

THE MYSTERY OF MORONE: SOLVED AT LAST?

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Morone, the Temperate Basses, is a small but commercially, recreationally, and culturally important genus of fishes native to fresh waters of central and eastern North America, and brackish and marine waters along the Western Atlantic and Gulf coasts. *Morone* is also the type genus of the family Moronidae, which contains one other genus, *Dicentrarchus*, the European Seabasses of the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean. Despite the 200-year pedigree of its name, and the fact that its species are among the most studied fishes in the world, ichthyologists have long puzzled over what “*Morone*” means. With the help of a 19th-century etymological dictionary, I offer an explanation.

Morone was proposed by Samuel Latham Mitchill (1764–1831), a physician from New York State in the days when surgeon and naturalist were pretty much the same position. He taught chemistry and botany, founded and edited a medical journal, and got into politics (eventually serving as a US Senator from 1804–1809), but his true love was natural history. He enjoyed collecting plants and animals and had a special fondness for things that lived in water.

On January 1, 1814, Mitchill self-published a 29-page pamphlet on the fishes of New York State. In it he proposed four new genera, including two that are still valid today: *Morone* and the Western Atlantic wrasse *Tautoga* (Labridae). He also introduced 43 new species-level names to science, 12 of which are still in use. These include such iconic American fishes as the Brook Trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*), Golden Shiner (*Notemigonus crysoleucas*), Blueback Herring (*Clupea aestivalis*), and Yellow Perch (*Perca flavescens*). Mitchill placed four of his new species into his new genus, *Morone*, but, unfortunately, he did not explain the provenance of the name.

In 1898, Smithsonian zoologist Theodore Gill reprinted Mitchill’s pamphlet, only a few copies of which were known to exist at the time. Gill was highly critical of Mitchill’s effort. It is “by no means a work of great scientific merit,” he wrote in his introductory essay. The four genera Mitchill proposed, Gill said, “were the fruit of ignorance and rashness and not of knowledge and deliberation.” If it is so bad, Gill asked, then why reprint it? Because “it is the starting point for part of our nomenclature,” as evidenced by the species mentioned above. Indeed, Mitchill’s pamphlet represents the first American fishes described by an American.

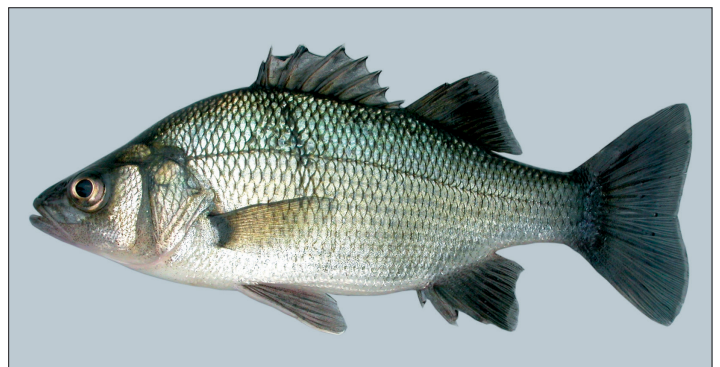
Gill, who was interested in fish-name etymologies, researched the meaning of *Morone* and drew a blank. Since Mitchill had used a Native American name as the basis for *Tautoga*, Gill wondered if *Morone* was also derived from a local Indian word. He even consulted an expert on Indian languages, one A. S. Gatschet, who was unable to discover an Indian equivalent. “*Morone*” is a Spanish family name, Gill noted, but chalked that up to coincidence.

Now, over two centuries years later, I have found a clue that may explain this mysterious name. According to the *Etymological and Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language* (5th ed., 1879), “*morone*” is a noun for a “deep crimson colour like the unripe mulberry.” In other words, it’s another word for—or an archaic variation of—maroon.

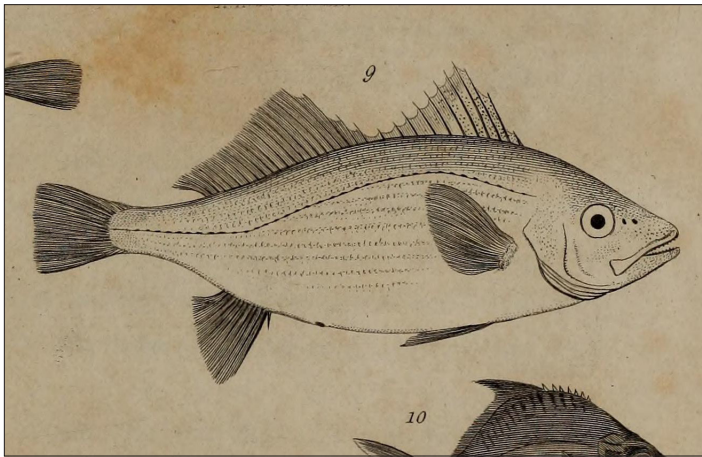
Sure enough, Mitchill indicated red, ruddy, or rusty (i.e., maroon-like) colors in all four of the species he included in his genus *Morone*.

- *M. pallida*, “White Perch of New York” — “anal and pectoral fins and chin ruddy” [a junior synonym of the White Perch, *Morone americana* (Gmelin 1789)]
- *M. rufa*, “Red Perch of New York” — “body whitish and speckled in rows with a kind of cream coloured and rusty brown; lower fins and throat ruddy” (Note: *rufa* is the neuter of *rufus*, Latin for red, reddish, or ruddy.) [also a junior synonym of *Morone americana* (Gmelin 1789)]
- *M. flavescens*, “Yellow Perch, or Yellow Basse of New York” — “ventral and anal scarlet” [now known as the Yellow Perch, *Perca flavescens*]
- *M. maculata*, “Fresh-water Sun-fish, or speckled Perch” — “colour various, being a brown along the back, mixed with reddish, rusty and ochreous, down the sides and along the belly” [a junior synonym of the Pumpkinseed, *Lepomis gibbosus* (Linnaeus 1758)]

As far as we know, no one has heretofore suggested the link between *Morone* and “maroon.” Angler Nicholas Karas (1974) suggested a link between *Morone* and *moron*, speculating (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) that in Mitchill’s day Striped Bass (*M. saxatilis*) “were so plentiful they were extremely easy to catch, and if a fish is easy to catch it might be thought of as an unwise or stupid fish. Take your pick.” Unless some indefatigable researcher discovers the



White Perch (*Morone americana*) from the Cape Fear River, North Carolina. (Photo by Fritz Rohde)



Morone americana appeared twice in Mitchill's second (i.e., 1815) work on the fishes of New York: first as Silvery Perch (*Bodianus argyro-leucos*), then as White Perch (*Bodianus pallida*).

answer in any of the Mitchill letters and papers scattered throughout several mid-Atlantic libraries, my explanation at the very least connects an obscure definition of the word with characters mentioned in Mitchill's text, however tenuous that connection may be.

It should be noted, however, that Mitchill was not the first to apply the word "morone" to a fish. While preparing an earlier version of this essay for publication, Olaf Nelson, an editor of *American Currents*, discovered several earlier mentions of "morone," indicating that the term had been used in connection with fishes in Europe for centuries. In 1524, the papal physician Paolo Giovio (1483–1552) published *De Romanis Piscibus*, wherein he mentioned "Morone" as a fish from the Black Sea region esteemed for its flavor by gods and humans alike. In the 1677 English translation of *Les Six Voyages* (1676) by French gem merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689), the editor appended a essay on the Euxine (Black) and Caspian seas under the pseudonym "Astracan." In it he mentioned that the Danube River "abounds" with "Sturgeon, Morone, and Sheveroke, besides divers [sic] forms of smaller Fish." ("Sheveroke" may be a variation of *sevruga*, a Russian name for the Starry Sturgeon, *Acipenser stellatus*.) In 1806, French geologist Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond (1741–1819) published a list of fishes from the Gulf of Spezzia and the Ligurian Sea, an arm of the Mediterranean; included is "Morone," which, based on its placement in the list, appears to be a local Genoan name for the European Hake, *Merluccius merluccius*. Last, in 1814, the third volume of *Zoographia Rosso-Asiatica* appeared, four years after the death of its author, Prussian biologist Peter Simon Pallas (1767–1810). Pallas indicated that "Morône" was a Gaulish name for the Beluga or European Sturgeon, *Huso huso*, perhaps derived from *Mario*, an ancient Greek name for Beluga as recorded in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* (77–79 AD). With the exception of Faujas de Saint-Fond's list, it appears that "morone" was a word applied to sturgeon, probably Beluga, in early European literature. Whether Mitchill was aware of this usage is impossible to say. There is certainly nothing sturgeon-like about temperate basses to suggest that the European "morone" inspired Mitchill's "morone" in New York.

While Mitchill's intentions in coining the name are unclear, his desire to scrap it entirely is not. Less than a year after the self-publication of his pamphlet, Mitchill published a much longer and more polished follow-up under the auspices of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New-York (Mitchill 1815). Perhaps

tellingly, Mitchill made no reference of the former work in the latter. Even more telling is the fact that "*Morone*" is not mentioned at all. Instead, Mitchill placed three former *Morone* species (*flavescens*, *rufa*, and *pallida*) into the labrid genus *Bodianus* Bloch 1790, while *M. maculatus* was dropped altogether. The genus *Morone*, it seems, was a mistake that Mitchill wished to erase.

The name wouldn't go away. In 1860, Gill, sorting through the temperate basses, opted to retain *Morone* for the White Perch (*M. americana*) as well as another generic name coined by Mitchill in 1814, *Roccus*, for the Striped Bass (now *Morone saxatilis*). In 1876, Dutch ichthyologist Pieter Bleeker concluded that *Roccus* and *Morone* were congeneric. But which name to use? Had he selected *Roccus*, Bleeker might have done us all a favor, since *Roccus*, a latinization of the vernacular "rockfish" (referring to its occurrence over rocky ledges) has a clear meaning. Instead, he went with the enigmatic *Morone*, probably because it appeared six pages before *Roccus* and therefore in the strictest sense had nomenclatural priority.

And so the name Mitchill apparently wanted the world to ignore was now fixed to temperate basses forever. Leaving the very few of us who care about such things obsessing over what "*Morone*" means.

Acknowledgments

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