

COMMON
FISH
OF NORTH DAKOTA



NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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PIKE FAMILY



There are two members of the pike family in North Dakota, the northern pike and muskellunge. Both have long bodies and long snouts with large teeth. The dorsal fin is located far back on the body.

Northern Pike

Pike are marked with horizontal body spots and never have more than five pores on each side of the lower jaw. Pike have scales covering their entire cheek. The northern pike was named North Dakota's state fish in 1969.

Pike feed on a wide variety of foods including other fish, aquatic insects, salamanders, frogs and even baby ducks. They are excellent fighters and one of North Dakota's best-tasting fish. Pike often get a bad rap, because of their protective slime coating.

PIKE FAMILY

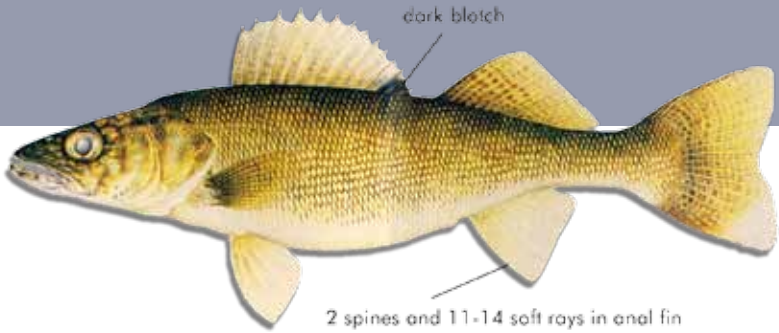


Muskellunge

Muskellunge have vertical dark bars on their sides and 6-8 pores on each side of the lower jaw. They have scales only on the upper half of the cheek. The tiger musky is a hybrid cross between a female muskellunge and a male northern pike.

Musky are found in a select few North Dakota waters.

PERCH FAMILY



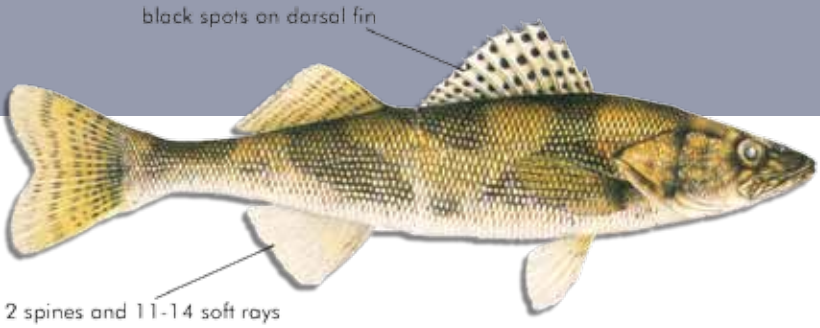
Members of the perch family have two completely separated dorsal fins. The first fin is spiny, while the second fin has soft rays. Walleye, sauger and yellow perch are popular members of this family. Darters, which seldom exceed 4 inches, also belong to the perch family.

Walleye

Walleye are dark-olive, with an overall golden brown mottling and a white belly. A black blotch on the lower rear portion of the front dorsal fin helps identify this fish. Walleye prefer sand and gravel bottom areas, habitat commonly found in our large reservoirs.

Stocked fish also do fairly well in some small lakes in North Dakota.

PERCH FAMILY

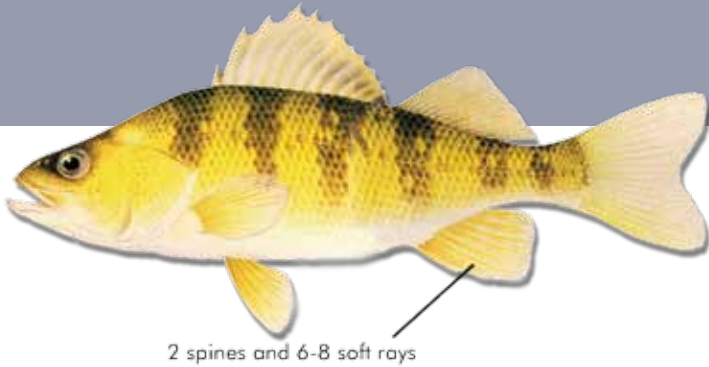


Sauger

Sauger are a native fish that resemble walleye, but are usually thinner in build. They have a blotched body color and rows of dark spots on the dorsal fin instead of the one black blotch of the walleye.

