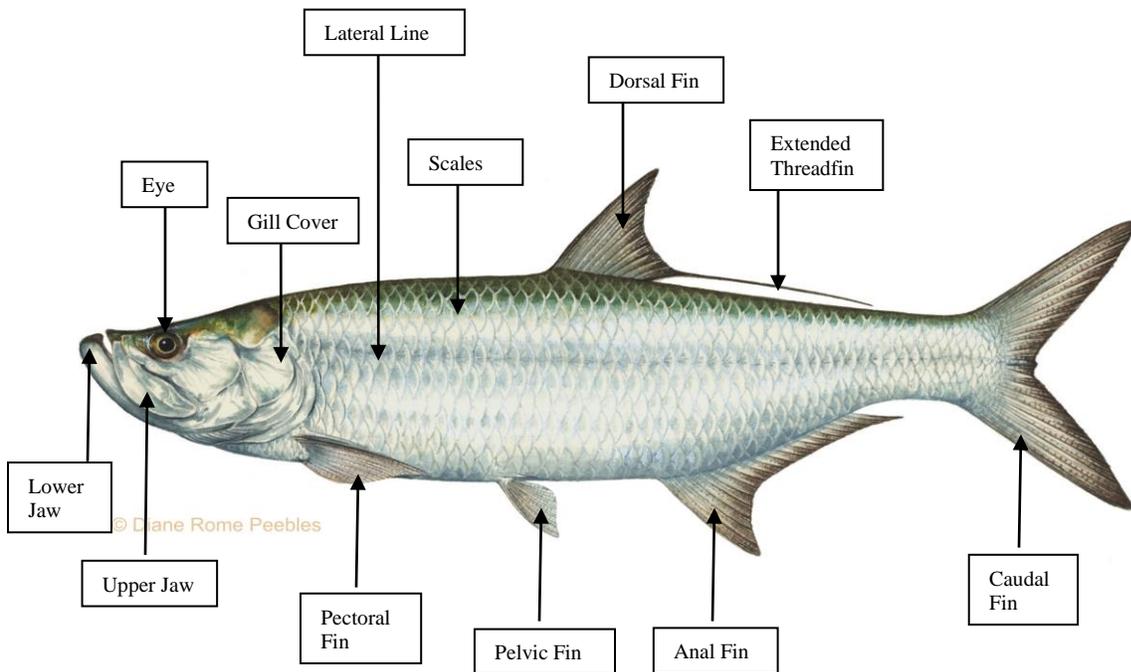


ATLANTIC TARPON



Range: The Atlantic tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*) is a large bony fish that commonly grows over 2-meters in length and weighs in excess of 90 kilograms (200 pounds). It is the larger of the two tarpon species still existing today. The other species is the Indo-Pacific tarpon (*Megalops cyprinoides*). Atlantic tarpon prefer tropical and subtropical waters and are most common from Virginia to central Brazil and throughout the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico. Fossil records show that tarpon have been swimming in our oceans since prehistoric times.

