



Spring Pygmy Sunfish (*Elassoma alabamae*)

The spring pygmy sunfish is a fish that is endemic to the Highland Rim region of Alabama.* It only lives in a few weedy springs in the Tennessee River Valley.

As the name implies, a spring pygmy sunfish is tiny, usually less than one inch long. Males are dark brown with five to seven narrow, silver, gold or iridescent blue vertical bars along their sides. The bottom of the fish is pale amber to white. The dorsal fin and anal fin have dark edges during breeding season.* Males and females look different with males being darker in color. Female are brown on their backs, mottled brown and white along the sides. Other identifying characteristics include three dorsal spines and a golden crescent beneath and behind the eye. A spring pygmy sunfish lives a little longer than a year. It hides in vegetation.

If people do not take care of the environment, it could cause unexpected changes that affect the quality of life for both people and wildlife. For example, when Pickwick Landing Dam was built during the Great Depression, the resulting Pickwick Lake covered the only known habitat of spring pygmy sunfish. As a result, the spring pygmy sunfish was thought to have become extinct. A population of spring pygmy sunfish was later discovered in Limestone County.

***Vocabulary**

Anal fin – a single fin on the bottom of a fish behind the anus.

Dorsal fin – the fin or fins on top of a fish.

Endemic – only found in a certain area.

Highland Rim – a geological region that includes part of north Alabama; the valleys include limestone and the ridges are often sandstone; unique fishes live in the springs and caves of this region.

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The drawing is original artwork by Julie Harris Mitchell. The photograph and some of the information are from *Fishes of Alabama and the Mobile Basin*.