

# A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



*Fathead minnows (male above, female below)*

## Fishing With Fatheads

While you avoid fishing with a fathead – the fool who invariably kicks over the tackle box and insists on casting near your head – your minnow bucket likely contains a dozen or two.

Fathead minnows are the legal live baitfish of choice of North Dakota anglers. The list of live baitfish anglers are allowed to use in the state is short in an effort to keep undesirable fish out of North Dakota waters. “It got to a point where we were eradicating a handful of lakes every year to rid them of unwanted fish species,” said Scott Gangl, Game and Fish Department fisheries management section leader. “It started making a difference when we clamped down on the baitfish anglers could and couldn’t use.”

If the wrong species of fish ends up in a lake that has a balanced fish population, the result, many times, is lost fishing opportunities for game fish species anglers prefer.

Legal live baitfish include fathead minnows, brook sticklebacks and creek chubs. White suckers are legal only in the Red River in the eastern part of the state. And anglers can fish with live rainbow smelt, but only in the Missouri River below Garrison Dam.

Just this year, spottail shiners were taken off the list of legal live baitfish anglers could employ in North Dakota waters. The availability of spottails and their use was limited, so striking them from the list makes it easier for anglers to recognize the few legal baitfish, especially fathead minnows.

Fathead minnows can be found in just about any type of aquatic habitat in North Dakota. “Anything ranging from small creeks, to sloughs, to reservoirs,” Gangl said. “They are a hardy, little fish that can withstand some pretty tough conditions. When a lake winterkills, for example, what are often left swimming are fathead minnows, which provide a forage base once the game fish population rebounds.”

Fathead minnows are prolific and can spawn multiple times in spring and summer. The male chooses the spawning site, say, the underside of a log. The male ushers one female at a time to the spawning site to deposit sticky eggs and then she is driven away. The result is that each nest may harbor eggs from more than one female in assorted stages of development.

Scientists report the life of a fathead minnow is short, rarely living beyond two years. When the walleye are really biting, anglers report the life expectancy of a fathead is about two casts.

*RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.*