

Mystery Fish Identified (Again!)

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It bothered me for over a year. I was directing a survey of historical records for information on Lake Sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*) in the Lake Michigan basin. Part of this effort involved searching microfilm of old newspapers in towns along tributary rivers for accounts of sturgeon caught by anglers and commercial fishers, primarily in the latter half of the 1800s and the early 1900s. In addition to recording all references to sturgeon, my student technicians participating in the search were instructed to photocopy any mentions of other fish species as well. Some of the information thus obtained permitted ready identification of the types of fish involved (Cochran, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Cochran and Wuepper, 2005). But one account posed a mystery:

June 20, 1878 (*Oshkosh Northwestern*)—Last week a gentleman named Lehman caught a fish at Appleton which differed materially from anything heretofore found in the Fox River. It was shown to those supposed to be good judges of piscatorial matters, who were unable to fully agree as to the species. To settle the question the fish was placed in alcohol and sent to the Smithsonian Institute at Washington. The result will be known in due time.

Appleton is located in Outagamie County, Wisconsin, not far downstream from the outlet of Lake Winnebago. I was interested in the identity of the specimen in the *Oshkosh Northwestern* story in part because I had collected fishes in the Fox River for many years farther downstream at DePere (Cochran, 1994; Cochran and Hesse, 1994; Cochran and Marks, 1995; Cochran and Lyons, 2004). However, I was also intrigued by the possibility that it represented a novel species that had recently used the Portage Canal—first opened in a rudimentary state in 1837—to cross from the Wisconsin River in the Mississippi River drainage to the

upper Fox River in the Lake Michigan drainage (Becker, 1983; Cochran, 2006).

Unfortunately, the student technician who found this account found no follow-up story in the *Oshkosh Northwestern*. Whenever I came across the photocopy in its manila folder while looking up other accounts, I wondered again about the mystery fish. I even used an on-line search function to search the fish collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History for a corresponding specimen, but to no avail (<http://acsmith.si.edu/emuwebvzfishesweb/pages/nmnh/vz/DtlQueryFishes.php>).

It was the next summer, and a new student technician was on the job. She brought me a folder of stories from a different newspaper, and there it was:

June 22, 1878 (*Green Bay State Gazette*)—The peculiar fish lately [*sic*] caught in the Fox River at Appleton, and sent to the Smithsonian Institution at Washington for classification has been found to be what is technically called *Luciscus Chrysoleucas* [*sic*]. Now you know all about it.

The only mystery left is why this fish was a mystery in the first place. *Leuciscus chrysoleucas* is the former scientific name of the Golden Shiner (*Notemigonus crysoleucas*), which did not receive its current generic name until 1895 (Scott and Crossman, 1973). This is a fairly widespread minnow (Becker, 1983), although it is not always common in localities where it occurs. Becker (1964) found it at two of 23 shoreline seining stations around the perimeter of Lake Winnebago. In the lower Fox River below the DePere dam, where I sampled for approximately 10 weeks each spring with a Sea Lamprey assessment trap (the trap was emptied five days per week), I collected Golden Shiners in eight of 15 years from 1985 to 1999 (preserved specimens were placed in the University of

Wisconsin-Green Bay museum in 1988 with the catalog number 1599). The species was not reported by personnel who tended the trap from 1979 to 1984. I never collected more than 18 Golden Shiner in any year, and they never contributed even a half of a percent to the yearly numerical total catch.

Why were folks in Appleton interested in unusual fish in 1878? Perhaps it was the residual influence of David Starr Jordan. It was early in his career, but this future giant in the annals of North American ichthyology had spent a year (1873-1874) in the employment of the Appleton Collegiate Institute (Hubbs, 1964).

There are other reports of “mystery fish” buried in the historical record of Wisconsin. Several are included in a recent book about unusual newspaper stories in the state (Lewis, 2007). Accounts of “sword fish” sound like gar, but I’m not sure what to make of a “chameleon fish” with the head of a bass and the body of a pike.

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“Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.”

— Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*