

FAO SPECIES IDENTIFICATION SHEETS

FISHING AREA 51
(W. Indian Ocean)

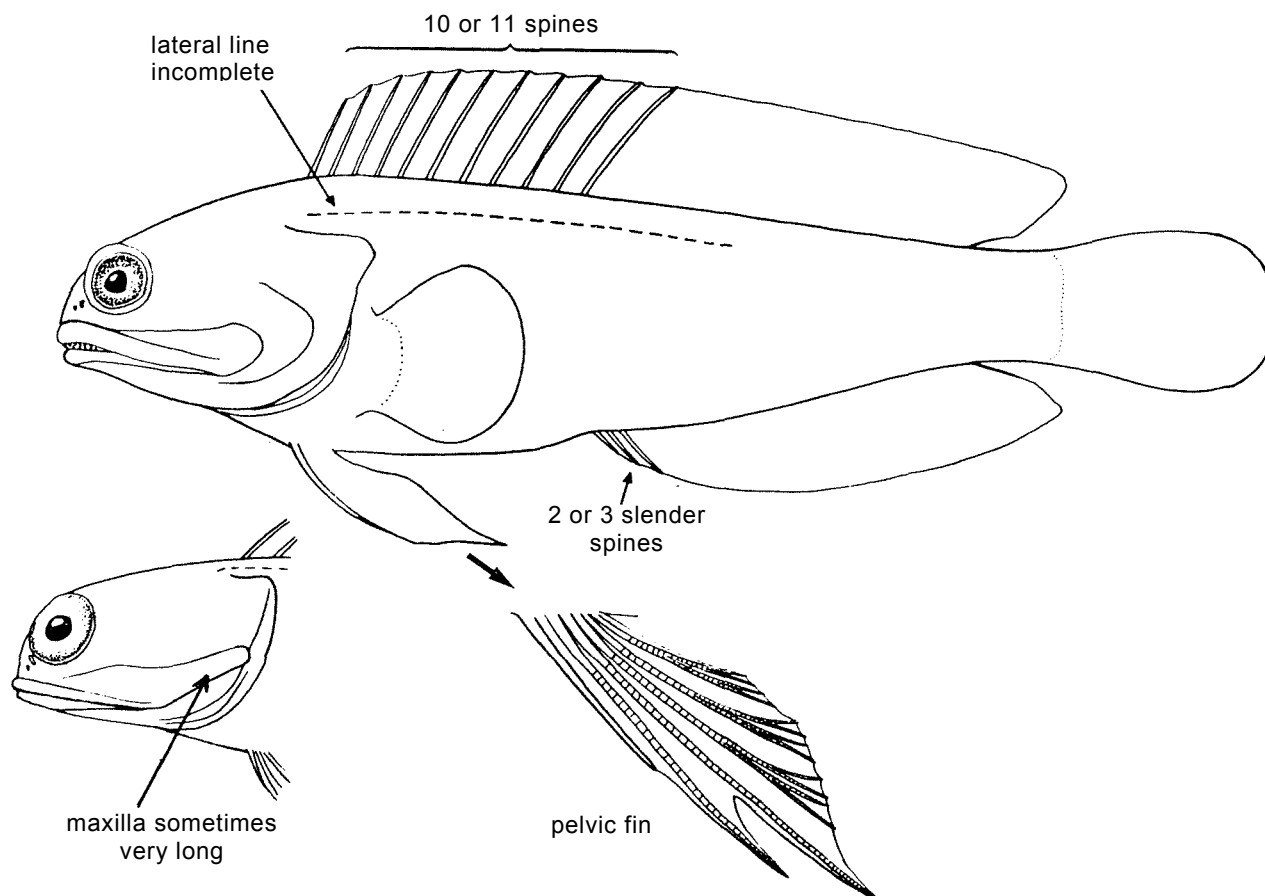
OPISTOGATHIDAE

Jawfishes

Small, moderately elongate fishes with a tapering narrow body. Head bulbous, mouth large; in some species the maxilla extends to or well beyond posterior margin of gill flap; eyes relatively large and high on head; moderate canine-like teeth in a single row along sides of jaws; several rows of smaller teeth may also be present anteriorly. Dorsal fin shallowly notched (if at all) between spinous and soft portions, with 10 or 11 usually flexible spines and 11 to 15 segmented soft rays; anal fin with 2 or 3 slender spines and 10 to 16 segmented rays; pelvic fins positioned anterior to pectoral fins, with 1 spine and 5 segmented rays, the outer 2 segmented rays unbranched and stout, the inner rays branched and weaker; caudal fin rounded, the middle 12 to 14 rays branched in most species. Lateral line high on body, ending below middle of dorsal fin; lateral-line tubes or canals embedded in skin, rather than occurring on scales. Scales cycloid (smooth), usually small and absent from cheeks.

