

9/1/79

# Natural History Notes



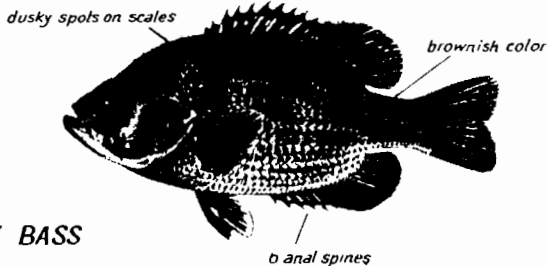
MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

## THE ROCK BASS

Most anglers have caught a rock bass at one time or another since it is one of our most common fish. The rock bass is a favorite fish of very small children, often giving them their first taste of fishing. Given a hook, line and some worms or almost any bait, this fish is easily caught. Lots of action and hours of enjoyment for all ages can be had over a rock-bass hole.

The rock bass is a widely distributed fish. It ranges from Saskatchewan to Florida and west to Oklahoma. It is a common fish in both lakes and rivers throughout much of the midwest. This fish is known by other names such as: red-eye, goggle-eye and red-eye bass. When you mention rock bass to someone down south he may not know what fish you are speaking of. Thus the need for a scientific name is justified. Known as *Ambloplites rupestris* to the biologist, this name (derived from Latin) tells us something about the fish. *Ambloplites* refers to its blunt armature or stiff spines, while the specific name, *rupestris*, means living among rocks. You may have also noticed that the scientific name of a plant or animal is always underlined or written in italics.

This fish is a member of the sunfish family, one of the largest family of fishes in Wisconsin. The general coloration of the rock bass is golden brown to olive, blending into a cream-colored underside. Often several bars or saddle markers are obvious on its sides. Its eye is usually bright red or orange, a key identifying characteristic leading to the name, red-eye bass. Other identifying characteristics are its six sharp, stiff anal spines and dusky spots on its scales, giving the rock bass its typical mottled appearance.



ROCK BASS

The typical sunfish family spawning activities are characterized by the rock bass. When the water reaches about 60° in late spring the male makes a nest about two feet in diameter in water from two to four feet deep. This can be over almost any substrate from gravel to weeds. Usually many males have nests in close proximity and each guards his nest diligently. When the females move in to the spawning area, they are courted by the males which involves ritualized displays, each designed to lure the female to a nest and then to spawn. Spawning takes place during several short intervals over about an hour. Several females may spawn in one nest and a single female may also spawn in several nests, laying up to 12,000 eggs. After spawning, the male fans the nest to provide enough oxygen for the developing eggs. He also diligently guards the eggs which hatch in three or four days, then protects the young by keeping them close to his side as he watches for predators.

The rock bass feeds principally on insects, crayfish and small fish. They usually inhabit small areas and especially like submerged logs and stumps which provide protection from larger predators. The prime value of this fish is probably ecological but we shouldn't disregard its value to the angler. When taken from cool, clean waters its flesh is white, firm, flaky and delicious. Pursuing the rock bass can be both a challenge and a joy for every member of the family.

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