

Name _____

Date _____

Reproductive Strategies

Animal Profile:

DUCK LEECH (*Theromyzon tessulatum*)

Leeches are the stuff of horror movies and doomed journeys into infested waters, and this leech is no exception to the rule. It has the disgusting habit of attaching itself to nostrils, eyes, throats and even brains. Thankfully for humans, it only does this in ducks and other waterfowl, earning it the common name “duck leech.”



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The duck leech does a fair job getting around and probably gets spread as ducks move from pond to pond. This leech, like all leeches, is a hermaphrodite, meaning that a leech has both male and female reproductive parts. But that doesn't mean it can move into a pond all alone, reproduce with itself, and start a new leech population. It still takes two to tango, as they say, and a leech requires sperm from another leech to fertilize its eggs.

When the duck leech reproduces, two leeches rub together and give each other their sperm. Each leech will use the other's sperm to fertilize its eggs before placing them in goeey cocoons for protection. The leech attaches the cocoons, which hold as many as 400 eggs, to a rock or other sheltered place. The parent then waves its body over the eggs, passing fresh oxygen-rich air over them with the movement of its body. After 21 days, all 400 of the developing young leeches attach to their parent's belly. They remain attached there until the parent finds a suitable bird for a meal. When that happens, the young bloodsuckers leave their parent behind and attach to the host for their first blood meal. The parent dies shortly thereafter, but not before giving hundreds of new eyeball-suckers a shot at the game of life.



Young attached to the underside of a parent leech.

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