can you find them?

Since they feed on phytoplankton, zooplankton are usually found near them, in the surface waters around the Bay. They like to feed at night. During the day, they generally hide on the Bay's bottom.

How do they behave?

The thing all zooplankton have in common is that they have little or no ability to swim on their own. They depend on the currents and tides in the water to move them around.

What do they eat?

Some zooplankton eat phytoplankton. Others eat other zooplankton. Zooplankton are consumers. They cannot produce their own food, as phytoplankton do.

What eats them?

Jellyfish eat a great deal of other zooplankton. Filter feeders, like oysters and clams, also depend on zooplankton as their food source. Fish larvae and smaller fish also feed on zooplankton.

Creature Feature

Since zooplankton are so crucial in the Bay's food chain, the health of their communities is a good indication of the health of the Bay.



Photo Source: Matt Wilson/Jay Clark, NOAA

