

# The National Fish Contest Is Underway

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ANFA is pleased to announce a contest to select a nominee for submission to the U.S. Congress as our country's National Fish. The United States has a National Bird (bald eagle), National Tree (oak), and myriad other national symbols. Recently, Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARK) proposed a National Reptile and a National Amphibian. Despite the great importance of fishes in U.S. history (Atlantic salmon sustained many early colonists), economy (many people have earned their keep through fishes for culinary, esthetic and recreational purposes), culture (could Norman Rockwell have garnered his iconic position without numerous small boys fishing in the company of dogs and grandfathers?), politics (who among us can forget the snail darter debacle), and countless other aspects of American life, no native fish has ever been designated as a symbol of our great nation. Twenty-nine states have state fishes; Alabama, Missouri and New Hampshire have two each (if Missouri's designation of the paddlefish as its state aquatic animal counts).

NANFA members appreciate the importance of our native fish fauna and its fragile status, both literally (because of habitat destruction, overexploitation and pollution) and figuratively (because so few Americans ever give a thought to fishes or have any awareness of the things we take for granted daily). A National Fish might provide a symbol around which to rally in the same way Americans rallied around such charismatic birds as the bald eagle and cherished mammals as the wolf when the Endangered Species Act became law. In short, a National Fish could help draw attention to the importance of American fishes and give them a needed boost in the national consciousness.

Also, NANFA members are in a unique position to publicize our favorite critters at the national level, and perhaps do

some good for conservation. And it can't hurt our organization to be the one making the proposal to Congress.

Six months ago, we asked members to nominate candidates for National Fish to be presented to the membership for voting. The only restriction we made was that the nominees be fishes native to the United States. We received six nominations, described below. The nominator's names are not included in order to avoid biasing the votes. After a selection is made, all nominators will be acknowledged in *American Currents*.

Here, then, are candidacy statements for each of the six nominees, in the words of the nominating NANFA members, for your consideration as National Fish of the United States:

## Bowfin

(*Amia calva*, Family Amiidae)

*The bowfin is uniquely American.* It is represented by a single species, in a single genus, in a single family, in a single order of fishes. More than 95% of the entire geographic range of this species occurs in the United States.

*It is a pioneer.* Bowfins are evolutionary and ecological pioneers. They belong to a group of fishes now believed ancestral to modern bony fishes. They frequently exploit newly formed habitats inhabited by few other fishes.

*The bowfin is gaining new respect.* Old-time anglers and fishery biologists defamed it as useless and destructive. Modern fishermen and enlightened ecologists extol it as under-appreciated and environmentally beneficial.

*It has a very strong sense of "family values."* The male bowfin constructs an elaborate "nursery" for its offspring. It aggressively defends its young against any kind of threat. It cares for its babies until they are old enough and large enough to care for themselves.

*The bowfin is strong, tough and enduring.* When hooked, the bowfin is a powerful fighter. When trapped in a hot, stagnant, drying, pool, it survives. For 70 million years, the bowfin has remained essentially unchanged.

### North American Cyprinids, or Minnows (Family Cyprinidae)

These fishes are unique American members of the largest family of freshwater fishes, a family that ranges over four continents. The North American forms comprise at least 316 species; almost all of them occur in the U.S., including 49 of the 50 states. Selection of this group as the national fish would thus give the broadest geographic representation possible. Almost all Americans would have a least one representative of the National Fish in a habitat near their homes.

*Cyprinids are ubiquitous in North American freshwater habitats.* Cyprinids are found in most freshwater habitat types in the U.S. Shiners in the genera *Notropis*, *Luxilus*, *Cyprinella* and *Pteronotropis* occur in the hot, steamy swamps and marshes of the southeastern U.S., and in clear, cool, spring-fed streams of mountain and hill ranges. Even the turbid large rivers of the plains and of Alaska have cyprinids adapted to them. Minnows truly are American in their catholic tastes for and abilities to exploit habitats. Yet each species, like Americans themselves, is special in how it relates to its environment and its ecological partners. A single small stream may have as many as 10 minnow species, each using resources in a different way.

