

***Sarotherodon melanotheron* Rüppell 1852**
Blackchin Tilapia



Photo by J. D. Williams, Florida Museum of Natural History

Identification: The species is orange or gold dorsally and light blue ventrally. Patches of black in variable patterns are sometimes present. Males can sometimes exhibit an overall darkened body coloration (as in the photo above). The mouth is small, its posterior edge does not reach the front of the eye. The underside of the head of adult males is black, giving the name “blackchin”. Grows to about 26 cm SL. Dorsal fin XV to XVI (10-12). Lateral line scales 27-30. From Trewavas (1983), Page and Burr (1991).

Native Range: The species is west-African in origin and inhabits brackish estuaries and lagoons from Senegal to Zaire (Trewavas 1983).

Similar Species: No tilapias are native to Florida and no native species are similar to tilapias.

Ecology: The species is primarily estuarine, but also found in freshwater and marine habitats. It can tolerate salinities of up to 100 ppt for brief periods and will spawn in waters to 35 ppt (Jennings and Williams 1992). Low winter temperatures are thought to be the most important factor limiting the geographic range expansion of the Blackchin Tilapia as it cannot tolerate temperatures below about 10 °C (Shafland and Pestrak 1982; Jennings 1991; Jennings and Williams 1992). Like other tilapias, a nest is built by excavating a shallow pit. However, unlike most tilapias where the nest is built solely by the male, both male and female Blackchin Tilapia participate in nest-building and guarding (Trewavas 1983). Generally males brood young in their mouths, but sometimes females will as well (Trewavas 1983). Trewavas (1983) reported the smallest mature female (in the native range) as 6.9 cm SL and the smallest mature male as

7.8 cm SL. Adults feed on detritus, while juveniles are more carnivorous (Trewavas 1983).

Nonindigenous Occurrences: In Florida, the species was first collected near Tampa in 1959 (Springer and Finucane 1963). It is established in fresh and brackish waters in and around Tampa Bay, as well as the Banana and Indian River lagoon system on the Atlantic coast.

In Hawai'i, the species is abundant in brackish-water lagoons including Pearl Harbor and several coastal marine environments (Randall 1987).

