

# Zebra Mussel



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## What Do We Know?

The zebra mussel (*Dreissena polymorpha*) is a shellfish native to the Caspian and Black seas in Eastern Europe. Zebra mussels generally are between one and two inches in length and typically exhibit dark and light concentric bands, which look like stripes. Zebra mussels can be confused with another invasive, the quagga mussel (*Dreissena bugensis*). To learn more about quagga mussels visit the USGS's [Nonindigenous Aquatic Species fact sheet](#).

The introduction of zebra mussel into the Great Lakes can be traced back to ballast water released from a vessel that traveled to the Great Lakes from the Black Sea. The quick spread of zebra mussels into waters surrounding the Great Lakes is attributed to the drifting of its larval stage, as well as transport via "hitch hiking" on vessels and trailers. One female zebra mussel can produce up to one million eggs in a breeding season. Under cool conditions zebra mussels can stay alive for several days out of water. Blue catfish have shown the ability to pass live adult mussels through their gut when consumed and digested in cooler water.

In 2002 a population of zebra mussels was discovered in New York state in the upper Susquehanna River, a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay. They spread further into the Chesapeake's watershed, with populations found in the lower Susquehanna River in Maryland in 2008. In 2015 an established population was found at the mouth of the Sassafras River in the upper Chesapeake Bay. Also in 2015, a population was also found in the Elk River. This is of particular concern to Delaware because the Elk River leads to the mouth of the C&D Canal. To date, no zebra mussels have been collected in Delaware waters.

Most of the negative effects caused by zebra mussels are related to its ability to cluster in large colonies. A density of 700,000 individuals per square meter is possible. Large clusters of mussels can suffocate native species and filter out zooplankton which native juvenile fish need to survive. Biofouling of intake pipes and fishing gear cost millions of dollars in repairs.

Members of the public are key to preventing the invasion and spread of aquatic invasive species. Reports of aquatic invasive species can be submitted via email: [DNRECFisheries@delaware.gov](mailto:DNRECFisheries@delaware.gov) or call (302) 739-9914.

[www.delawareinvasives.net](http://www.delawareinvasives.net)  
Facebook: [DEInvasiveSC](#)

National Invasive Species Awareness Week - 2023

## Quick Facts

- Exhibit dark and light concentric bands, which look like stripes.
- Can stay alive for several days out of water
- Blue catfish can pass live adult zebra mussels thus aiding in their spread
- One female zebra mussel can produce up to one million eggs in a breeding season
- A density of 700,000 individuals per square meter are possible