*Minnows are well known and respected by everyone.* Smaller species are important ecologically as forage for larger fishes. Large species like the Colorado pikeminnow, now endangered, were formerly sportfishes themselves. Who wouldn't respect a six-foot long, voracious, hard-fighting fish that braved the rapids and boulders of the Colorado River long before John Wesley Powell journeyed down it? And who wouldn't respect a three-inch long male bluntnose minnow that carefully selects, cleans, and defends a small rock cavity from other animals, including fishes much larger than itself, just to make a home for its babies?

*Minnows are beautiful.* Many species are brightly colored, have large, showy fins, and exhibit interesting behaviors, including their reproductive habits of courting and spawning.

*Cyprinids are economically important.* Minnows have been captured and cultured for sale as baitfish in all U.S. states except Hawaii. Thus they have contributed greatly to the U.S. economy.

Most important, cyprinids offer the most diversity of any North American fish family in numbers of species, appearance, behavior, and just plain beauty. Though they swim in American waters by the billions, in swamps, lakes, rivers, streams, marshes, reservoirs, and ponds, many populations and species are depleted, and selecting them as the National Fish would draw attention to the plight of our entire native fish fauna.

*Minnows are excellent aquarium fishes.* Many species reproduce readily in captivity.

### Pumpkinseed (*Lepomis gibbosus*, Family Centrarchidae)

David Starr Jordan, the dean of American ichthyology, called it "A very beautiful and compact fish, perfect in all its parts, looking like a brilliant coin fresh from the mint." Indeed, with its iridescent wavy blue-green lines, yellow to bright orange scales, and yellow to brassy orange belly, the male pumpkinseed is one of the most colorful and attractive fishes in North America.

Native to Atlantic Slope drainages from Maine to South Carolina, and in the Great Lakes, Hudson Bay, and upper Mississippi basins from New York, west to North Dakota, and south to Missouri and Kentucky, the pumpkinseed has also been modestly introduced elsewhere, with established populations in 10 other states, including Washington, Oregon and California.

The pumpkinseed has probably introduced more youngsters to the joy of angling than any other fish. It readily takes a line, and its shimmering colors dazzle the eye in the sun of a lazy summer day. Its relatively small size (eight inches) and hardiness also makes it a fine fish for the aquarium.

The source of its common moniker—pumpkinseed—is unknown, but likely refers to the numerous spots on its body. As such, its name is uniquely American, and unlike the name of any other U.S. fish.

### Rainbow Darter (*Etheostoma caeruleum*, Family Percidae)

I cannot think of a better candidate for a symbol of America than one that is so beautiful as a clear blue sky day and one that means so much to me!

Added by article authors: The rainbow darter is native to much of the northeastern and midwestern U.S. including most of the Ohio River and central Mississippi River

drainages. It represents a lineage of percids unique to North America—the darters (members of the family also occur in Eurasia, but those are more perch-like than darter-like). The darters are the second most speciose group and the most colorful of all native North American fishes.

The rainbow darter is the quintessential darter. The male is brilliant before and during spawning, its colors varying from brilliant cyan to deeper blue, with screaming scarlet or crimson depending on the particular population. Like other darters, the rainbow darter adapts superbly to well-managed aquaria, and reproduces in captivity if given the right care.

Many darter populations are depleted, threatened or endangered. Selecting a member of this family as our National Fish would draw attention to the fragile status of our uniquely American darter fauna.

### **Wild Alaskan Salmon (*Oncorhynchus* spp., Family Salmonidae)**

Please allow me to nominate any or all of the five major species of wild Alaskan salmon: king, sockeye, coho, chum and pink (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*, *O. nerka*, *O. kisutch*, *O. keta*, and *O. gorbuscha*, respectively).

Quite frankly, the Alaskan economy looks like the *Titanic* without them. Talk about culture? Go visit any of the fishing communities whose entire society revolves around salmon season. How about this bumper sticker (bought by myself in a local store in Petersburg, AK): “Friends don’t let friends eat farmed fish.” Alaska is the only state in the Union to outlaw salmon farming (or so I’ve been told).

