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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 currently a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.



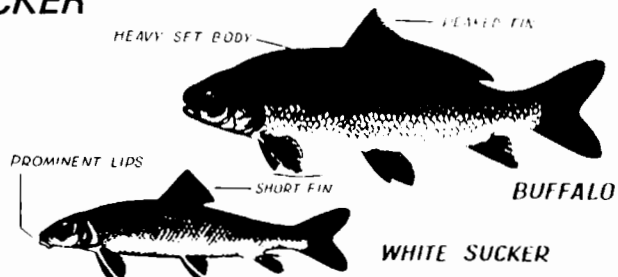
THE SUCKER

Forage species, such as the white sucker, are as important to stable populations of our gamefishes as the water they swim in. The sucker is as important to the musky as grass is to the rabbit, or the rabbit to the wolf. The many forage species occupy an essential niche in the aquatic world. Let's use the white sucker as an example. The preferred food of the musky is the sucker. How many pounds of sucker flesh does it take to produce a pound of musky flesh? Twenty-five would probably be a fair estimate since a large predator fish like the musky uses up much energy in its daily activities.

Common names for the white sucker are: bay fish, black mullet, grey sucker, eastern sucker, and black sucker. This species turns a dark grey to rosy-black during the breeding season. This color change is probably the cause of such confusion and the many common names. This color change occurs on many fish as well as other animals. The most colorful attire is almost always related to breeding. The sucker can change from the drab grayish white to rosy-black in just a few minutes and back to its original color just as quickly.

The white sucker migrates up rivers and streams in April and early May to spawn when the water reaches about 45° F. The exact time of spawning depends upon temperature and therefore varies from year to year. No nests are constructed. The eggs are sticky and adhere to whatever they come into contact with after released from the female's body. No care is given to the young and shortly after spawning the adults travel back downstream. From 30,000 to 150,000 eggs are produced by each spawning female. After hatching, these fry become the forage of various predator fishes and other animals such as kingfisher, herons, turtles and many others. From thousands of eggs only a very few suckers will reach maturity and these adults will spawn to produce more young in the continuous cycle of life.

The white sucker is the most common member of a large family of fishes including the redborses, the carsucker and the buffalo, among others. Contrary to common belief the carp is not related to the sucker, but a member of the minnow family.



Because of similarity in appearance, carp are often confused with some of the suckers and vice versa. The sucker gets its name from its sucking mouth which ideally equips it for bottom feeding. They feed on detritus and small animals on the bottoms of our lakes and streams. Besides being important forage fishes, they also help keep our waters clean. In fact, they can be used as indicators of pollution since they inhabit only clean waters.

White suckers are found from the Northwest Territories to the Gulf of Mexico in clean rivers and lakes. Besides being an important link in the aquatic food chain they contribute over \$300,000 to the economy of Wisconsin's bait industry. They are also made into fish sticks and sold commercially or taken by anglers and smoked, pickled or fried. A favorite Finnish dish is fish soup made from the white sucker.

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