Common SCULPIN of Cook Inlet

Sculpin are very diverse with 102 different species in Alaska. 17 species have been found in Kachemak Bay. Sculpin are commonly referred to as "bullheads" and many different sculpin are called "Irish lords". These labels are usually incorrectly used. Because they are not commercially important, very little is known about the details of their life history and their role in the food web of the ocean. Sculpin can be difficult to identify because of their diversity and due to differences between males and females.

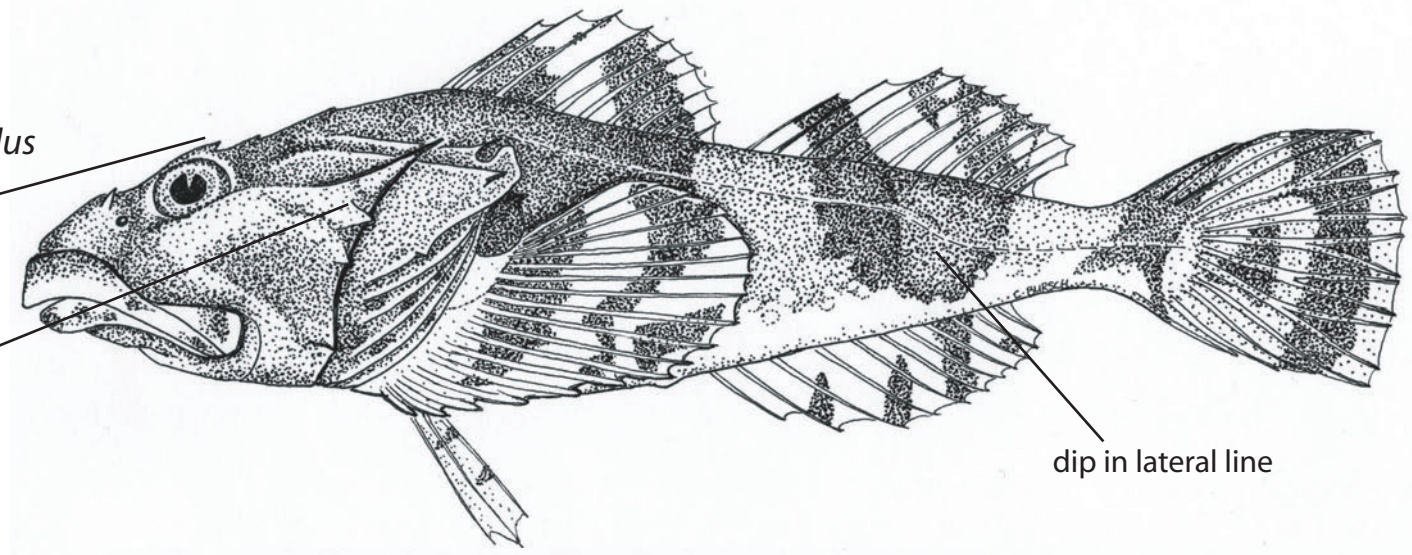
great sculpin

Myoxocephalus polyacanthocephalus

spines present above eye and on upper back of head

very long, straight, smooth uppermost preopercular spine pointing upwards

length up to 30"



plain sculpin

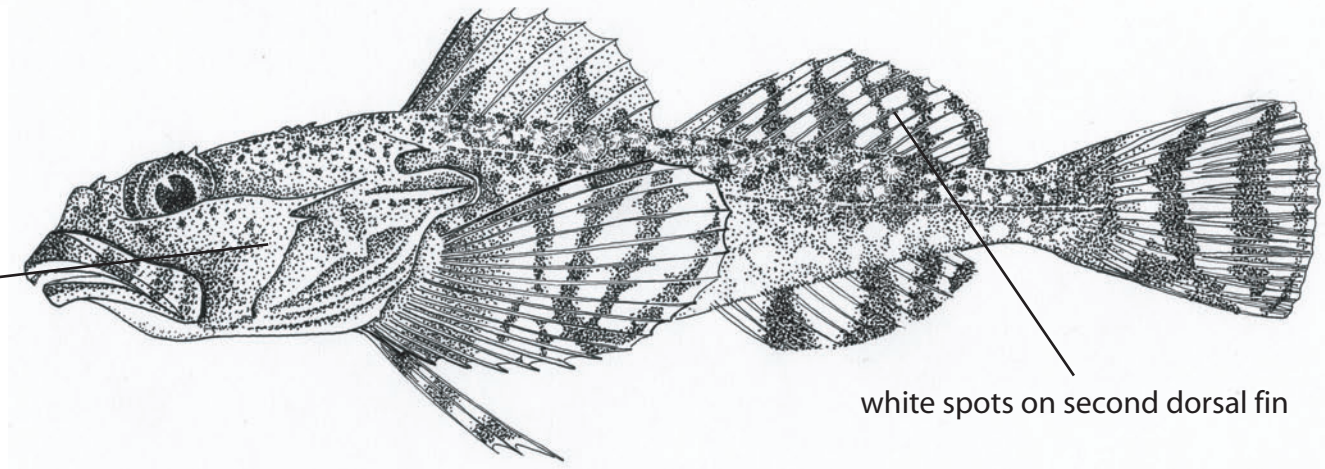
Myoxocephalus jaok

gray with many small black spots
no saddles or bands on body

Usually 3 preopercular spines
upper longest

white underside

length up to 23"



