

# Virginia Science Museum Showcases State's Underwater Life

~~~~~

by

Michael Thennet

4709 S. 29th St., Arlington, VA 22206, [thennet\\_michael@tmac.com](mailto:thennet_michael@tmac.com)

Last summer, while staying in Virginia Beach, I had the extreme pleasure of visiting the local Virginia Marine Science Museum (VMSM). Dedicated to Virginia's marine, tidal marsh and coastal river environments, the museum now ranks among the top 10 aquariums and marine science centers in the nation. The facility is filled with local native American fish exhibits, two aviaries, a tidal salt marsh preserve and more than a hundred interactive exhibits.

The museum opened in 1986 and today is Virginia's largest aquarium. In 1996, the museum completed a \$35 million dollar expansion, which tripled its size and increased it to over 800,000 gallons of aquariums. At the main entrance is the Coastal River exhibit, modeled after Virginia's lower Rappahannock River. I was sorry I couldn't set up camp here for few days. The exhibit features a large pond and indoor aviary. One end of the pond is supported by aquarium glass, to allow for viewing. The biotope habitat is populated by longnose gar (*Lepisosteus platostomus*), largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), black crappie (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*), and some large pumpkinseed sunfish (*Lepomis gibbosus*). The latter, at 8 to 10 inches long, were particularly impressive. Also present were yellow perch (*Perca flavescens*), white perch (*Morone americana*), and a few freshwater turtles. Local trees and bushes, planted around the pond, provided sanctuary for quail and bright red cardinals.

Beyond the bridge that spans the Coastal River exhibit is the Chesapeake Bay Aquarium. This biotope exhibit is cleverly constructed to appear as a 75-foot section of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, complete with concrete

support columns. At one end is a shallow, beach-side environment, which gradually gets deeper as you proceed through the exhibit. Eventually, you feel completely submerged. The aquarium supports over 50 species of local fishes such as small groups of lookdowns (*Selene vomer*), the museum's mascot, Atlantic croaker (*Micropogonias undulatus*), striped mullet (*Mugil cephalus*), spot (*Leiostomus xanthurus*), and Atlantic needlefish (*Strongylura marina*). The needlefish cruises the shallows like a remote-controlled silver speed boat. At the end of this exhibit are some smaller marine aquariums supporting octopi, blue crabs and jellyfish. A touch tank allows children to touch horseshoe crabs, skates, starfish, and sea urchins.

Next are the museum's largest aquariums, the sea turtle and the Norfolk Canyon exhibit. The 70,000-gallon sea turtle exhibit provides a habitat for endangered sea turtle species such as the loggerhead, hawksbill and leatherback, all of which visit Virginia's coast during one

## Virginia Marine Science Museum

717 General Booth Blvd.,  
Virginia Beach, VA 23451  
(South of Rudee Inlet)

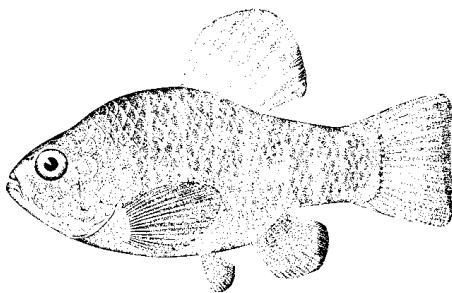
(757) 425-FISH  
Group reservations:  
(757) 437-4949

E-mail:  
[va-marine-science-museum@Va-Beach.com](mailto:va-marine-science-museum@Va-Beach.com)

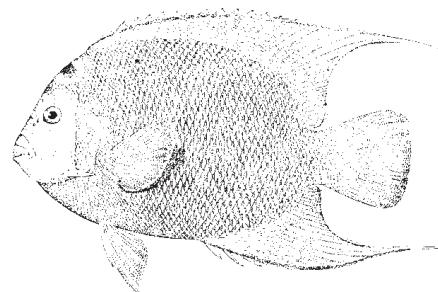
Web:  
[www.vabeach.com/va-marine-science-museum/](http://www.vabeach.com/va-marine-science-museum/)

season or another. Currently, the museum is successfully raising juvenile loggerheads and caring for injured and undernourished specimens that will be returned back to the wild once they regain their hall.