Sauger typically inhabit fairly fast moving water of rivers and streams. The saugeye is a cross between a walleye and sauger, but cannot be positively identified by external physical characteristics.

PERCH FAMILY



2 spines and 6-8 soft rays

Yellow Perch

Yellow-green in color, yellow perch have 6-8 dark bars running up and down their sides. They have two spines and 6-8 soft rays in the anal fin, while walleye and sauger have two spines and 11-14 soft rays in the anal fin, which helps identify them when small.

Perch can be easy to catch and are quality eating.

PERCH FAMILY



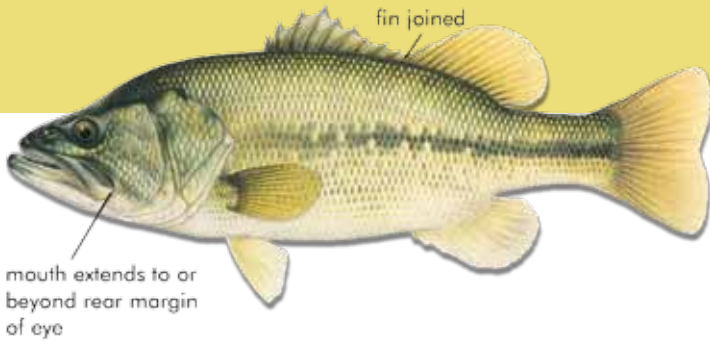
Johnny Darter

The Johnny Darter is one of several species of darters found in North Dakota. It can be identified by the series of black “w” or “x” shapes scattered across its sides.

Darters live in swift moving streams and apparently are not important prey for larger fish because of their small size and habit of hiding under rocks and in crevices.

Adults are typically 1.5 to 2.5 inches long. They feed on small aquatic insect larvae.

SUNFISH FAMILY



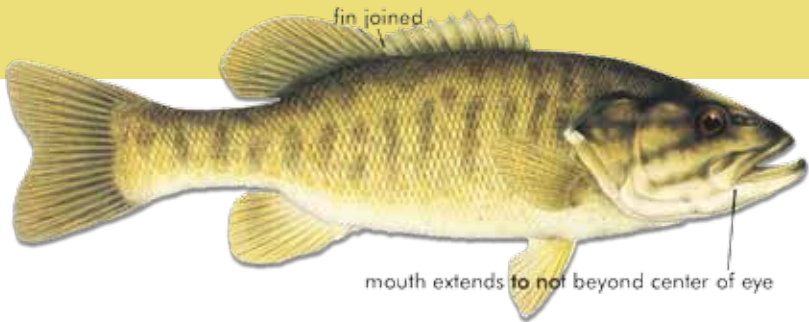
Sunfish family members are deep and stockily built, attractive in coloration, and popular as panfish. Their dorsal fin has a spiny front portion and a soft-rayed rear portion. The dorsal fin is almost separated into two parts in large and smallmouth bass.

Largemouth Bass

The back and upper sides of the largemouth are dark green and its sides have dark irregular patches. As its name implies, the mouth is large, with the end of the upper jaw extending to or beyond the rear margin of the eye. It prefers small lake habitat.

Largemouth bass are more common in southern states, where water is warmer throughout the year. They are excellent fighters on hook and line.

SUNFISH FAMILY

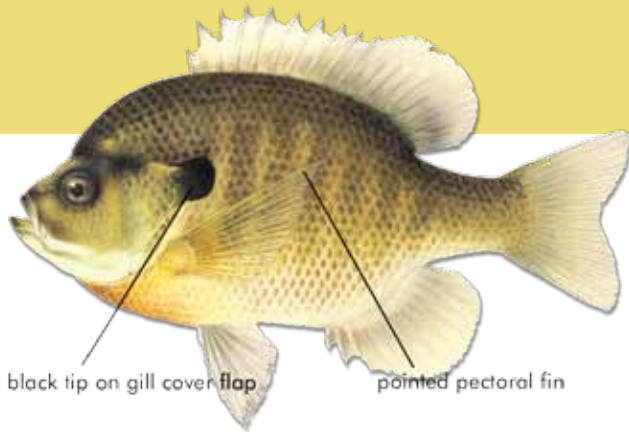


Smallmouth Bass

The smallmouth is similar in color to the largemouth, except for barred markings on its sides. The mouth is smaller and the rear of the upper jaw does not extend beyond the center of the eye. It prefers rocky habitat.

