**Three-spined stickleback**

*Gasterosteus aculeatus*

Order: *Scorpaeniformes*

Family: *Gasterosteidae*

External appearance

The three-spined stickleback is a small fish that lives in the upper layers of water. Adults are usually less than 10 centimetres in length. A characteristic feature are the 2–5 spines on the first dorsal fin for protection against predators. The body bears no scales and is instead covered with skin. Individual bony plates cover the flanks. During the spawning period, males become brightly coloured with a red belly and blue eyes.

Distribution

Lives in both marine and fresh waters. Found in coastal waters of the Northern Hemisphere.

Diet

Feeds mainly on zooplankton, but can also feed on insects, zoobenthos, plant matter, fish eggs and larvae.

Life history

In Latvia the three-spined stickleback spawns in May and June. The number of eggs laid depends on the size of the female – a 4.5-cm-long female lays about 40 eggs in total during the spawning season, whereas a 7-cm-long female can lay up to 300 eggs.

Fishing

Due to the small size of the fish, the species is not of major importance in commercial fisheries. In the past it was fished as a raw material for fish oil production.

Interesting facts

Males make a tunnel-shaped spawning nest out of algae, which they then guard. Males can build several spawning nests in one spawning season, attracting females to the nest with a characteristic zigzag dance.