

American Eel (*Anguilla rostrata*)

Do they have any other names?

The names “glass eel” or “elver” are used to describe young, developing eels.

Why are they called American eels?

The closest relatives to the American eel are other freshwater eels found in Europe and Asia; therefore they are called American eels because they are only in America. *Anguilla* is the Latin name for eel and *rostrata* is Latin for “beaked,” in reference to the snout.

What do they look like?

American eels are a brownish-colored fish with a slender, snake-like body and a small, pointed head. The body appears smooth and mucousy; however there are small scales present. They have a long dorsal fin that is more than half the length of the body and attached to the tail and anal fins. American eels do not have pelvic fins, but do have pectoral fins (on the sides near the head). The lower jaw projects farther than the upper jaw and they have many small teeth.



Photo Credit: Duane Raver/USFWS

Where do they live in Indiana?

American eels are rare in Indiana and are found in large streams and rivers. They can sometimes be found in ponds or lakes that are not connected to a river, although this seldom happens.

What kind of habitat do they need?

American eels are found in large streams or rivers with continuous flow and clear water. During the day eels like to stay near logs, boulders, or other cover.

How do they reproduce?

Freshwater eels reproduce south of Bermuda in the western North Atlantic Ocean. The exact location is not known and it is believed that the adults die after spawning. The American eels travel back to the southern and eastern coasts of the United States and the other freshwater eels travel all the way back to Europe. The eels reach the river mouths and enter the river systems. The males do not travel far inland and stay near the river mouths but the females continue traveling north up the rivers until they are stopped by the stream source or by an object like a dam. Females have even been seen crawling through wet grass or rocks to go around an obstruction or to enter a nearby pond or lake that has no outlet to the ocean. After anywhere from 6 to 20 years later the eels travel back to the ocean to reproduce.

How old are they when they reproduce?

American eels can be anywhere from 6 to 20 years old when they reproduce.

How long do they live?

American eels can live up to at least 20 years old.

How fast do they grow in Indiana?

Males only grow to about 18 inches in length whereas the females can grow as long as 62 inches in length. However, there are no males in Indiana because they stay in the river mouths near the ocean.

What do they eat?

Young eels eat mostly aquatic insects and the larger, adult eels eat crayfish and fish.

What eats them?

The American eel is eaten by larger fish, other eels, and fish-eating birds.

Are they safe to eat?

American eels are safe to eat and freshwater eels are an important food fish in Europe. It is popular to eat fried, smoked, or pickled. However in Indiana eels are rare and are not listed as a game fish for harvesting.

How do I fish for them?

Most American eels are taken by anglers while fishing for other species. American eels put up a strong fight when taken on hook and line. However, they are not a game fish and are not encouraged to be harvested.

How is Indiana managing American eels?

American eels are native to Indiana and are not stocked by the state. The state does monitor the American eel populations, however.