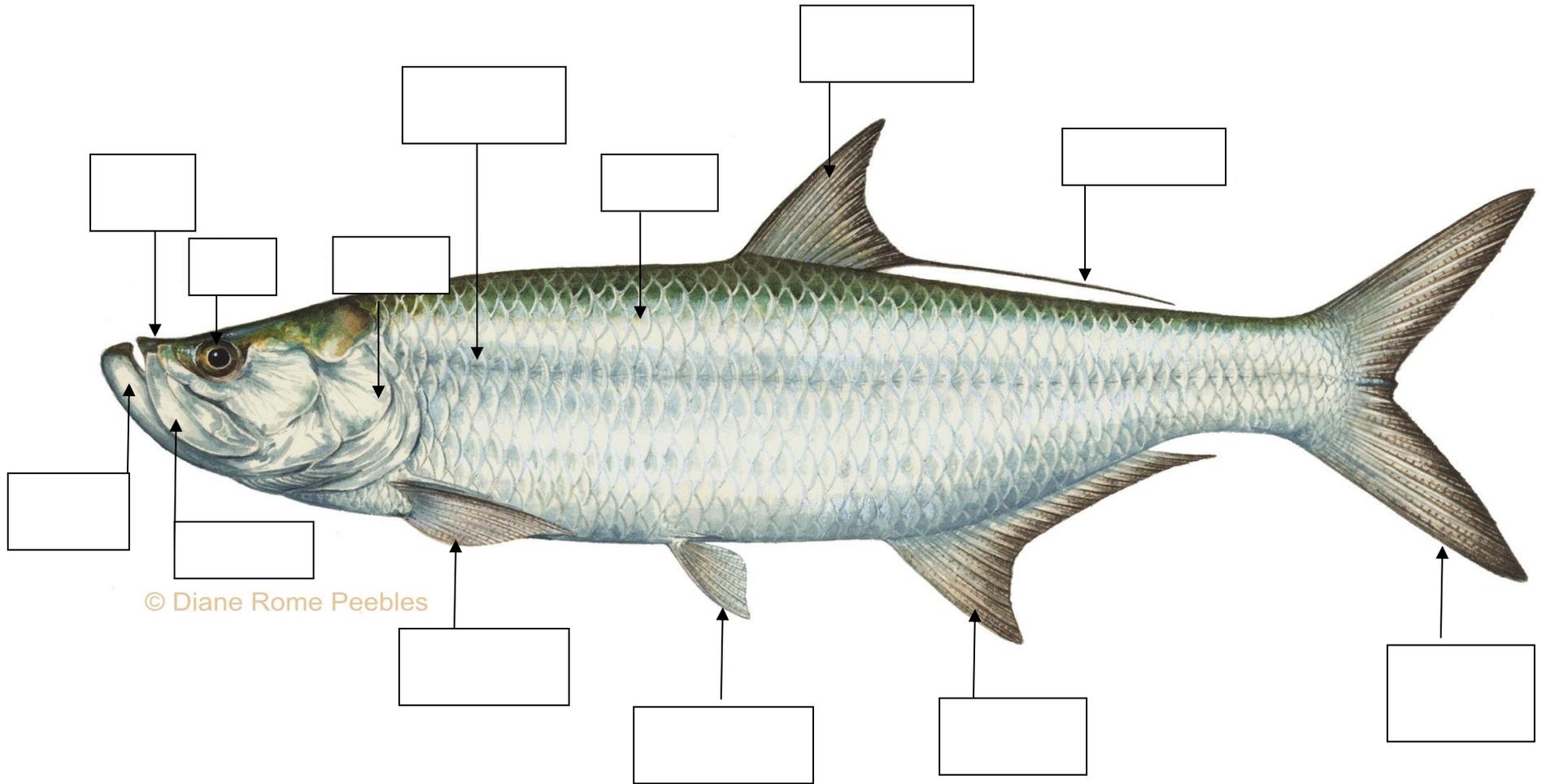
Anatomy: Tarpon are silver with blue-gray backs and have large plate-like scales that act as armor for the fish. They have a large projecting, upturned lower jaw that contains a bony plate for crushing prey. A distinguishing characteristic is the long threadfin on their dorsal fin. Their forked tail makes them excellent swimmers. Their eyes have excellent vision. They can see color into the ultraviolet light spectrum and in the dark. Tarpon predominantly breathe using gills, but they can also breathe oxygen directly from the air using a swim bladder. This allows them to survive in harsh environments.

Life History: It takes a tarpon approximately 8 to 10 years to reach maturity and spawn for the first time. By this time, tarpon are approximately 128 centimeters in length (4 feet). A single female tarpon can release between 1 million and 20 million egg cells per year. They spawn offshore in ocean waters, but tarpon larvae (known as a leptocephalus) move to low salinity marsh and mangrove habitats. Tarpon larvae are like those of eels, bonefish and ladyfish.

Diet: Tarpon like to eat anything that comes their way. As juveniles, they like to eat small invertebrates, fishes and shrimp. As they grow, their diet shifts to fish and crabs.

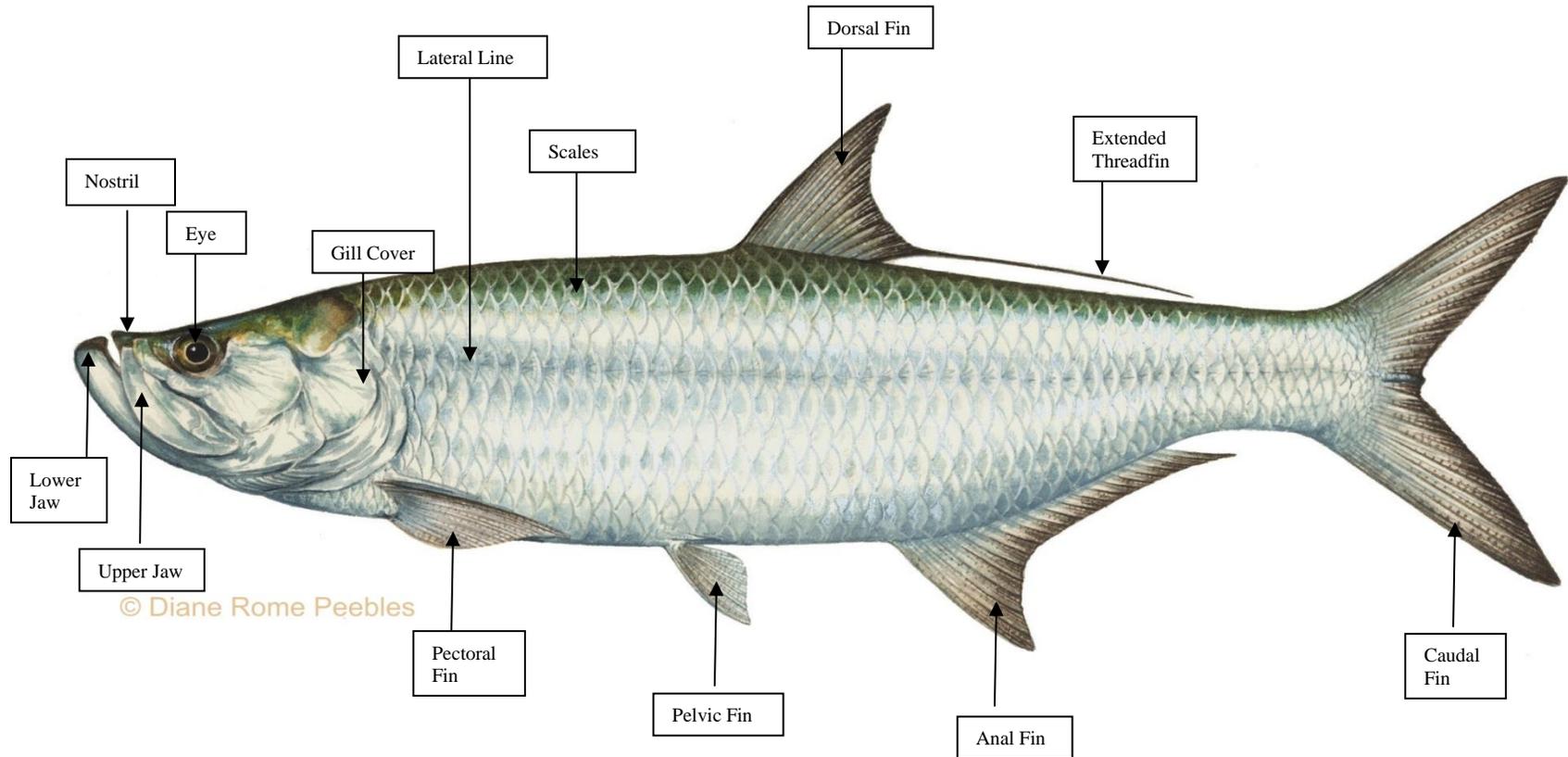
Tarpon facts courtesy of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (2020).
Fish image © 1992, Diane Rome Peebles.