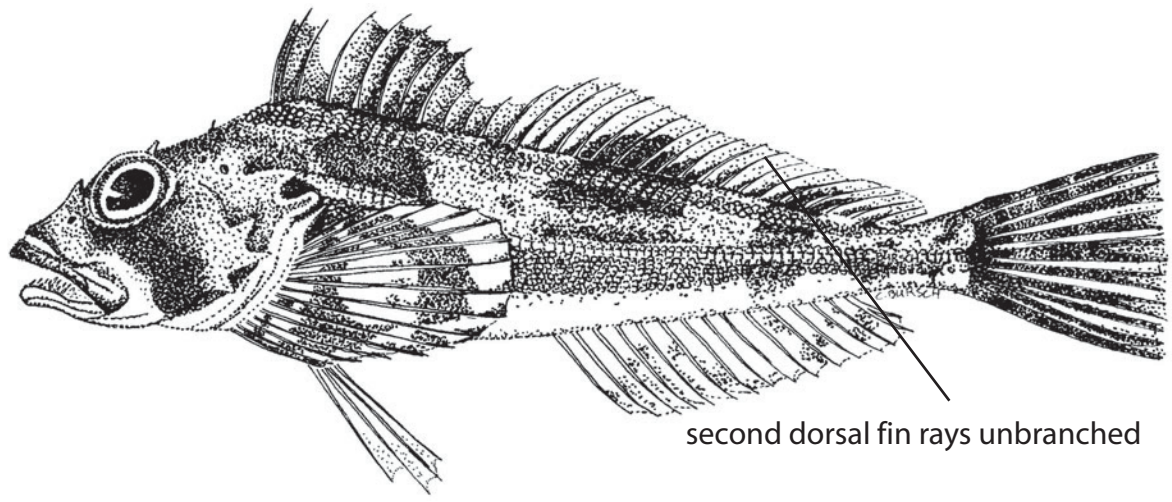
yellow Irishlord

Hemilepidotus jordani

yellowish tan to dark brown

notch in first dorsal fin
ciri on lip narrow
gill membrane attached
gill membranes yellow

length up to 19"



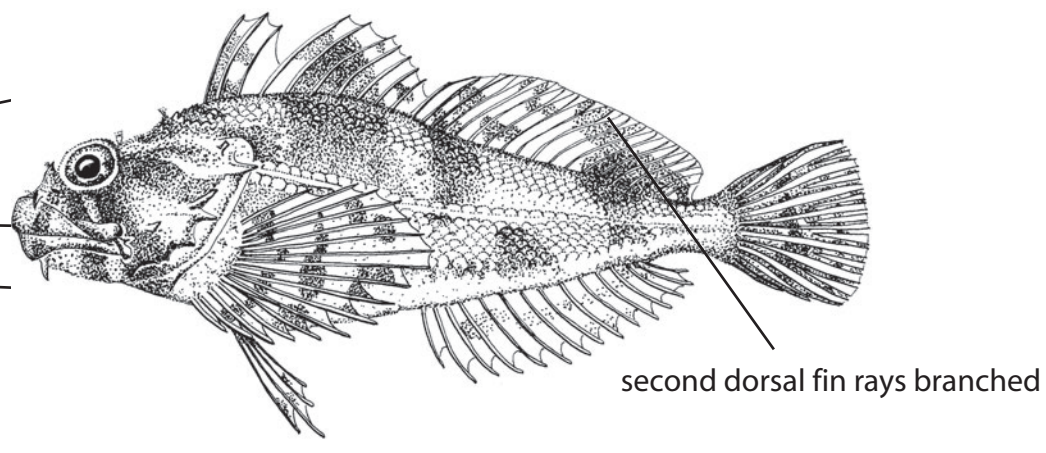
red Irish lord

Hemilepidotus hemilepidotus

red to orange, pink, or brown

notch in first dorsal fin
ciri on lip wide
gill membrane attached

length rarely over 15"