Colour: most species are mottled with various shades of brown and often have a black spot on the spinous dorsal fin.

Generally small fishes (under 11 cm total length), but some attain about 35 cm. Most jawfishes occur in relatively shallow depths (2 to 30 m) on sandy substrates adjacent to coral reefs, but some species have been trawled in, depths exceeding 200 m. Jawfishes live in burrows, which they construct themselves; some species are solitary but most live in colonies; apparently all brood the eggs orally. They are not of commercial importance, but occasionally caught by hook and line fishermen and in trawls, and reported to be good to eat.

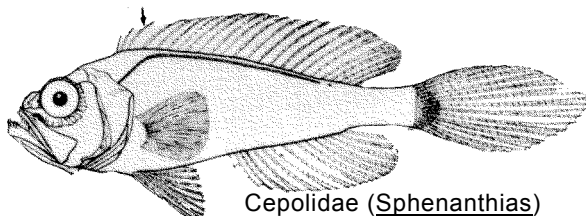


SIMILAR FAMILIES OCCURRING IN THE AREA:

The arrangement of the pelvic fin rays, consisting of 1 spine and 5 segmented rays (the outer 2 unbranched and stout, inner 3 branched and weak), will distinguish the jawfishes from all other families. Additional distinguishing characters of the superficially similar Cepolidae are the following:

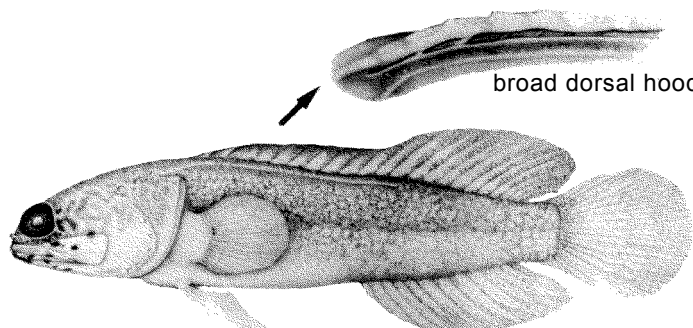
Cepolidae (including Owstoniidae): dorsal fin spines 0 to 4 (10 or 11 in Opistognathidae) and caudal fin moderately to strongly lanceolate (rounded in Opistognathidae).

0 to 4 spines



KEY TO GENERA OCCURRING IN THE AREA:

1a. First 7 or 8 dorsal fin spines transversely forked (posteriorly spines successively less deeply and more narrowly forked); skin covering spinous dorsal fin forming a broad dorsal hood to accommodate transversely forked spines (Fig.1)



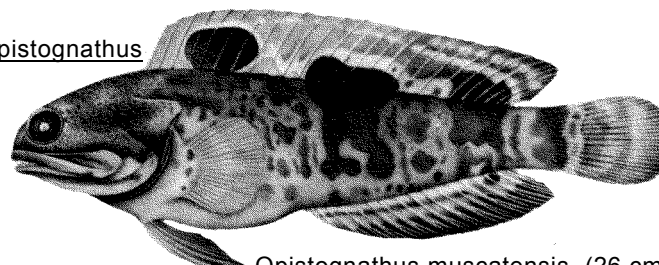
Stalix

Stalix moenensis (3.9 cm SL)

Fig.1

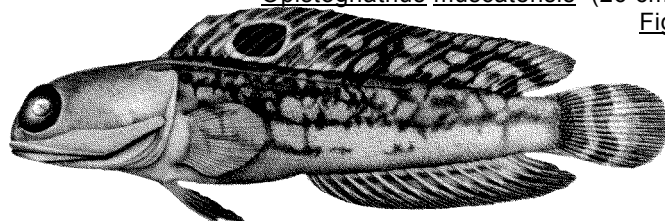
1b. Anterior dorsal fin spines not transversely forked; skin covering spinous dorsal fin not forming a broad dorsal hood (Figs 2,3).....

Opistognathus



Opistognathus muscatensis (26 cm SL)

Fig.2



Opistognathus nigromarginatus (12 cm SL)

Fig.3

LIST OF SPECIES OCCURRING IN THE AREA:

- Opistognathus muscatensis Boulenger, 1887
- **Opistognathus nigromarginatus Rüppell, 1830

- Stalix histrio Jordan & Snyder, 1902
- Stalix moenensis (Popty, 1922)

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Illustrations provided by author

*Seven undescribed species of Opistognathus are under study by the author

**Opistognathus macrostomus Smith is a synonym of O. nigromarginatus