# FISH TV: OBSERVING NATIVE SUCKERS UNDER THE ICE



Mapleton, Minnesota

Cord-cutting seems to be the newest trend, especially among millennials like me. Instead of cable TV, many are purchasing streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. Personally, I've discovered a completely different way to cut the cord. Warning: you may be tempted to move your living room atop an icy river that is brimming with fish life.

Avid ice fishermen are well aware of the activities of their favorite gamefish species underneath the ice. Panfish, Walleye Sander vitreus, Northern Pike Esox lucius, etc., have well-publicized patterns of activity, diet, and habitat use. However, winter activities of suckers of the family Catostomidae—commonly the dominant large fish species of Midwestern rivers—are mysterious to most people. In south-central Minnesota, most rivers are home to 6–10 species of sucker. Here in the Corn Belt, suckers roam the bottom of these rivers much like bison used to roam the now mostly vanished prairies. A compelling group, I am exceptionally fascinated by them.

One way to enjoy suckers, of course, is angling. Success can be excellent throughout the open-water season, and during the right situations they can be enjoyable to observe visually in clear water. The problem in the Ice Belt, of course, is that open water on rivers gives way to hard water (ice) for around three months. (Four months if we are lucky/unlucky, depending on how many times I've gotten my vehicle stuck in snowbanks that year.) Luckily, I stumbled across a method to enjoy these fishes all winter long.

I only started targeting suckers through the ice on rivers over the past three ice seasons (2017–19). It's a basic endeavor: canvas deep, slow pools where you previously encountered fishes in the late fall with an array of set-lines rigged with nightcrawlers. Slipsinker rigs or heavy tungsten jigs work fine. Then, wait until a rod tip starts jiggling. Soon, you've got a wriggling sucker of any number of species through the hole.

### Photos by the author.

Collin Nienhaus is a science teacher at Maple River Public Schools in Mapleton, MN. A lifelong fish enthusiast, he cut his teeth fishing for bullheads in southern Minnesota pothole lakes and by middle school was surfing government agency databases for information on fish distribution. He has a backyard pond featuring native suckers, and his classroom is home to eight native fish species in a trio of 40-gallon tanks. A multi-species angler in his free time, he enjoys experimenting with off-beat species, locations, and patterns. His favorite angling quarry is, of course, suckers. As a Minnesotan, sitting on a cold bucket and watching rod tips is enjoyable, but I soon discovered a superior experience: sight-fishing. I am far from the inventor of the technique I am about to describe. I first came across mention of winter sight-fishing for suckers from a forum on Roughfish.com and was further inspired by the adventures of the multi-species fishing channel on YouTube called *Uncut Angling*.

Here's how it works:

- 1. Select your river. I have successfully done this on the Watonwan River (Blue Earth County, MN) as well as the Blue Earth River (Faribault County, MN) (Figure 1). Higher-order streams with good winter water clarity, solid ice, and quality sucker populations will work and are common throughout the upper Midwest. Most of my following descriptions will be drawn from experiences on the Watonwan, where I have had greater success.
- 2. Pick a spot. Understanding sucker biology is critical for success. Suckers generally abandon the higher current areas that they have utilized during the summer months and congregate in deep, large, slow pools with fairly fine substrates. This generalization of habitat use



Figure 1. Blue Earth and Faribault counties outlined in red.

tends to be true in my experiences and in the literature (Bowman 1970; Butler and Wahl 2017; Cunjak and Power 1986; Edge et. al 2020; Sule and Skelly 1985; etc.). For mid-order rivers like the Watonwan, much of it is suspected to be devoid of fishes aside from scattered large aggregations. My best spot is an approximately 5–6 feet deep pool with a detritus-strewn bottom (the river averages around 2 feet in depth elsewhere). This pool is about 100 feet in length and is on an outside bend with fallen timber at the head and tail end. On the inside turn is a shallow (1-3 ft) sand flat that extends another 200 yards upstream of the pool, which suckers appear to sometimes utilize when feeding. The downstream end of this pool transitions into deep cobble at the head of a shallow riffle that normally remains open during winter.

- 3. Be safe. River ice is significantly more dangerous than lake ice, so it is imperative that the location has been scouted during open water. Keep in mind that the slow pools you are looking for will normally have the best ice anywhere on the river. Conversely, fishless areas—shallow water areas with faster current—build ice slowly and groundwater seeps weaken ice. In 2018, I fished on 15 inches of ice in mid-February within 30 yards of an open water riffle (Figure 2). I typically wear a life jacket, floating bibs, and follow common-sense ice safety practices.
- 4. Be prompt. Suckers are active and aggressive during the early-to-mid ice period. By late ice (normally early February), activity slows to a crawl. I have sighted 30–40 fish per trip at one location, only to come back to the same spot two weeks later and see nothing. During these slower times, I have attempted to take advantage of the curiosity and gregariousness of winter suckers by deploying a sucker-pattern spearing decoy. In a small sample size,



Figure 2. The author's favored location on the Watonwan River, Blue Earth County, MN. This photo demonstrates the unpredictability of river ice, as the author is standing on a foot or more of solid ice a stone's throw from open water.



Figure 3. The author with an iced Silver Redhorse.

its effectiveness is inconclusive but intriguing enough to continue. The fish will begin a ravenous pre-spawn bite a week or two prior to the river break up, but since this burst of activity is being stimulated by rising flows and dirty water, sight fishing is no longer feasible. These fish can be caught traditionally.