Whether it is canned, smoked, or value-added raw fish, everyone in America is familiar with salmon (try saying that about any other fish) and its heroic trek to its personal spawning grounds for reproduction.

What is America without salmon, which I believe is the number three most-eaten fish in the U.S. behind tuna and shrimp in per capita consumption, and the only one native to [the freshwaters of] North America?

### **Flagfish (*Jordanella floridae*, Family Cyprinodontidae)**

In some respects, the flagfish appears poorly suited as a “national symbol.” It is a little fish (usually <65 mm) little known to most of the general public. Geographically, it represents only a very small and atypical part of the American landscape: South Florida. Economically, it is unimportant, only

occasionally exploited as an ornamental species. Ecologically, it has no more or less value than the topminnows and live-bearers with which it occurs. It seems by most standards . . . undistinguished. It is, however, outstanding in many ways—and, in one way, superbly qualified to serve as our National Fish.

*The flagfish is an individualist.* Some aquarium writers and hobbyists describe it as shy and peaceful fish, compatible with members of different species as well as its own kind. Others describe it as a pugnacious ruffian having “stormy” relations with its own kind and aggressively bullying others. Behavior of the flagfish depends on the fish and its circumstances.

*It is resilient.* Wetland populations can be devastated by drought, yet within weeks after water has refilled their pools and backwaters, flagfish rebound with abundant plump and colorful fish. Eggs are particularly hardy, sometimes surviving long exposure to air, yet still hatching into lively, fast-growing adventurous youngsters.

*It is respected at home and abroad.* Few aquarium books published in this country omit this species, providing brief descriptions of its care and noting its occasional availability. British and European publications are less restrained, enthusiastically describing its beauty, detailed recipes for successful propagation, and occasionally lamenting the infrequent availability of specimens to hobbyists.

*The flagfish is distinctively American in appearance.* With its unusual markings, bright colors, and lively movements, the male of this species really does resemble an American flag snapping in the breeze. The dark blotch below the dorsal fin and the alternating rows of red scales on the deep, broad body are reminiscent, respectively, of the blue field and the red and white stripes on the American flag. Consequently, writers from the 1930s to today frequently insist on calling this fish the “American flagfish.” Some writers go further and describe its pigmentation as “patriotic.”

How could a National Fish be more appropriately attired than to be dressed as our best-known national symbol—Old Glory?

### **Cast Your Ballot**

Which species do *you* believe should be our National Fish? One of the above? Or another species entirely? Photocopy the ballot shown here, vote, comment on your choice if you want to, and send it to: NANFA, 1107 Argonne Drive, Baltimore, Maryland 21218 USA. You can also send an e-mail to [ichthos@comcast.net](mailto:ichthos@comcast.net). After a selection is made, all nominators will be acknowledged in *American Currents*.

Comments may be used with or without attribution in future publicity of the proposal. Nominator of the winning species and a randomly selected supporter of that species will win a free year's membership in NANFA. Only NANFA members

in good standing (i.e., dues paid through voting deadline) may vote, and members may only vote once. Deadline for voting is October, 15 2005. ←

# NANFA Ballot for National Fish

Please indicate only one fish each as your first and second choice.

You may write in your own candidates if the fishes listed do not represent your own choice for a National Fish.

Fish	First Choice (check only one)	Second Choice (check only one)
bowfin	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
minnow	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
pumpkinseed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
rainbow darter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alaskan salmon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
flagfish	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
write-in:	_____	_____
write-in:	_____	_____

Please mail completed ballot to:  
**NANFA National Fish Contest**  
**1107 Argonne Drive**  
**Baltimore, Maryland 21218 USA**

Or send an e-mail (by Oct. 15, 2005) to [ichthos@comcast.net](mailto:ichthos@comcast.net).  
 Written ballot must be signed below and postmarked no later than Oct. 15, 2005.  
 Unsigned or late ballots will not be counted.

Print your name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_