Pacific staghorn sculpin

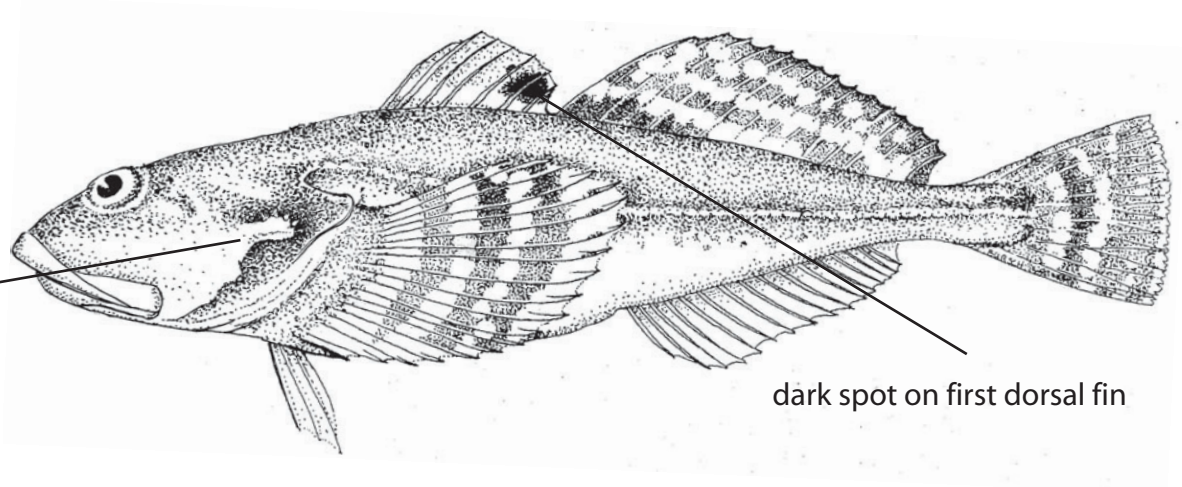
Leptocottus armatus

greenish brown with some yellow

smooth skin

2-6 prongs on preopurcular spine
like a "stag horn"

length up to 18"



Common SCULPIN of Cook Inlet

Sculpin reproduction is unique. Females lay eggs in masses on various substrates. Fertilization by males can occur internally prior to this or externally after the eggs have been deposited. Males of many species guard the eggs from predators. The eggs eventually hatch and tiny planktonic larvae emerge to feed on microscopic life near the surface. Most eventually settle to the bottom of the ocean where they grow and mature into adults. They are distinguished from other groups of fish by not being completely covered with typical scales and by noticeable spines on their heads. They generally inhabit cold, northern coastal waters while some species live in fresh water.

