

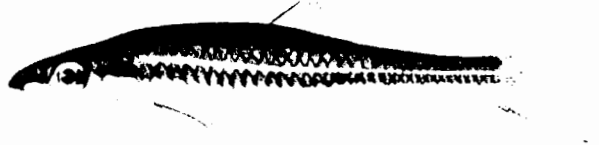
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Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is presently a staff member of the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

WHAT IS A MINNOW?



Contrary to popular belief, a minnow is not merely any small fish. The word "minnow" refers to a specific family of fishes of which most species are relatively small at maturity. To complicate matters further, a mudminnow or topminnow are no more members of the minnow family than are the sharks.

Cyprinidae is the technical name for the large family of closely related fishes called minnows. There are over 2,000 species of minnows in the world, over 300 in the United States, and approximately 43 species in Wisconsin. The minnows account for 1/3 of the species of fish present in the state — more individuals and species than any other family of fish in Wisconsin.

What makes a minnow a minnow? For the convenience of man, all living organisms are placed into groups for ease of identification and characterization. All native Wisconsin minnows have less than 10 dorsal fin rays and no spines in their fins. Their jaws lack teeth; however, they do possess one or two rows of "throat" teeth on their gill arches. These throat teeth are used to strain and crush food. These are the few characteristics to look for in determining if a fish is a member of the minnow family.

The various species of minnows are often difficult to identify even by an expert. Yet almost everyone who has heard of fish has heard of minnows. There are probably hundreds of millions of minnows in this state. They inhabit almost every type of habitat in the aquatic ecosystem. Since individuals are usually quite small their large numbers can find sufficient food and cover in a small area.

In the spring the males often develop breeding characteristics such as tubercles on the head, fins and sides of the body and/or a bright red, orange, or yellow coloration. For example, the male fathead minnow develops nuptial tubercles on its head and dorsal surface and turns a deep purple to almost black color. The male finescale dace takes on a bright red to pink hue while the redbreast dace

develops a crimson band on its side. Minnows also exhibit varying degrees of parental behavior. The creek chub is a conscientious parent. He builds a nest in the gravel where his mate deposits the eggs after which he covers the nest and guards it against predators. Fathead minnows fasten their eggs alongside or beneath underwater objects and the male guards the eggs until the hatch. Other species of this same family do nothing at all to protect the eggs or young.

Minnows range in size from about 2 to 18 inches in the native species. The goldfish and carp, both technically minnows, were introduced from Europe. The carp may reach a weight of over 50 pounds. Most minnows are carnivorous, feeding on small insects and larva as well as small crustaceans like the water fleas and fairy shrimp. Minnows constitute an important link in the aquatic food chain, controlling populations of insects and serving as a food base for many larger fish that are harvested by man. They are also eaten by turtles, herons, kingfishers, mink and other semi-aquatic animals.

The next time you go to the bait shop for a dozen minnows, don't take these small fish lightly because the game fish you are after couldn't exist without them.

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