

# Freshwater Fish of New River, Belize<sup>1</sup>

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Belize is home to an abundant diversity of freshwater fish species and is often considered a fishing paradise. The New River area is a popular freshwater fishing destination in the Orange Walk district of northern Belize. Here locals and visitors alike take to the lagoons and waterways for dinner or for good sportfishing. This guide highlights the most popular species in the area and will help people identify and understand these species. A fishing license is required for all fishers, so before casting be sure to check the local laws and regulations.

## Tarpon

*Megalops atlanticus*

Adult size: 1–2.5 m (4–8 ft)

Tarpon are large fish that can weigh up to 127kg (280 lbs). They are covered in large, silver scales and have no spines in their fins. They have a broad mouth with a prominent lower jaw. Tarpon are fighters and may jump out of the water several times when hooked. They are found in fresh and saltwater.



Figure 1. Tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*).  
Credits: Albert Kok, en.wikipedia.org

## Bay Snook

*Petenia splendida*, bocona

Adult size: 45–50 cm (18–20 in)

The bay snook is a popular fishing species. It is a brilliant green-gold with black spots and large, rounded fins. A red color morph also exists. It has a highly protrusible jaw—which means it can thrust its jaw forward. The bay snook's jaw extends to more than a quarter of its entire body. It is often mistaken for the South American peacock bass, but is easily distinguished because the bay snook has a single dorsal fin instead of two.



Figure 2. Bay snook (*Petenia splendida*).  
Credits: bidkev.deviantart.com

## Blue Tilapia

*Oreochromis aureus*, tilapia

Adult size: 13–20 cm (5–8 in)

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This edible, fleshy fish can be identified by its overall blue color. Adults can weigh up to 2.7kg (6 lbs). This exotic cichlid is abundant in both fresh and brackish waters.



Figure 3. Blue tilapia (*Oreochromis aureus*).  
Credits: Victor Atkins, [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)

## Mayan Cichlid

*Cichlasoma urophthalmus*, pinta

Adult size: 25–27 cm (10–11 in)

This popular food fish has dark vertical bars and a large black eyespot with a blue border at the tail base. The first dorsal and anal fins have many sharp spines. They are territorial, aggressive and intensely colored when breeding.



Figure 4. Mayan cichlid (*Cichlasoma urophthalmus*).  
Credits: DATZ. R. Stawikowski, [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)

## Firemouth Cichlid

*Thorichthys meeki*, cabezona, panya gial

Adult size: 10–12 cm (4–5 in)

This commonly fished cichlid has a very bright orange-red coloration beneath its jaws. The rest of the body is blue-gray with dark blotches on the sides. They have protrusible jaws, and males engage in territorial displays.



Figure 5. Firemouth cichlid (*Thorichthys meeki*).  
Credits: DATZ. R. Stawikowski, [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)

## Mayan Catfish

*Sciades (Ariopsis) assimilis*, bagre

Adult size: 25–35 cm (10–14 in)

This heavy-bodied, edible species has a large dorsal fin and three pairs of barbels (whiskers). It is grey-blue with a white underside and is predominantly found in freshwater, but sometimes inhabits brackish water.



Figure 6. Mayan catfish (*Sciades (Ariopsis) assimilis*).  
Credits: Granados-Dieseldorff and Christensen, [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)

## Bigmouth Sleeper

*Gobiomorus dormitor*, mudsleeper, dormilon

Adult size: 30–60 cm (12–24 in)

Sleepers are camouflaged, ambush predators that are found at the bottom of the riverbed and also in brackish and saltwater. They are fleshy fish that are prized for eating and can be identified by their 9 soft dorsal rays, 6 dorsal spines, and rounded caudal fin.



Figure 7. Bigmouth sleeper (*Gobiomorus dormitor*).  
Credits: Juan Miguel Artigas Azas [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)

## Atlantic Silverside

*Menidia menidia*, sprat

Adult size: 13–15 cm (5–6 in)

This small, schooling species is often found in brackish water. It serves as prey for larger fish and is eaten whole in local villages. It is translucent with a silver horizontal stripe running the entire length of the body and a forked caudal fin.

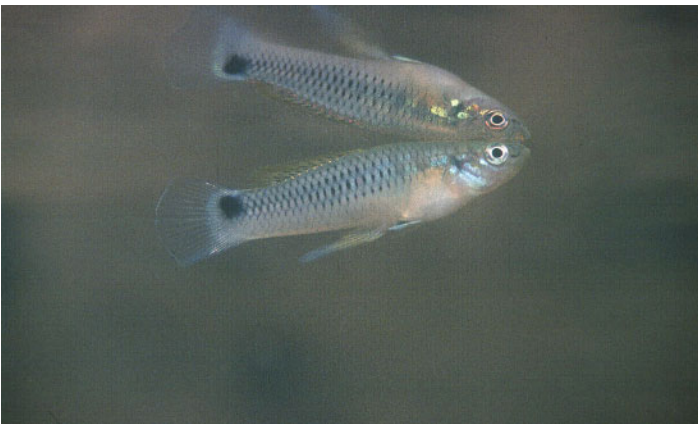


Figure 8. Twospot livebearer (*Heterandria bimaculata*).  
Credits: Juan Miguel Artigas Azas [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)

## Yucatan Gambusia

*Gambusia yucatanana*, billum, bute, mosquitofish

Adult size: 5–8 cm (2–3 inches)

Like other mosquitofish species, it is small and slender, with a thick body that tapers beyond the anal fin. It is covered in large, translucent, silver-brown scales that have many small black spots toward the tail. Females are larger than males.

## Pike Killifish

*Belonesox belizanus*, topminnow

Adult size: 7–20cm (3–8 in)

The pike killifish has a long, upturned lower jaw and many needlelike teeth. It has an elongate body with a flat back and is light beige with green, iridescent scales and tiny black spots on the sides. It has large eyes and a black spot at the base of its fan-shaped tail. Females are much larger than males.



Figure 9. Yucatan gambusia (*Gambusia yucatanana*).  
Credits: Juan Miguel Artigas Azas [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)



Figure 10. Pike killifish (*Belonesox belizanus*).  
Credits: Granados-Dieseldorff et al. 2012 [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)

## For More Information

Fishing licenses, laws, and regulations: [http://www.agriculture.gov.bz/Fisheries\\_Dept.html](http://www.agriculture.gov.bz/Fisheries_Dept.html)

Tourism information and licensed fishing guides:  
<https://www.travelbelize.org/things-to-do/activities/fishing-sport-fly-trolling-tarpon#panel1>