Smallmouth bass are an under-utilized resource in North Dakota and provide an excellent fight on hook and line.

SUNFISH FAMILY



Bluegill

This wonderful and scrappy little fish varies in coloration, but usually is dark olive above, with dark vertical bars on the upper sides and orange or yellow on the throat and belly. Its gill covers are blue with a black tip on the flap.

It is probably the most popular member of the sunfish family in North Dakota, however, at times it may be stunted due to overpopulation. It is often called sunfish or sunny.

SUNFISH FAMILY



black tab on gill cover edged in white

Orange-spotted Sunfish

The orange-spotted sunfish is similar to the bluegill, but usually more colorful and smaller in size. Adult fish are only 3 to 4 inches in length.

It has a black tab on its gill cover that is edged in white. They prefer large, turbid lakes and rivers. It is not common in North Dakota.

These fish are seldom caught by anglers and therefore are not observed by many people.

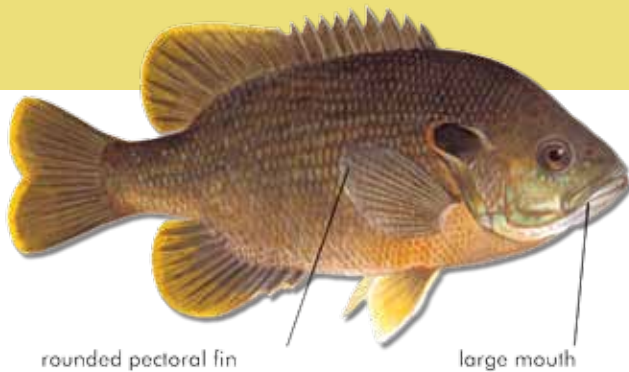
SUNFISH FAMILY



Pumpkinseed

Similar to the bluegill, but lighter in color and usually not as large. It has a red or orange spot on the flap of the gill cover. It may hybridize with bluegill and is not abundant in North Dakota.

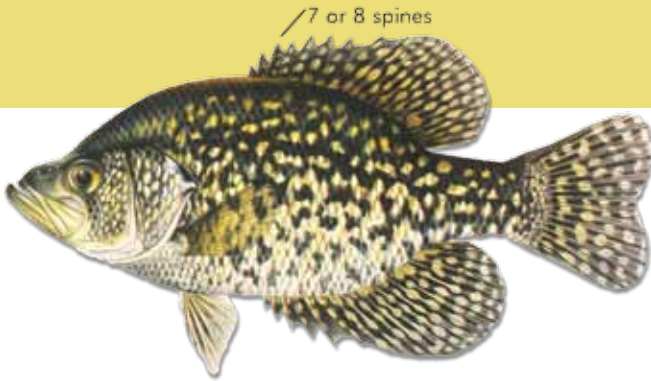
SUNFISH FAMILY



Green Sunfish

The green sunfish is small, hardy and often over-populates our waters. It also resembles a bluegill, but has a much larger mouth and a black tip on the gill cover, edged in a lighter color. Quite common in southwestern North Dakota, it is seldom important as a sport fish. Commonly hybridizes with bluegill where both are present.

SUNFISH FAMILY

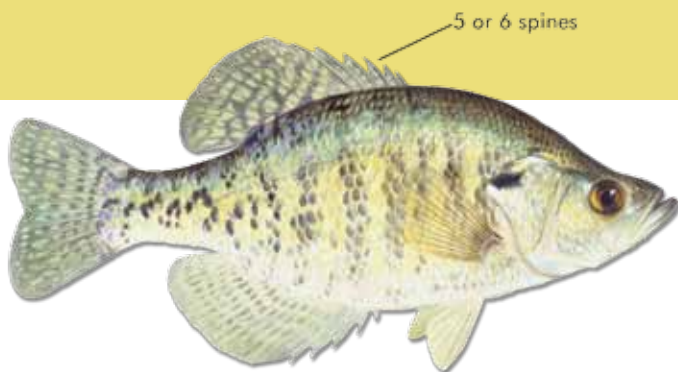


Black Crappie

Flat and silvery and marked with irregular dark spots, the crappie is an attractive and desirable fish. The black crappie is positively identified by its 7-8 spines in the dorsal fin.

