

What's in a Name? . . . The Olympic Mudminnow

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To be safe, I checked the phone book for any Mr. or Mrs. Mudminnows that I might offend with this statement, so here it goes: “Mudminnow” is a really bad name. Come on, if your name is Mike Mudminnow, for example, you’re gonna get beat up. You’ll have to really earn your respect. (Note: I’m not advocating violence against people with funny names, but hey, kids can be cruel.)

People have scoffed when I’ve tried to talk seriously about Washington’s special little native Chehalis River fish. This fish gets very little respect, and I think it’s mostly because of its name. If it were named “Olympic monstertruckfish” people would probably have posters of it in their bedrooms.

Heck, maybe a bad name is a good thing if you are a fish. Who would want to eat something called “mudminnow?” Someone would probably taste an Olympic espressofish, and if it tasted good there could be trouble. Hip urban professionals would probably pay a dollar to have one sprinkled on their mocha. Examples exist of fish with bad names who should have left well enough alone. You may have seen a fish called “orange roughy” in the market. Before there was a market for this fish, it was a slimehead. