

WALK ON THE WILDSIDE

The Minnesota Conservation Federation

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Minnesota's waters home to some odd fish

Most Minnesota anglers can easily identify the state's most popular game fish, including walleyes, largemouth and smallmouth bass, northern pike, crappies and sunfish, but occasionally anglers hook into something that is not so recognizable. Often it belongs to a loosely defined group called "rough fish".

Rough fish are often strange looking or odd shaped fish. Many are bottom feeders. Their colors are muted and dull. Often they have unflattering physical characteristics like a suction cup-like mouth or bulging eyes. Anglers are quick to describe them as disgusting or ugly, and names like hogsucker and sheepshead, don't exactly help their image.

Most of Minnesota's rough fish are native species, which have their own roles in the state's aquatic ecosystems. Others, like the carp, are non-natives, which have caused extensive environmental problems.

Carp

A fish despised by many an-



glers and fisheries managers, the carp was introduced to Minnesota's lakes and rivers in the late 1800s by misguided members of the State Fish Commission. They thought the carp from Asia would be a great addition to the state's fisheries and would be popular with anglers. Unfortunately, carp populations exploded and anglers quickly grew to hate them.

Today, carp are found over a vast area of the state and most anglers still despise them. Carp grow fast and it is not too difficult to find fish in the 10 to 20-pound range. The state record weighed more than 55 pounds. Among the best times to see them is in the spring, when they congregate in shallow water to spawn.

Since its introduction, the carp has destroyed countless spawning

areas for native fish and thousands of acres of wetland waterfowl habitat. State fisheries managers try to control carp numbers in waters where they are causing excessive damage, but it will be impossible to completely eliminate them from the state.

Sucker

Found throughout most of Minnesota, the white sucker is a native bottom-feeding fish common to lakes and rivers from Grand Marais to Fairmont. During their spring spawning run, suckers often choke small streams as hundreds of fish try to reach the spawning grounds at the same time. If you are in the right stream at the right time, you may witness this amazing event.

White suckers do not grow particularly large. The state record weighed 9-1.

The white sucker is not only sucker species in the state. Anglers may also catch the larger blue sucker or smaller longnose sucker, which are less common.

The state chemically treats some lakes to kill suckers when their populations become too high.

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Bluebird comeback is an amazing story

There are few species of songbirds in North America that have captured the attention and affection of birdwatchers like the bluebird.

Part of the public's attraction to the bluebird is likely related to its beauty. The bird is blue with a rusty orange breast. It's easy to spot and seeing one is a memorable experience.

People have also grown fond of the bluebirds, because of its comeback story. Bluebird populations were once very high throughout much of the United States, including Minnesota. However, as increasing numbers of non-native birds like English sparrows and starlings were introduced to the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s, they began to compete with bluebirds for habitat and food. The non-native birds proved more aggressive and took over bluebird habitat and even killed bluebirds.

Bluebird populations also suffered due to a loss of habitat. Cities and suburbs expanded and eliminated habitat. As people settled new areas, they also cut down dead trees, a favorite nesting area for bluebirds.

Another contributing factor to the drop in bluebird populations was heavy use of pesticides in agricultural areas, where the birds are typically found. Pesticides killed bluebirds, as well as the insects the bluebirds feed on.

In the late 20th century, bird enthusiasts and environmentalists began a grassroots effort to save



the blue bird. People all across the bluebird's range began building bluebird houses to replace the bird's lost habitat of dead trees. People placed the houses in parks, along roadsides, in their backyards and in farm fields. Those who knew how to build the boxes and where to place them taught others, and bluebird houses quickly became a common sight throughout much of the country.

Twenty years ago it was rare to spot a bluebird. Today, thanks to the efforts of countless volunteers, bluebirds can commonly be seen in many of Minnesota's rural areas.

Nesting

Bluebirds prefer to build their nest in the hollows of trees. It is not uncommon for them to build nests in old woodpecker holes.

Bluebird nesting boxes successfully attract bluebirds, because they imitate the hollow of a tree.

A mother bluebird can have as many as four broods of young between the spring and late summer.

The male bluebird finds a nest-

ing site and tries to attract a female to it with a ritual demonstration. He flaps his wings and calls, while perched the nesting site. If a female accepts his invitation, she builds the nest.

The female lays between three to six eggs per brood. It takes the eggs about two weeks to hatch. The baby bluebirds stay in the nest for about three weeks, before they are ready to leave.

Bluebird facts

► Bluebirds are members of the thrush family. There are actually three varieties of bluebirds found in North America: the eastern bluebird, mountain bluebird and western blue bird. The eastern bluebird is found in Minnesota.

► Bluebirds eat mainly insects, fruits and berries. They help farmers, because they eat high quantities of destructive insects, including grasshoppers and cutworms. Between 60-80 percent of a bluebirds diet is made up of insects.

► Bluebirds have strong eyesight. They can spot small objects of food from 100 feet away.

► Bluebirds prefer a habitat of open grassy areas with scattered trees for perching and nesting.

► In addition to competition from non-native birds like English sparrows and starlings, the blue bird also faces predation from raccoons, snakes and cats.