It prefers clear water conditions and feeds primarily on small fish as an adult.

SUNFISH FAMILY



White Crappie

Looks similar to the black crappie, but only has 5-6 spines in the dorsal fin. The dark spots on its sides are consolidated into vertical bars. The white crappie is more tolerant of turbid water and well-suited to reservoirs such as Lake Tschida and Patterson Lake.

TEMPERATE OR TRUE BASS FAMILY

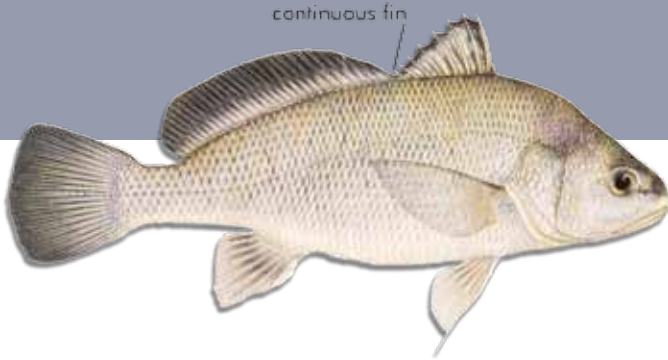


The introduced white bass is the only member of this family in North Dakota. The dorsal fin of the bass family is separated, not joined as in the sunfish family.

White Bass

This beautiful silver-gray fish has rows of broken, dark, narrow stripes running partially the length of its body. At times, it reproduces abundantly and then the population seems to almost vanish until conditions favor it. It has done well in our large lakes and reservoirs such as Devils Lake and Lake Oahe. Some call this fish a silver bass.

DRUM FAMILY



This family contains many saltwater fishes, but only one that lives entirely in freshwater. Some drum species have complicated swim bladders and make audible sounds, especially during spawning season.

Freshwater Drum

Also known as sheepshead and grunter, it is silver-gray and deep-bodied. The top fin is long and almost separated into two parts. The tail is rounded. It has two “lucky stones,” or ear bones, located in its head. These stones are called termed otoliths and used by fish for balance, orientation and sound detection. All fish have these structures but they are more pronounced in drum.

The drum feeds on the bottom in calm areas of deep rivers and lakes. At first glance, this fish can be confused with a white bass. Drum are excellent to eat after removing the thin layer of red, fatty meat on the skin side of the flesh.

CATFISH FAMILY



Catfish family members range from small to large fish, do not have scales, and possess several pairs of whisker-like barbels. They also have wide heads and broad mouths.

Channel Catfish

The channel catfish is our most widespread member of the catfish family. It has a deeply forked tail, is a grayish brown color, and sports an anal fin with 24-29 rays. Small channel cats often have small black body spots. It prefers large rivers and lakes as its habitat.

The Red River, Missouri River and Lake Oahe are excellent cat-fishing locations. Catfish are an under-utilized resource in the state and are excellent eating.

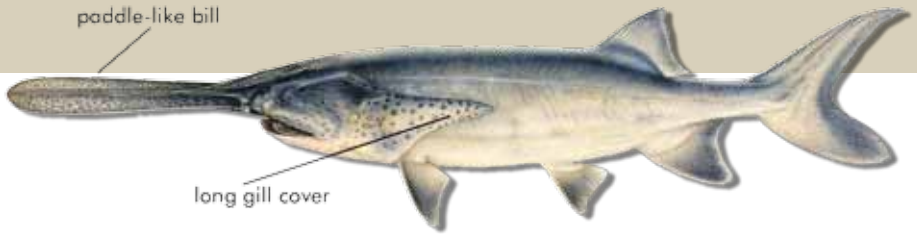
CATFISH FAMILY



Black Bullhead

The black bullhead is our most common bullhead. Compared to catfish, bullheads are stockier, darker in color, have a more rounded, slightly notched tail, and are not as large. North Dakota also has yellow and brown bullheads. The black bullhead has 17-20 rays in the anal fin. There are also variations in color in the three bullhead species as the names suggest, but not as noticeable as might be expected.

