Order ACIPENSERIFORMES

Paddlefishes

Family POLYODONTIDAE

Bonaparte 1835

Polyodon

Lacepède 1797

Polyodon spathula (Walbaum 1792)

Psephurus

Günther 1873

Psephurus gladius (Martens 1862)

A toothless fish named for its teeth?

Many references explain that Polyodon, meaning “many tooth,” refers to the numerous gill rakers that the fish uses to filter zooplankton from the water. But Lacepède did not mention gill rakers in his description. He mentioned teeth: “It is close ... [to] Acipenser (sturgeon), but it is distinguished by the presence of many teeth in the paddlefish, and zero in Acipenser” (translation).

Most references will also explain that adult Polyodon do not have teeth. Juveniles, however, do. According to David Starr Jordan (1882), Lacepède’s description was made up from numerous young specimens preserved in the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle.

Some proposed changing the name to Spatularia (referring to its spatulate rostrum) on the grounds that Polyodon was an inappropriate name since adults are toothless. In fact, adult paddlefish were once described as a different, toothless species, Polyodon edentula. As Jordan concluded:

“There is, however, no good ground for setting aside Polyodon, even if Spatularia seems a more pleasing name. The fish does have many teeth, even if they ultimately fall out, and Polyodon it must remain.”