

LEECHES IN TEXAS WATERS

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Leeches can on rare occasion become economically important in fish farming but most attention is given to leeches when they become bothersome to people who swim in farm ponds or natural waters. Leeches are akin to annular worms such as earthworms but have a well developed sucker on the tail end and a lesser developed sucker surrounding the mouth. Some can swim but others cannot; some are flat and leaflike and others more cylindrical in shape, some are brightly colored but most are brown or black; some will feed on blood but others not.

Kinds of leeches

A North American leech known to regularly attack mammals is the "horse leech", *Haemopsis marmorata*, which will attach and take a blood meal from livestock. This leech has not been recorded in Texas or other southern states. It belongs to a group of leeches that have teeth and are relatively large in size (2 to 6 inches in length). Two leeches in this group that have been reported in Texas are *Macrobdella decora* and *Philobdella gracilis*.

Leeches which are more frequently seen in Texas waters are smaller and normally parasitize typical aquatic animals such as turtles, fish, frogs, and snails. Leeches are quite common on turtles and will have a leaf-shaped body. Those attaching to fishes are as a rule more round and slender. Many freshwater leeches do not live a parasitic life at all but rather live as scavengers or predators on small aquatic animals such as worms and immature insects.

Marine leeches are not as common as freshwater relatives and are found as parasites of sea turtles and fishes. One leech, *Mayzobdella lugubris*, is very common on fishes in both marine and freshwater areas and is occasionally seen to associate with crabs and small shrimps in coastal waters.

Members of another group of leeches exclusively parasitize water birds but these have been reported so far only from the northern states. Land dwelling leeches that are known to attach to land animals in tropical areas are not known from Texas.

Leeches affixing to swimmers

The leeches that attach to people while swimming in Texas ponds and lakes are usually those that normally parasitize water animals but will affix to swimmers when attracted by factors such as movement. Their size is typically less than one inch long or at most one and a half inches. Leeches do not transmit human diseases and skin damage is considered quite minor. Leeches that are attached to people may be merely removed by hand or encouraged to release by application of table salt.

Important factors in leech presence

In years of drought conditions when pond water volumes become low, leeches can become common on fishes or other aquatic animals and bothersome to swimmers. Leech occurrences also seem to be enhanced in spring seasons following mild winters.

Leeches may be distributed by animals migrating in and out of a pond. Turtles, for example move across land. Infested fishes can migrate during heavy rains and the leeches are able on their own to migrate across wet areas or during flooded conditions.

Control of leeches

Leeches, like many nuisance animals, tend to have up and down population cycles. Pond owners can often "wait out" a leech problem and see the pests disappear as a season changes.

Ponds may be drained and the pond bottom mud dusted thoroughly with quicklime, powdered bleach or powdered swimming pool chlorine. Exposure to an extended dry period or hard freeze will kill hibernating leeches in a drained pond.