PADDLEFISH FAMILY

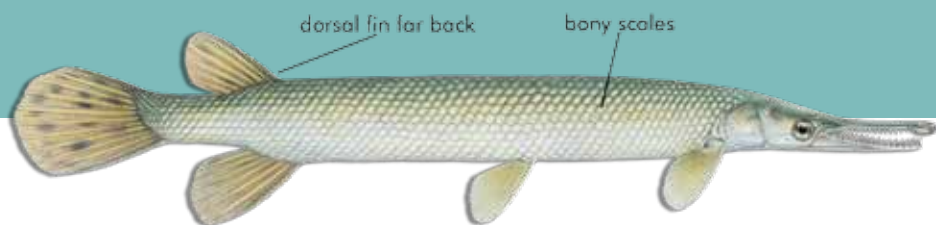


There is only one member of the paddlefish family in North Dakota and it is easily recognized by its long, paddle-like snout.

Paddlefish

Almost shark-like in appearance, the paddlefish skeleton is made almost entirely of cartilage. Its only scales are located on the upper lobe of the tail and its gill covers are very long. It is a large and long-lived fish that feeds on plankton, so it seldom is taken on lures or baits. Snagging is the accepted method of taking paddlefish. This pre-historic fish is closely managed to avoid overharvest. Paddlefish have an established spawning run upstream from Lake Sakakawea into the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. Also called spoonbill, these unique fish commonly grow to 100 pounds.

GAR FAMILY

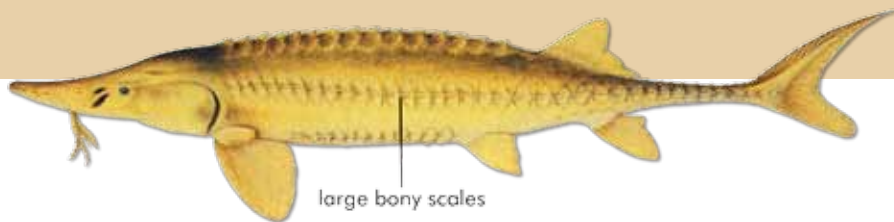


Gar are primitive fish, often referred to as living fossils. Their long bodies are reminiscent of pike when seen near the surface of a quiet Missouri River backwater. Gar have hard, diamond-shaped scales and their long thin jaws have many short, sharp teeth.

Shortnose Gar

This tough, bony fish is seldom taken by anglers, but occasionally by people bowfishing when they find them sunning near the surface. Long and slim, it grows to about a 30-inch maximum length. It is armor-plated, large toothed and is an interesting fish that was probably more abundant before the large Missouri River dams were built.

STURGEON FAMILY



Sturgeon are primitive fish with a cartilaginous skeleton, shovel-like snout, four barbels under the snout in front of a toothless mouth, long shark-like tail, and bony plates or scales on the body. They are found in the Missouri River System.

Shovelnose Sturgeon

The shovelnose sturgeon, which seldom exceeds 5 pounds, is our most abundant sturgeon. It is recognized by scales on its belly, short snout and barbels located in front of the mouth. The two center barbels are almost as long as the outside barbels. Law now requires that all sturgeon must be released immediately to protect the larger pallid, which looks a lot like the shovelnose at a young age.

TROUT FAMILY



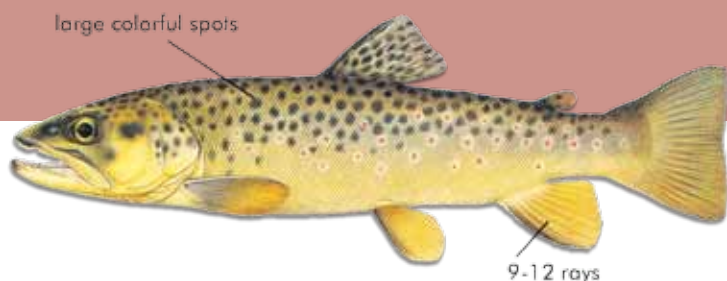
In North Dakota, members of the trout family are all introduced. Trout are beautiful fish, sporty to catch, and fine eating. North Dakota habitat does not provide the conditions for most trout to spawn and reproduce successfully. They must be grown in a hatchery and then stocked into area lakes.

Rainbow Trout

The rainbow trout from the Pacific Coast has been widely stocked in North Dakota and has been the most successful. It varies in coloring, but usually has pinkish streaks on its sides and small black spots on its sides, fins and tail. The rainbow has 9-12 rays in its anal fin.

