

**Fundulus similis**

by William Ballard, Fairhope, Alabama

Fundulus similis is a large brackish-water killifish commonly found in bays, bayous, and tide pools from eastern Florida and the Gulf Coast as far south as Tampico, Mexico. It reaches six inches in length. The fish is very streamlined, with a rather thin body and a long, pointed nose.

Typical colors are a tan to light gray back with a lighter line on the back behind the head. The sides are white or light tan, with conspicuous black vertical stripes. On females and juveniles, these stripes may be faint or incomplete; and on very old fish, they may be absent altogether. The belly is white. On females and juveniles, fins are clear except for a black spot on the dorsal and possibly a light gray tail border. Males have grayish dorsal and anal fins, and gray to gray-green tails with black borders. There is also a darker spot on the gill cover which may be grayish orange or light orange.

When mating, the males become truly spectacular. The body and dorsal and fins become dark gray. The tail is chartreuse with a black border. The spot on the gill cover is bright orange, and a black spot forms just behind the gill cover. Unfortunately, these colors persist only during courtship and quickly fade when mating ends. If a mating male is captured, the colors will fade within five minutes. I have never succeeded in getting a captive male to display the mating colors. Perhaps my tank (29 gals.) was simply too small.

In nature, F. similis frequents sandy, shallow areas, usually in the vicinity of marsh grass and sand bars. Sandy, shallow tide pools are also to their liking. Mating likely takes place in shallow water near reeds, since this is where bright males are most often seen. In winter, these fish are seldom seen. I think they retreat to deeper water.

F. similis requires considerable salinity, and, I believe, rather moderate temperatures to survive. I have noticed that after severely heavy rains or abnormally cold winters, the local similis population declines.

F. similis is a fast swimmer. It covers a larger area in foraging in the wild than do many other killies. If terrified, it often burrows into the sand.

These fish survive captivity fairly well, but never seem to adjust totally to it. Larger tanks might solve this problem.

Although willing to eat flake food or pieces of meat, F. similis has an unusual way of feeding in nature. The fish poke their noses in the sand and root around, expelling sand from their gill covers as they go. I believe they are straining organisms from the sand.

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