5. Cut your hole. Before any unnecessary work is done, be certain that you can clearly see the bottom. (This is a mistake you make only once!) There are many ways to properly cut a sight-fishing hole. The larger, the better, and I ususally drill out a grid of 4 x 3 with an 8-inch auger. If you choose to remove the ice block rather than push it under the ice, be sure to place it out of the way as to not create a snowmobile hazard. I use a portable shelter, so it is critical that I mark my hole at the end of the day. One or two sticks is not enough; make it look like a muskrat lodge for the safety of others. Finally, your shelter will need to be adequately darkened, and the sunlight needs to be reasonably bright to see well. As an aside, the amount of snowpack on the ice has a significant impact on visibility, and I am starting to suspect it also has an impact on sucker activity levels.

It is not easy work to set-up, but the pay-off is incredible. I still remember the first time I saw a fish. It was over a sand flat in much shallower water than I typically fish now (no more than 24 inches). It was a big, lazy Silver Redhorse *Moxostoma anisurum* (Figure 3) that slowly made its way through the hole, past my bait, and under my feet without noticing my presence. It's a heart-pounding experience whether or not the fish cooperates with your offering. (In reality, I think my *actual* first sighted river fish was a pesky 13-inch Walleye *Sander vitreus* that immediately slammed my worm, but I don't like that story as much!)

Before I describe what an average day of sight-fishing for suckers looks like, let me more thoroughly describe my pre-



Figure 4. A school of Quillback drifting through the hole suspended high in the water column.

ferred river. The Watonwan River is a prairie stream that flows through a watershed in south-central Minnesota that is 87% row-crop agriculture (Boettcher and Davis 2020). For much of the year it is stained with sediment and sometimes algae with visibility measured in mere inches. It is quite flashy, and the late summer low-water baseflow is around 60 cubic feet per second. In the fall and winter, runoff and algal growth is limited, so visibility is quite good (5-6 feet or more). Stream surveys from 2013 by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency show that the sucker assemblage in this reach is dominated by Golden Redhorse M. erythrurum ~42% and Shorthead Redhorse M. macrolepidotum ~21%. Next most abundant are Quillback Carpiodes cyprinus ~17%, Silver Redhorse ~9%, and Northern Hog Sucker Hypentelium nigricans ~9%. White Sucker Catostomus commersonii, Bigmouth Buffalo Ictiobus cyprinellus, and Highfin Carpsucker C. velifer make up the small remainder.

A good day on the ice might include 30–50 or more fish passing through the hole. Redhorse are by far the most common sighting. They tend to embark on feeding excursions of 2–5 fish. They may feed in the middle of the pool or move along the detritus-sand transition on its edge. Golden Redhorse are common, aggressive, and caught the most frequently. The next most frequent catch is the equally aggressive Silver Redhorse. They ap-



Figure 6. Silver Redhorses on a feeding foray at the edges of the sight hole.



Figure 5. A large school of Common Carp swimming through the sight hole after being spooked by people walking on the ice.

pear to comprise a higher proportion of the fish community in this wintering hole than indicated in summer stream surveys, suggesting they are concentrating here from elsewhere. (Or they are under-sampled in the summer.) Shorthead Redhorse are the least aggressive of the redhorse and seem to be the most tactically discerning while feeding. They can be caught, however. White Suckers are caught quite frequently and are reasonably game to my presentations. Like Silver Redhorse, they are much more abundant here in winter than in summer surveys. Presumably, fish from much more abundant headwater populations join these winter aggregations. Curiously, I have never seen a Northern Hog Sucker, despite them being moderately common in this reach. Uncommon Bigmouth Buffalo and Highfin Carpsucker have not been seen either.

Quillback have produced some of the most interesting observations. I once watched a school of 5–6 adult Quillback drift aimlessly through my hole with their dorsal fin rays nearly scraping the bottom of the ice (Figure 4). I did not observe mouth movements that would indicate feeding. They simply seemed to be loafing. More commonly, loners or smaller groups will slowly cruise through the bottom half of the water column in a similar seemingly purposeless fashion.

Suckers are my target, but they are not the only species in the wintering holes. Walleyes are a common co-inhabitant and are a thrill to sight fish. One small (~12 in) specimen was hooked and unsuccessfully lifted fully out of the water twice before I successfully hooked and landed it on the third strike. It was either very hungry or had poor short-term memory! Common Carp Cyprinus carpio—a common species in this river—act peculiarly under the ice. Sometimes they are seen drifting lazily like Quillback in the middle of the water column alone or in small groups. Other times, they move in unusual directions (across current, downstream) in large schools with multiple year classes. One time I even witnessed a carp stampede that was prompted by the approach of my fishing partners from upstream. Approximately 30-40 carp blitzed at break-neck speed through my hole (Figure 5). What that large school was doing beforehand will remain unknown. Carp certainly do not feed like suckers in winter, as I have never witnessed one do so.

Rounding out my list of species observed is Black Crappie *Pomoxis nigromaculatus*. In this river, crappies are rare vagrants, so it was much to my surprise that a single adult of about 9 inches swam to the edge of the hole, closely watched me and my bait, and swam off after several minutes. I have never observed small species (e.g., minnows, darters, chubs, etc.). Further, I have never observed Channel Catfish *Ictalurus punctatus* or Northern Pike, two large species that have moderate populations in this river.

Watching "fish television" is undoubtedly my favorite way to enjoy fish (Figure 6). It allows you to be much more in tune with fish behavior than during any other time of the year. Fish are merely feet away from you. Trying to entice a curious redhorse to bite a tiny chunk of worm is as addictive as binging any show on Netflix. Watching a 23-inch Walleye turn on a dime and engulf your bait as the mid-winter sun is setting is memorable. Seeing Quillbacks swim by so closely that you could reach down and pet one is powerful. If you are crazy or fortunate enough to live in the Ice Belt, consider safely giving this technique a chance. If your rivers don't freeze, come join us for lefse, hotdish, and pop and have a go at it. We're reasonably friendly.

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