Rainbows prefer colder water temperatures. They grow well in the Missouri River System, but have also done surprisingly well in some smaller lakes. Trout are powerful fighters.

TROUT FAMILY



Brown Trout

The brown trout is native to Europe and is able to survive warmer water conditions than the rainbow. It is found in the Missouri River System and a few lakes where it is regularly stocked. Like the rainbow, it has 9-12 rays in the anal fin. It has spots that are much larger and more colorful than those of the rainbow. The spots on the brown trout may be black, brown, orange or red and surrounded with a light halo. On large browns, the spots may be irregular shaped or even x-shaped. The brown usually does not have spots on its tail.

TROUT FAMILY



Chinook Salmon

Chinooks, also called king salmon, are stocked in the Missouri River System and provide anglers with a great fight on hook and line. The inside of the lower jaw is blackish, while in rainbows and browns, it is white. They are spotted similar to a rainbow. Chinooks have a long anal fin that contains 15-17 rays. In late fall when they reach spawning conditions, they darken in color and gradually deteriorate until death. Chinooks thus vary from silvery to nearly black. North Dakota conditions prevent chinooks from reproducing successfully. They are the largest trout found in North Dakota.

COD FAMILY



Almost eel-like in appearance, with a small head and small eyes, the burbot is considered the only member of the cod-fish family in our waters.

Burbot

The burbot is a beautifully colored fish, with a single barbel under its chin, rounded tail and long spineless anal and dorsal fins.

Also known as a ling, burbot are great predators and therefore can be caught on a variety of tackle. They are most active in cold water. Likely because of their snakelike appearance, they have been killed and discarded by anglers for no reason. Burbot are excellent eating fish.

MOONEYE FAMILY



Members of this family are flat-sided and silvery, large-scaled, and have well developed teeth.

Goldeye

Goldeye are found in both the Red River and Missouri River systems. The goldeye is described as flat-sided and silvery, with a large golden eye and only one dorsal fin located almost directly above the anal fin. It is often called skipjack or shiner. It is important as a forage fish for predators like catfish and pike. They are bony fish, best prepared for eating by smoking.

SUCKER FAMILY



Suckers are native fish and as their name implies, have sucker-like mouths with large lips and no teeth. They are suited to feed on the bottom and serve as forage for other fish.

White Sucker

Like other members of the sucker family, the white sucker has no spines in its fins. It has a large number of small scales and ranges from a dark color above to a light color below, being darker in color during the spawning season. It is found in both rivers and lakes and may be taken by anglers who fish with worms on the bottom.

Like carp, suckers may become over-abundant in lakes and must be managed to allow room for other more desirable fish to live. It is not legal to use suckers in most North Dakota waters as baitfish. This management technique is used to prevent introduction and over-population of suckers in area waters.

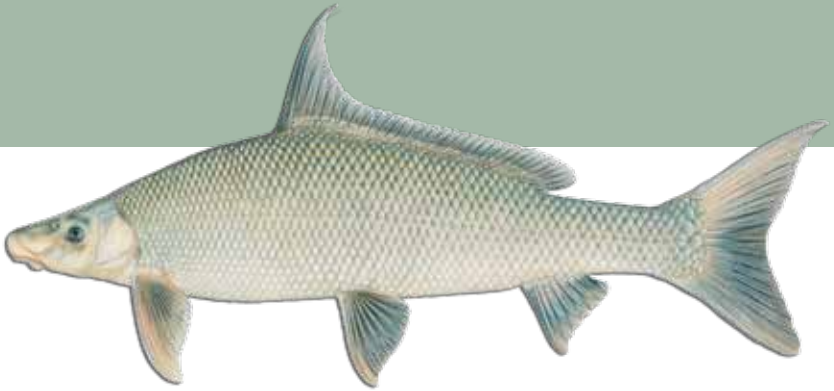
SUCKER FAMILY



Bigmouth Buffalo

Buffalo have heavy-set bodies, large scales and are blue-green to bronze in color. The bigmouth buffalo has a relatively large mouth for a sucker, located at the end of its snout. It is the largest member of the sucker family. Buffalo are not commonly caught by anglers, but are often harvested by those who bowfish.

