

Zebra mussel

Description

Small, fingernail-sized clams that attach to solid surfaces in the water. Adults are $\frac{1}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, they have a D-shape shell, and the shells are often colored in alternating yellow and brownish colored stripes. Most zebra mussels are under one inch long. They do prefer shallow waters (6-30 feet deep) that are algae-rich.

Facts

- Zebra mussels are the only freshwater mollusk that can firmly attach itself to solid objects – rocks, dock pilings, boat hulls, water intake pipes, etc.
- Zebra mussels can last out of water, under certain conditions, for days.
- Zebra mussels attach to hard surfaces using tiny fibers called “byssal threads.”
- Zebra mussels can be a costly problem for cities and power plants when they clog water intakes.

- They eat tiny food particles that they filter out of the water, which can reduce available food for larval fish and other animals, and cause aquatic vegetation to grow as a result of increased water clarity.
- Zebra mussels can also attach to and smother native mussels.

Reproduction

A single female can produce 100,000 to 500,000 eggs per year. The microscopic, free-living larvae that come from these eggs are called veligers. These cannot be seen by the human eye, but do feel like sandpaper on surfaces that they can attach to. At about two to three weeks, the veligers began to settle and attach to any firm surface. They usually grow in clusters containing numerous individuals.

Native distribution and Minnesota distribution

Zebra mussels are originally from Eurasia, the combined landmass of Europe and Asia. During the 1980s zebra mussels were spread to the Great Lakes in contaminated ballast water discharged from cargo ships. They then expanded into the Mississippi River, its tributaries, and then in to inland lakes. The main mode of transportation for zebra mussels is attaching to boat hulls, aquatic plants, nets, fishing equipment, or in water.