

THE BEGINNER'S BUCKET

Sculpin Basics

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Colorful, sleek, graceful. These adjectives most decidedly do not describe sculpins, a magnificently ugly group of fishes found in the faster flowing streams and rivers of North America. And while sculpins aren't what you'd call beautiful, they're active, intelligent fishes that are great conversation starters. They'll quickly learn to recognize the person who feeds them and draw near when it's feeding time. They'll even follow a fingertip traced along the outside of the aquarium glass.

You can find these drab bottom dwellers under rocks in strong current. Sculpins bear a superficial resemblance to banjo catfishes, having a wide flat body, tapering down to a narrow caudal peduncle. Freshwater sculpins have a wide mouth, a face full of spines, two dorsal fins—the second longer than the first—and large, fan-like pectoral fins. The wide pectoral fins, together with their compressed bodies, help sculpin navigate the current in the faster-flowing sections of streams that they prefer.

The family includes more than 300 species found throughout the world. Most species are marine, but in this article I'll touch on a couple of the roughly 30 freshwater species found in North America.

It is extremely difficult to tell sculpin species apart. Most species resemble each other, having mottled color patterns in shades of gray, brown, or black. I assume I've kept both Potomac Sculpin (*Cottus girardi*) and Mottled Sculpin (*C. bairdii*)—both of which are found in the countryside around my suburban Washington, D.C. home—but to tell you the truth, I've never been patient enough to try to tell them apart.

Sculpins swim in short, rapid bursts. Most of the time they get around by hopping along the bottom of the aquarium. If you're keeping more than one sculpin, they'll soon set up discrete little territories. The current that sculpins need can be supplied with a powerhead or an oversize filter.

Freshwater sculpins generally don't grow very large, with most only reaching a few inches. Depending on the species, a few may grow as long as 7 or 8 inches.

Most sculpin species prefer cool water. If the temperature gets above 70°F, they will likely falter and die. Some of the southern species, however, are reputed to withstand temperatures in the low 80s. To ensure that his sculpins make it through summer hot spells, Todd Crail keeps their tank directly on the cooler basement floor, instead of on a stand.

Sculpins love blackworms and can be trained to frozen offerings like brine shrimp. The key is to keep frozen items moving, so that they simulate live prey.

They aren't good competitors with the faster-swimming minnow and shiner species. If you've got sculpins in a tank with a lot of faster species, you can train the sculpins to accept blackworms from a turkey baster. The turkey baster also may come in handy for making sure the smaller sculpins get enough to eat when there are larger sculpins around. After sculpins become acclimated to the turkey baster, you can train them to accept small feeder minnows offered with forceps.

Writing on the NANFA e-mail list, Mike Austin described a hollow plastic tube, stuck vertically to the inside of his aquarium with suction cups. Mike would first feed the tank's minnows, to distract them away from the tube. Then he'd drop a small earthworm or other offering down the tube, where the waiting sculpin would snag it once it hit bottom.

Be forewarned, however, that sculpins are extremely predatory and will pick off anything they can swallow. When I first collected some, I learned the hard way that they can't be trusted around Fantail Darters (*Etheostoma flabellare*). Sculpins also have no sense when it comes to eating fish that are just a little too large for them. I once discovered a dead sculpin on the bottom of one of my tanks with the rear half of a large darter protruding from its mouth! 