SUCKER FAMILY



Blue Sucker

The blue sucker gets its name from its bluish-gray appearance, particularly males that may become dark blue-black during breeding season in late spring and early summer. Like most members of the sucker family, they have a sucker-like mouth and feed on small bottom-dwelling organisms. They are easily distinguished from other suckers by their long dorsal fin. Blue suckers often grow larger than other suckers, reaching up to 36 inches.

Blue suckers prefer swift current, and are often caught in main channel areas of large- or medium-sized rivers, such as the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers.

SUCKER FAMILY



Shorthead Redhorse

This redhorse is generally found in rivers. It has larger scales than most other, similar suckers. Its silvery color and reddish or orange fins make it an attractive fish. However, few anglers fish for it.

MINNOW FAMILY



This family comprises the largest number of fish in North Dakota. Nonnative carp and about 30 other species of minnows are found in North Dakota. These small minnows all have a single dorsal fin. They can be an important source of food for other fish as well as birds and mammals.

Carp

Introduced carp have multiplied and occupy most North Dakota waters. Carp root up vegetation and contribute to turbid water conditions detrimental to game fish and waterfowl. Carp have two barbels on each side of the jaw. Goldfish that are released into the wild will grow large and cause the same problems as carp.

MINNOW FAMILY



Fathead Minnow

This abundant minnow is important as a bait fish. Males have black heads and horn-like projections across the snout during the spawning period.

Fatheads grow to a length of 1.5 to 3.5 inches. They eat aquatic vegetation and move in large schools.

MINNOW FAMILY



Golden Shiner

The golden shiner may grow to 12 inches, is hardy and can survive where few fish can. It is illegal to use golden shiners as bait fish. It is deep-bodied and an attractive golden color.

MINNOW FAMILY



Creek Chub

This chub may grow to 12 inches and is found mainly in rivers and large streams. Some people like to fish for them and others use them as bait fish.

STICKLEBACK FAMILY



Sticklebacks are hardy little fish, with noticeable spines on the dorsal area of the back.

Brook Stickleback

Rarely exceeding 3 inches, it survives in shallow lakes and streams where few fish can live. The 5 prominent spines protruding from its back make it easy to recognize. They may be mixed in with bait minnows, so anglers may first become acquainted with the stickleback in their minnow buckets.

SMELT FAMILY



A marine family that contains 10 species of small fish. Some live in estuaries and others enter rivers and streams to spawn.

Rainbow Smelt

Smelt are slender, silvery fish with a large mouth and well-developed teeth and adipose fin. First stocked in Lake Sakakawea in 1971, smelt have multiplied and spread throughout the Missouri River System.

They are an important source of food for salmon, walleye and other predator fish. Most adults are generally 7-9 inches long. Few live beyond 5 years.

CURRENT NORTH DAKOTA FISH SPECIES

CATFISH

Black Bullhead	Native
Brown Bullhead	Native
Channel Catfish	Native
Flathead Catfish	Native
Stonecat	Native
Tadpole Madtom	Native
Yellow Bullhead	Native

CODFISH

Burbot	Native
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DRUM

Freshwater Drum	Native
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GAR

Shortnose Gar	Native
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KILLIFISH

Banded Killifish	Native
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LAMPREY

Chestnut Lamprey	Native
Silver Lamprey	Native

MINNOW

Bigmouth Shiner	Native
Western Blacknose Dace	Native
Blacknose Shiner	Native
Bluntnose Minnow	Native
Brassy Minnow	Native
Carmine Shiner	Native
Central Mudminnow	Native
Central Stoneroller	Native
Common Carp	Nonnative
Common Shiner	Native
Creek Chub	Native
Emerald Shiner	Native
Fathead Minnow	Native
Finescale Dace	Native
Flathead Chub	Native
Golden Shiner	Native
Hornyhead Chub	Native
Lake Chub	Native
Largescale Stoneroller	Native
Longnose Dace	Native
Pearl Dace	Native
Northern Redbelly Dace	Native
Plains Minnow	Native
Pugnose Shiner	Native
Red Shiner	Native
River Shiner	Native
Sand Shiner	Native
Sicklefin Chub	Native
Silver Carp	Nonnative
Silver Chub	Native
Spotfin Shiner	Native
Spottail Shiner	Native
Sturgeon Chub	Native
Western Silvery Minnow	Native

