

A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Sandra Hagen



CRAIG BIRHLE

Leech

Bad Rap Bait

Thanks to movies and urban legend, leeches have acquired a bad bloodsucking rap. In truth, very few leeches actually feed on the blood of warm-blooded animals.

Leeches are creatures with segmented bodies and are closely related to earthworms. There are about 600 species worldwide, with about 10 percent of those found in North America. They range in size from teeny tiny to more than a foot long when extended and swimming.

Recognize that a leech has a sucker on each end of its body. Typically, the narrower end houses the mouth, while the wider end has a sucker for grasping. Leeches are grouped according to how they feed. One group has a needle-like proboscis, which is poked into worms and other prey to remove body fluids. Another group swallows their prey of insect larvae and worms whole. The third group includes jawed leeches, which are carnivorous and prefer blood meals. They most often attach to fish, waterfowl, frogs and turtles, but may choose a human if accessible. The leech shown on this page is commonly found on the legs of snapping turtles in North Dakota.

Leeches are hermaphrodites, meaning they have both male and female sex organs. They do not fertilize themselves, but individuals deposit the ingredients allowing them to reproduce. The leech develops a cocoon from a thick glandular part of its body in which the fertilized eggs are deposited for safe development of young.

The leech commonly used as fishing bait has several names: bait leech, ribbon leech or worm leech. It is in the group of leeches which swallow their prey whole. This leech has essentially lost its ability to penetrate tissue and suck blood. When you grab one out of the bait bucket, it probably sticks to you with its posterior end, not its mouth. While that in itself may gross out the most squeamish of anglers, a headfirst-swimming leech hooked through the rump is an irresistible sight to walleye.

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