ATLANTIC TARPON EXTERNAL ANATOMY

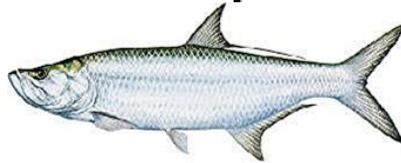


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ATLANTIC TARPON



Atlantic Tarpon FUN Facts



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- There are two species of tarpon in the world: Atlantic tarpon and Indo-Pacific tarpon.
- *Megalops*, the genus of tarpon, is of Greek origin and means 'large face'.
- Tarpon earned the nickname Silver King because of their majestic size and color.
- Tarpon have hard, overlapping scales like a suit of armor.
- Tarpon eyes see more colors than humans and they can see in the dark.
- They have a large upturned lower jaw and long threadfin on the dorsal fin.
- Tarpon like to eat fish and crabs and will crush their prey or swallow it whole.
- Fossils show us tarpon have been swimming in the oceans since before the dinosaurs.
- Tarpon commonly weigh more than 100 pounds. Lucky anglers might catch one over 200 pounds.
- The largest tarpons tend to be females and well over 2m (6-feet) in length.
- It takes a tarpon 8 -10 years to mature into an adult.
- Tarpon from the wild have been aged at 55 years. The oldest known tarpon in captivity was 63 years old. Science provides evidence that they might live up to 78 years.
- The all-tackle world record tarpon weighed 286 pounds, 9 ounces and was caught in Guinea-Bissau, Africa.
- The Florida record using conventional tackle is a 243 lb. tarpon caught off Key West.
- Atlantic tarpon are found from Virginia to central Brazil, throughout the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico, and along the tropical coast of Africa.
- Tarpon like a variety of habitats. They are commonly found in shallow coastal waters and estuaries, open marine waters, around coral reefs, and even in rivers.
- Tarpon like it hot! They can handle water temperatures between 63° and 102°F (17-39°C) but prefer 82-86°F (28-30°C). They can also freeze to death if water gets colder than 50°F (<10°C).
- Tarpon can be seen swimming in a slow circular motion lined up nose to tail while moving down the beaches. This is known as a "daisy chain".
- One female tarpon may release between 4.5 million and 20 million eggs during spawning season.
- In Florida, most tarpon spawn from late April through July.
- Tarpon eggs hatch into microscopic larvae that have a ribbonlike body with fanglike teeth.
- Transparent larvae about 1-inch long will take 30 to 50 days to drift inshore to estuaries and have been found as far as 125 miles offshore in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Tarpon form scales when they are two inches (40mm) long.
- Tarpon nursery habitats are marshes and mangrove swamps where they spend their first year.
- Tarpon can grow 12 to 16 inches in their first year.
- Tarpon breathe using gills, **BUT**...they can breathe air using a swimbladder. This allows them to survive in harsh environments.
- Because of its strength, stamina, and fighting ability, the tarpon is a premier game fish.
- Tarpon support a popular recreational **catch-and-release** fishery in Florida.
- Tarpon are so cool Michelangelo even painted one on the roof of the Sistine Chapel with Jonah

Facts courtesy of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Updated 4/7/2020