MOONEYE

Goldeye	Native
Mooneye	Native

PADDLEFISH

Paddlefish	Native
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PERCH

Blackside Darter	Native
Iowa Darter	Native
Johnny Darter	Native
Logperch	Native
Sauger	Native
Troutperch	Native
Walleye	Native
Yellow Perch	Native
Zander	Nonnative

PIKE

Northern Pike	Native
Pure Muskellunge	Nonnative
Tiger Muskellunge	Nonnative

SHAD and HERRING

Gizzard Shad	Native
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SMELT

Rainbow Smelt	Nonnative
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STICKLEBACK

Brook Stickleback	Native
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STURGEON

Lake Sturgeon	Native
Pallid Sturgeon	Native
Shovelnose Sturgeon	Native

SUCKER

Bigmouth Buffalo	Native
Blue Sucker	Native
Golden Redhorse	Native
Greater Redhorse	Native
Longnose Sucker	Native
Quillback	Native
River Carpsucker	Native
Shorthead Redhorse	Native
Silver Redhorse	Native
Smallmouth Buffalo	Native
White Sucker	Native

SUNFISH

Black Crappie	Native
Bluegill	Native
Green Sunfish	Native
Largemouth Bass	Nonnative
Orange-spotted Sunfish	Native
Pumpkinseed	Native
Rock Bass	Native
Smallmouth Bass	Nonnative
White Crappie	Native

TEMPERATE BASS

White Bass	Nonnative
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TROUT

Brown Trout	Nonnative
Chinook Salmon	Nonnative
Cisco	Nonnative
Cutthroat Trout	Nonnative
Lake Trout	Nonnative
Lake Whitefish	Nonnative
Rainbow Trout	Nonnative

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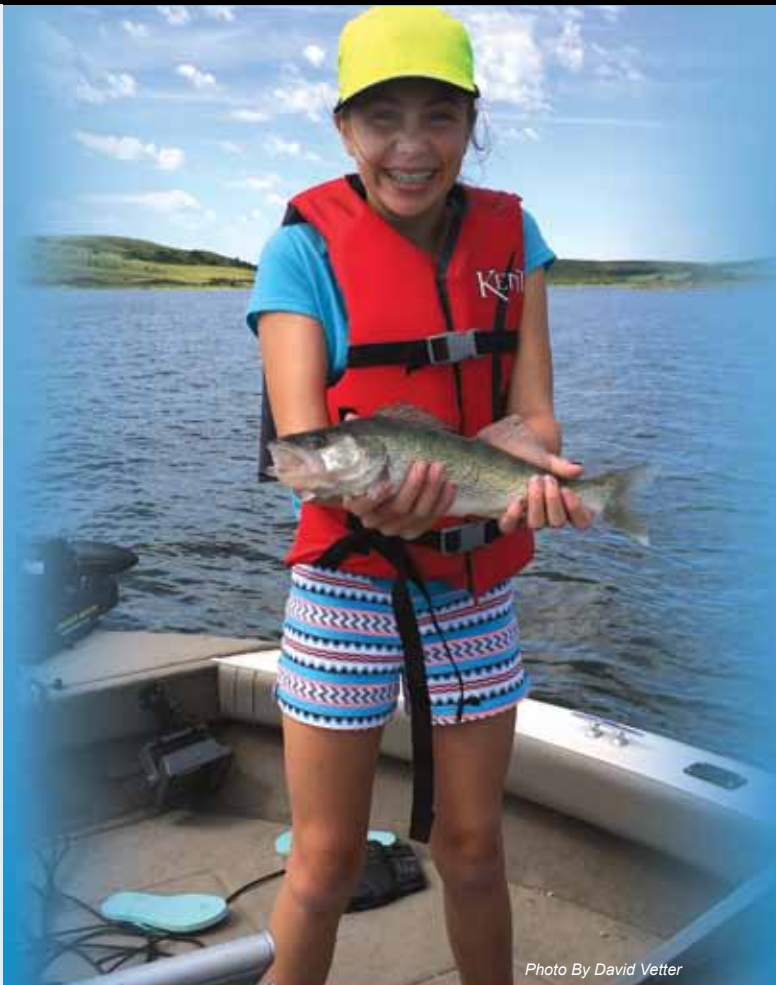


Photo By David Vetter

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