



# Herring and Shad Identification Tips

Updated Spring 2017



Blueback herring, alewife, hickory and American shad are members of the herring family (Clupeidae). They are anadromous fishes, which means they spend the majority of their adult lives at sea and migrate up coastal rivers in the spring to spawn in freshwater. At one time, these coastal rivers supported thriving herring and shad industries, with millions of fish harvested each year. However, populations of these fishes declined dramatically in the last century due to dam constructions, overharvesting and other factors.

In response to the population decline of river herring in North Carolina, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission and

N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries closed harvest for Alewife and Blueback Herring in 2007. Harvest remains closed in North Carolina as of 2017. Many other states along the Atlantic Coast have also closed river herring harvest. American Shad harvest is managed with river-specific regulations. Anglers are encouraged to consult the current version of the [Regulations Digest](#) to find limits on Hickory and American Shad harvest.

Because these four species of migratory herring and shad can appear similar, particularly as juveniles, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission developed this handout to help anglers identify the fish they catch. Similar resident species—Gizzard shad and Threadfin shad—are included as well.

## American Shad (average length: 20-24 inches)

Lower jaw fits into a notch under the upper jaw



Often has greenish-to-dark-bluish metallic shine along back

## Hickory Shad (average length: 12-20 inches)

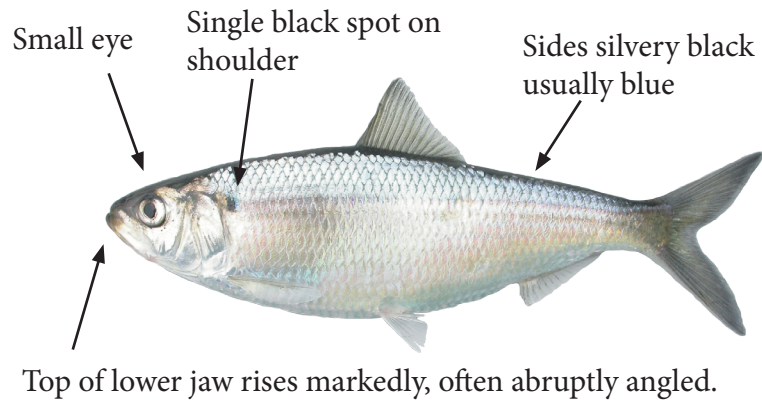
Lower jaw extends beyond upper jaw



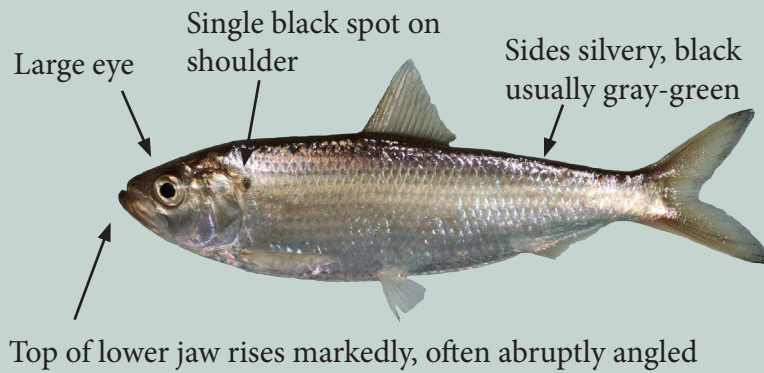
Grayish-green back fading to silvery sides



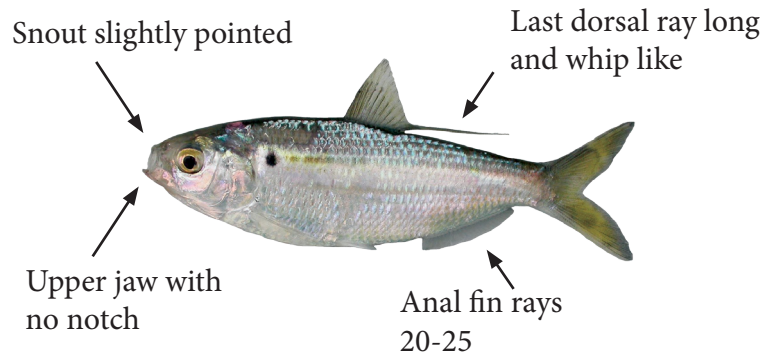
**Blueback herring**  
(average length:  
10 inches)



**Alewife**  
(average length:  
10 inches)



**Threadfin Shad**  
(average length:  
3-6 inches)



**Gizzard Shad**  
(average length:  
10-14 inches)

