

This Month

NORTHERN PUFFER

Colloquial Nicknames: Balloonfish, Blowfish, Puffer, Swellfish, Swell Toad, Toad,
Scientific name: *Spherooides maculatus*



Field Markings: Upper side is gray or brown with tiny black pepper-spots. Belly is yellow to white. Black bar between eyes is often present.

Size: Maximum 14 inches

Habitat: Bays, estuaries and protected coastal waters, around rocks or reefs

Seasonal Appearance: Late spring through fall

Distinguishing Features and Behaviors

Pufferfish are a commonly known family of fish named for their ability to inflate themselves by swallowing water (or air, if removed from the water). When this occurs, they become round and softball-sized, causing them to appear larger to predators. Striped bass and bluefish are the puffer's predators in Narragansett Bay.



The mouth of this fish is small, with teeth fused into powerful cutting and crushing beaks divided in the middle.

The northern puffer has sandpapery and teethlike scales, with small, crescent-shaped gills in front of its pectoral fins. Puffers sometimes target their prey in large schools. Their diet consists of large crabs, other hard-shelled invertebrates and some finfish.

The northern puffer spawns May through August off of the Massachusetts coast, laying sticky, transparent eggs in bottom areas. It is thought that their larvae may be dispersed throughout

the North Atlantic coast by the Gulf Stream current. The northern puffer's population is highly resilient, with a quick reproductive rate.

Around the Bay, the northern puffer lives in a variety of habitats. They have been collected while seining through shallow brackish estuaries, by trawling in saltier areas of the southern Bay and at a depth range to nearly 600 feet.

They are usually only seen as younger fish and aren't found in the colder months. Their lowest temperature limit is about 46 degrees.



Other species of puffers found in Narragansett Bay during the early fall months include the bandtail pufferfish (*Spherooides spengleri*), which has a row of large dark spots along the lower part of its body from chin to caudal-fin base, and the striped burrfish (*Chilomycterus schoepfi*), which has dark brown dorsal stripes with rigid spiny skin that is skeletonlike.

Relationship to People

Some puffers produce a powerful poison (tetrodotoxin) that is concentrated in their major organs, including their skin. Northern puffers are reportedly non-toxic, and are sold as "sea squab" in the northern part of their range. Puffers are also a popular aquarium fish, especially the porcupinefish and burrfish. They are commercially important fish for both of these reasons.

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