

# EXOTIC SUCKERMOUTH CATFISHES (FAMILY LORICARIIDAE) IN TEXAS WATERS

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Plecostomus (*Hypostomus* sp.), Del Rio, Texas.



Sailfin catfish (*Pterygoplichthys*), San Antonio, Texas.

## Introduction:

Species of suckermouth catfishes are native to waters from the La Plata Basin of Argentina north into southern Central America. The family includes some 80 genera and over 600 species, many of which are poorly known and need more intense study. Distinctions between some genera and species are so poorly defined that it is often impossible to attach a species name to individual specimens.

Some species reach maximum lengths in excess of 3 feet, many grow to about half that size, and some are far smaller. Suckermouth catfishes, as their name suggests, have sucker-like mouths. Many feed by scraping algae and other material off rocks and other structures. Some are more carnivorous than others. In addition to dorsal and pectoral fin spines, these catfishes are also heavily armored with scales modified into bony plates that cover the body. This group is also known as armored catfishes. In their home waters, some are known as *armadillo del rio* or armadillo of the river. Although there are a few brightly colored species, most have color patterns of tan, brown, and black. Some species can become somewhat territorial and they may be intolerant of other fishes, especially other suckermouth catfishes. Some have been reported to dig pits into mud and clay banks, particularly when other cover is lacking.

Suckermouth catfishes have long been popular in the aquarium trade. Aquarist interest in these fishes is often related to their ability to control algal growth. Members of the genus *Hypostomus* have long been sold under the name plecostomus (older literature sometimes incorrectly used this term as a genus). Over 100 species have been described in this genus, but classification is so confused that it is usually impossible to confidently assign a particular species name. Species in a

## References:

- Fuller, P.L., L.G. Nico, and J.D. Williams. 1999. Nonindigenous fishes introduced into the inland waters of the United States. American Fisheries Society Special Publication 27.
- Howells, R.G. 2001. Introduced non-native fishes and shellfishes in Texas waters: an updated list and discussion. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Management Data Series 188, Austin.

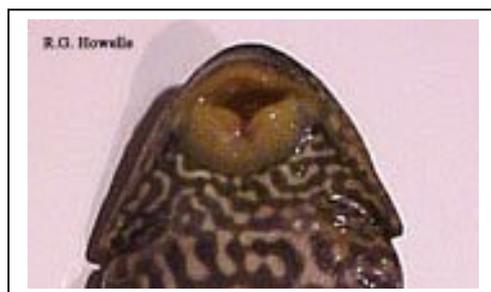
**Sailfin catfish lips designed to scrape algae from rocks (right).**

second genus that has become abundant in American pet stores in recent years are the sailfin suckermouth catfishes in the genus *Pterygoplichthys*. Not only are distinctions between species unclear with this genus, but hybridization among pet-trade stocks appears to be further confounding species-level identifications. Here, again, it may not be possible to confidently assign species names.

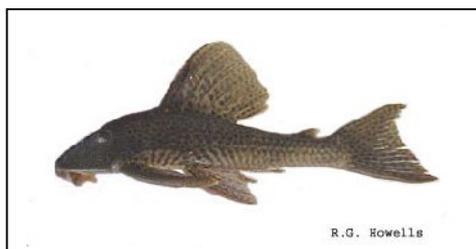
## Introductions in Texas:

Unfortunately, like many fishes in the aquarium trade, several suckermouth catfish introductions have occurred around the U.S. In Texas, *Hypostomus* specimens were first found in the headwaters of the San Antonio River in 1962. Other *Hypostomus* were found in the Comal and San Marcos Rivers, a pond near Corpus Christi, and more recently, in San Felipe Creek in Del Rio off the Rio Grande. *Pterygoplichthys* has been taken in Galveston Bay drainages in southeastern Texas, and in the San Antonio River and its associated upstream reservoirs.

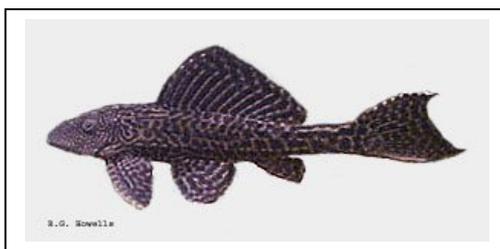
Since being discovered in San Felipe Creek, Val Verde County, the *Hypostomus* population has increased dramatically. Concurrently, other algal-feeding species have also declined. The federally-threatened Devils River minnow (*Dionda diaboli*), that was once abundant in this creek, appears to have experienced a major decrease in abundance. One of the native snails there, *Elimia comalensis*, also seems to have been reduced or eliminated in some areas. In this case, perhaps a single release of aquarium fish now threatens the continued survival of native animals and the stability of a very unique aquatic ecosystem. In Texas, it is illegal to release any fish, shellfish, or aquatic plant into Texas waters without a permit from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.



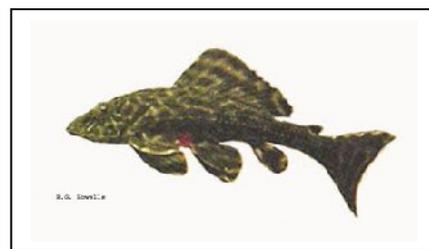
## PLECOS (*Hypostomus* & *Pterygoplichthys*) Identification Notes



*Hypostomus* sp. – San Felipe Creek, Del Rio, Texas; short dorsal fin with 1 spine and 7 rays.



*Pterygoplichthys* sp. – Calaveras Reservoir, San Antonio, Texas; long dorsal fin with 1 spine and 10-13 rays



*Pterygoplichthys* sp. – pet store specimen with long dorsal fin.

Common name	<i>Pterygoplichthys</i> species	Dorsal pattern	Abdominal pattern	Comments
snow pleco	<i>anisitsi</i>	light spots that remain spots posteriorly	light vermiculations wider than dark	Burgess (1989) shows an “ <i>anisitsi</i> ” with chevrons
vermiculated sailfin catfish	<i>disjunctivus</i>	light spots become chevrons posteriorly	dark and light vermiculations of equal width	
Orinoco sailfin catfish	<i>pardalis</i>	black spots that become chevrons posteriorly	large dark spots on light	Some consider <i>pardalis</i> = <i>multiradiatus</i>
Amazon sailfin catfish	<i>multiradiatus</i>	small dark spots on sides	small dark spots on light	
leopard pleco	<i>gibbiceps</i>	definite reticulate pattern (like chain pickerel)	brown spots on white	
Corroncho, silver pleco	<i>punctatus</i>	moderately small dark spots on light background	-	juveniles with unique bold pattern



*Pterygoplichthys* sp. - Calaveras Reservoir  
Dark & light vermiculations



*Pterygoplichthys* sp. - Pet store specimen  
Darks spots on light



*Pterygoplichthys* sp. – Galveston Bay drainage  
Light spots on dark

*Hypostomus* sp. – San Felipe Creek



Note: J.W. Armbruster, University of Alabama authority on exotic catfishes, observed that while the Calaveras specimen above most closely resembled *P. disjunctivus*, it also had traits of other species and could be a hybrid like many others being found in the pet trade (pers. comm.).

*Hypostomus* – pronounced “high-poss-tow-muss”  
*Pterygoplichthys* – pronounced “ter-go-plik-thees”