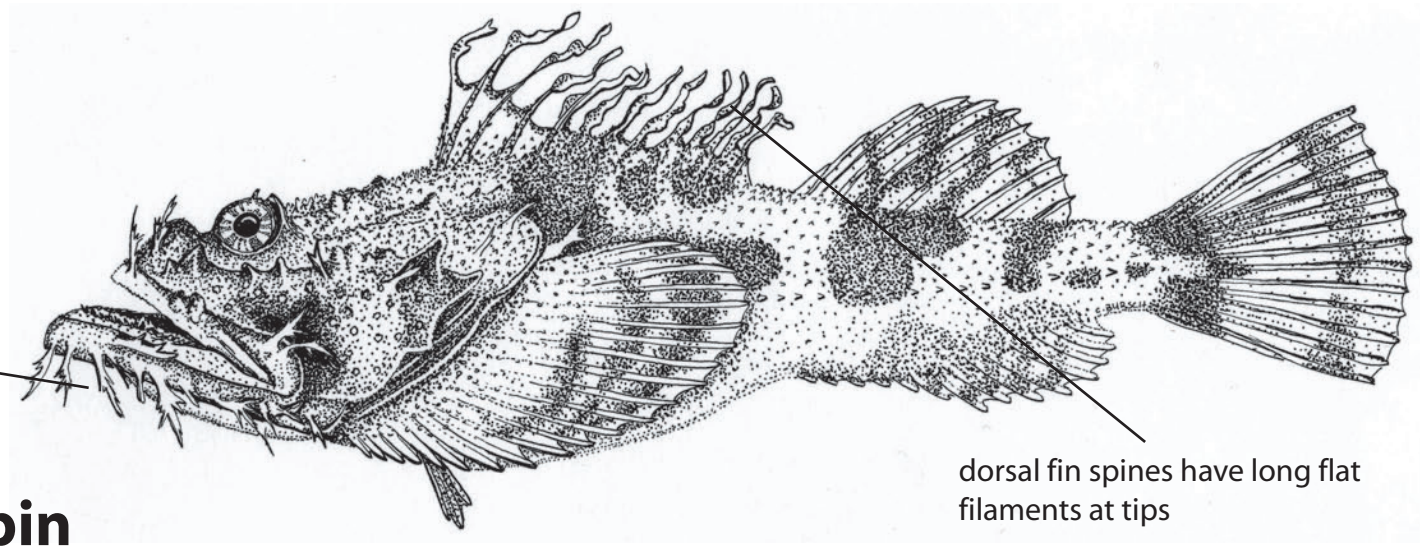
bigmouth sculpin

Hemitripteus bolinius

mouth extremely large
lips extending to the rear of eye

numerous blunt spines on head
prickles cover body
numerous complex ciri

length up to 28″



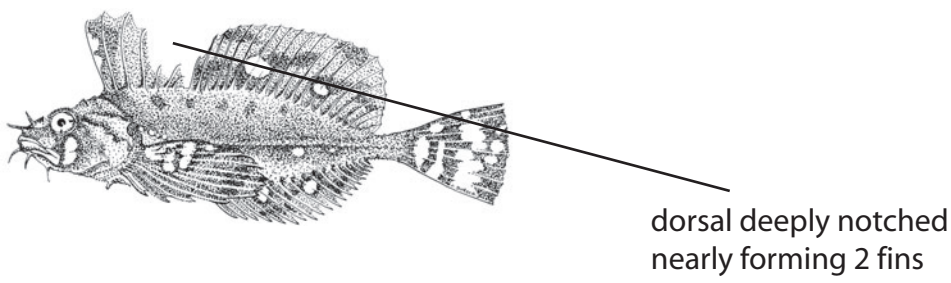
silverspotted sculpin

Blepsias cirrhosus

brown or green on top
red to yellow on underneath

bright silvery white patches
below lateral line and on fins
and cheeks

length to 7″



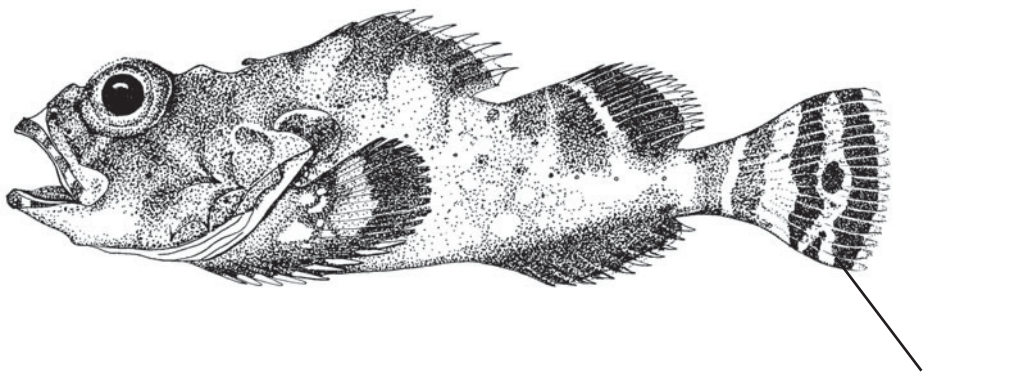
darkfin sculpin

Malacocottus zonurus

light grayish brown
fins with dark and light bands

in the 'fathead' sculpin group
loose skin over gelatinous flesh

length up to 13″



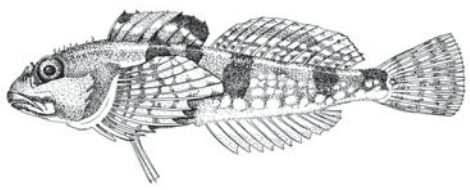
tidepool sculpin

Oligocottus maculosus

greenish gray to reddish
spotted and mottled
dark saddles

no scales or prickles
commonly found
in tidepools

length up to 3.5″



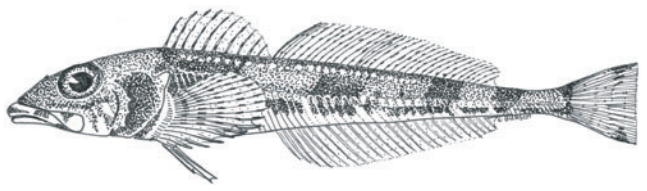
ribbed sculpin

Triglops pingelii

olive
brown on back
whitish underneath

fine diagonal lines
across body
black streaks below
lateral line

length up to 7″

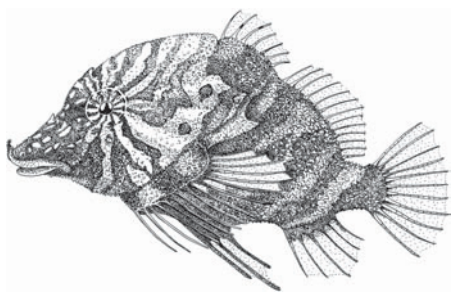


grunt sculpin

Rhamphocottus richardsonii

large head
long snout
high back
tail and fins red
"walks" on pectoral fins
makes a grunting noise

length up to 3.5″



slimy sculpin

Cottus cognatus

lives in fresh water lakes and streams

dark brown, green or gray
often with orange tint

first dorsal fin dark at base

length up to 3″

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