► During the late summer and fall, blue birds gather together in groups of 10-50 birds that remain together through much of the winter.

Skunk cabbage is more than a smelly plant

One of the earliest plants to appear during the spring has one of the worst names of any of Minnesota's native plants.

The skunk cabbage often appears soon after the snow disappears, but it is not uncommon for it to appear when snow and ice are still on the ground.

As its name suggests, the plant does have an unmistakable, smelly scent, but it is not an ugly plant. The skunk cabbage has a large cup-shaped leaf called a spathe, in which the flower grows. The flower is not very colorful, but the unique shape draws many people to the skunk cabbage.



The smell emitted by the skunk cabbage is often compared to that of rotting meat. The smell gets stronger when the leaves of the plant are bruised or crushed. The scent helps attract flies and other insects, which land on and pollinate the plant, taking the pollen to other skunk cabbages. Among the

insects that pollinate the skunk cabbage are bees, beetles, butterflies and flies.

In the fall, when the leaves die and rot, many insects feed on them, including millipedes and slugs. Skunk cabbage leaves are poisonous to mammals, including humans, so if you see a skunk cabbage, it is best not to touch it.

Skunk cabbage grows in wooded wet areas, often along the edges of streams, or marshes. The plant can live a very long time. Some indications suggest it can live up to 1,000 years.

Odd Fish

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This is done mainly in designated trout lakes.

Buffalo

Like the mammal they were named after, buffalo fish are big. Commonly found in rivers, Minnesota's three species, the bigmouth buffalo, black buffalo and smallmouth buffalo can easily exceed 10 pounds. The state record bigmouth buffalo weighed in at more than 40 pounds.

Buffalos are members of the sucker family, but do not have the suction-cup mouth. They look more like a carp than a sucker. They feed mainly on plant material and are found in schools.

Freshwater drum

Anyone who has fished exten-

sively in the Minnesota, Mississippi or St. Croix rivers has likely caught a freshwater drum, which is also known as the sheepshead. The drum has a humped back and large eyes. Although it usually weighs a pound or less some grow to five pounds or more. The state record weighed more than 35 pounds.

Like many rough fish, drum are bottom feeders. They eat a variety of foods, including insects, crayfish and snails.

Gar

Anyone who has visited the Department of Natural Resources' building at the State Fair has likely seen a gar. It is an ancient fish that has its roots in the era of the dinosaurs. It is a long, thin fish with a long, pointy mouth.

Gar inhabit many waters in the southern and western portions of

the state, but are most often found in shallow lakes and rivers. They eat minnows and small fish.

Minnesota is home to the longnose and shortnose gar. The state record longnose gar weighed nearly 17 pounds. The shortnose gar is considerably smaller. The state record weighed 4-9.6.

Other species

Of course Minnesota is home to many other rough fish species, including five species of redhorse. Other species include the bowfin (dog fish), mooneye, quillback, carpsucker, American eel, goldeye and burbot.

When you throw your fishing line into one of Minnesota's lakes or rivers, you never know what you may reel in.

Flying dragons fill the skies during the summer

Throughout the summer months, dragonflies and damselflies are common sights in Minnesota. Cruising and darting through the air, these colorful flying insects can be found throughout the state.

To many, dragonflies and damselflies may not seem important, but they do play an important role in the ecosystem by helping to control the populations of insects such as the mosquito.

Dragonflies and damselflies belong to an order of insects called Odonata. The name means “toothed ones”, referring to the teeth on the lower lip of dragonflies and damselflies. The teeth are used to capture and hold prey.

Dragonflies and damselflies are well-adapted hunters. They can fly fast and move with great agility to capture other flying insects. Dragonflies have about 30,000 lenses in their eyes and can see 360 degrees around them. They can see the movement of an insect up to 40 yards away.

Even in their larval stages, before they can fly, dragonflies are effective hunters. Some chase down other species, while others



use camouflage to capture their prey. They hide in the sand or vegetation, waiting for prey to come their way.

Differences

At first glance, dragonflies and damselflies appear very similar, and they are, however, there are some notable differences.

► At rest, dragonflies will keep their wings extended, while the damselfly folds its wings behind.

► The dragonfly will eat its food while flying, but the damselfly always perches to eat its food.

► All of the damselfly's wings are the same size. The dragonfly's

back wings are shorter and broader than its front wings.

► The damselfly's eyes are separate, while the dragonfly's eyes often touch.

► Damselflies are almost always seen near water, while dragonflies can be found nearly anywhere.

Although dragonflies are hunters, they are also hunted. Birds such as the purple martin will catch and eat dragonflies.

Minnesota is home to a many dragonfly species, which are rare or listed as species of special concern. There are more than a dozen such species, including the St. Croix snaketail, sand snaketail, extra-striped snaketail, smoky shadowdragon, zebra clubtail, Arrowhead spiketail, skillet clubtail, pygmy snaketail, Kennedy's emerald and boreal whiteface. Many are found only in small areas of the state.

Did you know?

Dragonflies date back to the time of the dinosaurs. At that time, dragonflies were very large. Some had a wingspan of more than two feet.

Learn more about the Minnesota Conservation Federation...

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