

The Joy of Bait Shops

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by

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Looking for some really great natives? A surprising diversity of fishes awaits at your local bait shop, or at bait shops wherever your travels take you.

As a native fish enthusiast and angler, I make it a habit to visit bait shops whenever I'm on the road. They provide an opportunity to get a close-up look at live native fishes. Bait shops are also a good source for free booklets and pamphlets on local fishes and fishing conditions. And, as a bonus, bait shops give you the opportunity to meet and learn from down-home folks who have similar fishy interests.

Take, for example, a trip I took recently to the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame in Hayward, Wisconsin. I couldn't pass up an early morning detour to the live bait section at Pastika's Sporting Goods Store on Highway 27 South, just a short walk from the beautiful Namekagon River. A peek into the bait tanks and an hour-long chat with salesman Lyman Groat provided interesting information about both game and nongame fishes of the famed Chippewa Flowage region.

The first native fish to catch my eye was a white sucker, known locally as a black sucker.

"Our guides favor black suckers as the prime bait for really big musky," Lyman explained. "We can't get enough of them and we sell all we can get."

The sign on the tank—"Musky bait \$1.95"—added credibility to Lyman's words. Looking down at the crowded tank, I wondered how much these suckers would cost if they were *hard* to get.

Lyman said that some folks find black suckers to be "good eatin'" in soups and chowders, and that hot smoked black suckers were often sold for food under the name "mullet." Frequently caught in early spring while dipnet-

ting for smelt, the black suckers are fried in hot butter and prized for their white, flaky, sweet flesh.

Dip net in hand, Lyman showed me other Wisconsin natives in his tanks, among them golden shiners, redbtail chubs, silver shiners, cardinal chubs, and fathead minnows, also known as "mudminnows" and "tuffis."

Lyman shared his understanding of the fathead minnow. "I've heard they're members of the salmon family. They molt, just like the salmon. They have a three-year cycle. After they spawn they turn black, just like the salmon, and at that time they are hard to keep alive. The males are most colorful in the spring, and in their full colors they make the best bait."

Of course, fatheads are *not* in the salmon family, but in the minnow family. And neither salmon nor fatheads molt (as snakes do). Obviously not all bait shop personnel are up on their ichthyology!

Many bait shops collect their own minnows, and Pastika's is no exception. Lyman was more than happy to share his collecting technique.

"Once trout season opens," Lyman said, "up to 500 minnows can be taken out of trout streams. We use minnow traps that have a throat size less than one inch in diameter. We set the traps in pockets, holes, and eddies in streams that are a foot or so in depth. We dig a little hole or channel out in front of the trap throat to serve as a funnel. This helps lead minnows into the throat."

Lyman further explained that seines are used in July and August, when the weather's hot and minnows are hard to come by.

"Seining is done in big rivers, like the Namekagon. Two-man teams are used. One man holds the net in a curl while the other man kicks out, driving the minnows into

the net. As soon as the kicker reaches the net, he grabs one end and both men head toward shore, keeping the bottom of the net close to the bottom of the stream. You get a lot of good minnows, and at times we also get freshwater lampreys, waterdogs and sculpins.”

Another benefit of visiting bait shops, especially early in the morning, is the opportunity to meet local guides and sportfishermen on their way to “work.” Most are willing to discuss the locations where they are catching fish. Such information can be important to native fish aquarists; wherever gamefishes are being caught, it’s likely there will be good numbers of forage fishes to catch, too.

I was surprised by how often the locals will invite you to tag along on their fishing trips, especially if they know you study and collect native fishes. Just be prepared to answer lots of questions. They’re going to pick your brain for tips that can help them catch more fish. For instance, on the day of my visit to Pastika’s, local angler Bob Bauer was interested in the eating habits of big bluegill, his favorite quarry. Bob, in turn, told me the reason black crappie from the Chippewa Flowage had such beautiful bright yellow colors was due, in some part, to the fact that the Flowage covers large peat bogs, which leach tannins and other chemicals into the water.

Just as interesting as talking to the people who operate and visit bait shops is the literature bait shops often make available, especially literature which allows you to compare fish collecting and catching regulations across various jurisdictions. For instance, the Wisconsin DNR advises in its pamphlet, “Guide to Wisconsin Hook and Line Fishing Regulations for 1997-1998,” that rough fish “. . . may be taken by hook and line and by hand, may be returned to the water . . . ,” and that rough fish “should not be left on shore.” The booklet also advises that any fish to be released “. . . should be handled carefully with wet hands.” (If you plan on collecting in Wisconsin, please know that a fishing license is required. Additional regulations are highlighted in the sidebar.)

Finally, bait shops are great places to visit because they often maintain photograph collections and taxidermy mounts of gamefish. Pastika’s trophy mount collection includes muskellunge, walleye, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, yellow perch, bluegill and crappie. Several of the mounts were Line Class World record fish.

Don’t overlook the many native fish species available in bait shops. And don’t pass up the opportunity to

chat with some fantastic folks who are likely to be just as interested as you are in enjoying and learning about the great diversity of nature. Bait shops prove that one of the most exciting things about the native fish hobby is that there will always be something more to learn, no matter where you go.

**Native fish enthusiasts should be aware that the following acts are illegal in Wisconsin:**

- to possess or use trammel nets, hoop nets, or fish traps
- to take fish other than rough fish by hand
- to fish with a hook and line while using a dip net or having a dip net attached to your boat
- to release unused bait fish into Wisconsin waters
- to possess live crayfish while fishing or while possessing angling equipment on any inland water, except the Mississippi River
- to fish in any streams identified as “trout streams” when trout season is closed, except for the taking of rough fish by hand
- to fish using any method other than hook-and-line within 200 feet of a fishway, lock or dam
- to deposit fish entrails into Wisconsin waters
- to use or possess a box or container in which to hold live fish unless a legible tag bearing the owner or user’s name and address is attached to the container; containers and live boxes used by anglers while fishing are exempt from this requirement
- to remove insect larvae from a trout stream except for a licensed angler to use the larvae while fishing on that same stream
- to buy, sell, or trade any gamefish
- to transport live rough fish into or within the state without a permit from the WDNR

**Note:** The above is not a complete list of illegal acts as defined by the Wisconsin fishing regulations. For complete information, write to WDNR, Fisheries Management and Habitat Protection, FH/4, P.O. Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707-7921; call the WDNR License Section at 608-266-2105; or visit their Website ([www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/fhp/fish](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/fhp/fish)).