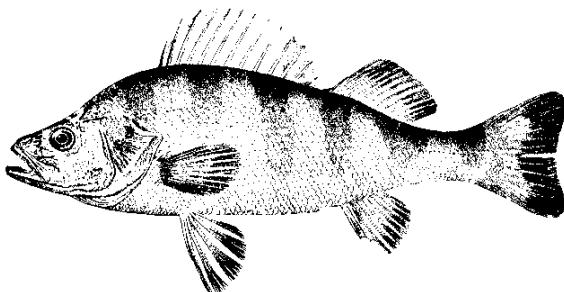
Down the hall from the turtle exhibit is the 300,000 gallon



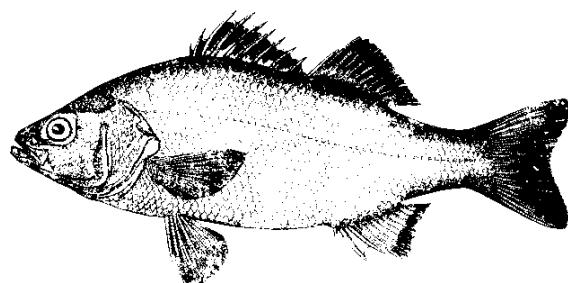
sheepshead topminnow, *Cyprinodon variegatus*



queen angelfish, *Holacanthus ciliaris*



yellow perch, *Perca flavescens*



white perch, *Morone americana*

Norfolk Canyon aquarium, which provides views from a staged shipwreck and a simulated submersible research vessel. Here, the typical inhabitants include various species of jacks (*Caranx* sp.) and goatfish (*Mullus* sp.), as well as cunners (*Tautogolabrus adspersus*), rays, and, of course, sharks—hammerheads, black tips and sand tigers. Color is provided by queen angels (*Holacanthus ciliaris*), blue parrotfish (*Scarus coeruleus*), yellowtail snappers (*Ocyurus chrysururus*), and various butterflyfishes (*Chaetodon* sp.) which inhabit Virginia's coastal waters during the summer months.

From the main museum building spans a 1/3-mile-long nature trail. Three observation decks overlook Owls Creek marsh, where ospreys, herons, egrets, turtles, crabs, frogs, and raccoons can all be seen among the marsh grasses, and wild flowers. The trail eventually leads to Owls Creek Marsh Pavilion, where a large circular aquarium with a grass-topped mud structure at its center is encircled by a moat of brackish water. Inhabitants of this biotope are the ever active sheepshead minnows (*Cyprinodon variegatus*), striped killifish (*Fundulus majalis*), mummichogs (*Fundulus heteroclitus*), and fiddler crabs. This exhibit is definitely one of the more enchanting smaller setups which can easily be copied by the home aquarist. Other small exhibits in the pavilion maintain oyster toadfish (*Opsanus tau*), naked gobies (*Gobiosoma bosc*), and the unusual skilletfish (*Gobiesox strumosus*),

which takes the goby trademark suction-cup to the extreme. One of the more interesting interactive exhibits in the pavilion is the Macro-Marsh, where fiberglass plants, animals and insects have been enlarged many times their normal size.

Finally, in addition to the exhibits mentioned above, the museum also has an outdoor aviary with over two dozen species of shore and marsh birds, a reptile room, a river otter paludarium, a harbor seal aquarium and an award winning wildflower habitat. If you are ever in the area, I highly recommend a visit.

### Museum Extras

For an extra fee, the museum offers seasonal 2-hour boat trips to view the dolphins (summer) and humpback whales (winter) that migrate to the Virginia Beach coast each year. All trips include an educational program and are guided by museum interpreters. Reservations are required. Please call 757-437-BOAT. Information on hotel packages that include the whale watching trips is available from 1-800-446-8038.

The museum also offers IMAX® movies, on a six-story, wrap around, 3-D screen. The IMAX® page of the museum's Website, last updated on June 14, 1998, listed movies on the California kelp forest, photosynthesis, and human imagination and creativity.