

GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

Cownose ray *Rhinoptera bonasus*

Range/Habitat

- The cownose ray occurs in the eastern Atlantic off the coast of Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea; in the western Atlantic from southern New England to the Gulf of Mexico, migrating to Trinidad, Venezuela and Brazil.
- It is found in tropical climates to depths of 72 feet (22 m).

Physical Characteristics

- This species has a unique forehead that resembles a cow's nose; an indented groove around the front of its head; and distinctly bi-lobed snout (flaps).
- Its coloration is usually brown to olive on the back (dorsal surface), with no spots or marks. The lower body (ventral surface) is a white or yellowish-white.
- The wings (pectoral fins) are long and pointed.
- It has a long whip-like tail with one or two barbs at the base.
- The cownose ray can grow to about 4 feet (122 cm) wide.

Diet/Feeding

- The cownose ray feeds on crabs, bi-valves, lobsters and bony fish.
- The mouth is located on the underside of the body and has strong plate-like teeth for crushing mollusk shells.
- One way the cownose ray will feed is by using its pectoral fins to stir up the bottom sediments to reveal its prey. It may also use its snout to forage and root on shallow saltwater flats in much the same way in which a wild pig would on land.

Conservation Status

- The cownose ray is not on the IUCN Red List.

Additional Information

- The cownose ray is an open ocean species that is sometimes found near the coast.
- This ray will form segregated schools and is often seen in aggregations numbering in the thousands!
- It is preyed upon by many sharks. Barbs from the cownose ray have been found embedded in the heads, jaws and inside the mouths of many shark species - especially hammerheads.
- The species is ovoviviparous: young hatch from eggs inside the female and are released from her body live. Its spawning period is June through October.
- This ray is often mistaken for a shark by swimmers because when it 'flies' near the surface its wingtips frequently break the surface and look just like a shark's dorsal fin.
- It has occasionally been seen jumping and landing with a loud smack, probably as a territorial display.
- The cownose ray is considered to be oceanadromous, meaning that it undertakes long migrations to different parts of the ocean. It moves in large groups, usually in a seasonal pattern. In the Atlantic, the species moves northward in the late spring and

southward in the late fall. In the Gulf of Mexico it migrates in a clockwise manner according to season.

- The cownose ray population is believed to be increasing in numbers. Schools of up to 10,000 rays leave west coast of Florida for Yucatan, Mexico in the fall.
- The cownose ray's high predation of oyster beds could further complicate the problem of declining oyster populations. As a solution, they were considered for commercial fisheries, but after cost analysis studies, it was decided not to pursue this route due to the high expense of harvesting the rays.

Sources

www.fishbase.org

<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/Gallery/Descript/CownoseRay/CownoseRay.html>

The Shark Almanac. Allen, Thomas B., pg. 144

Sharks and Rays. Hennemann, Ralf M., pg. 278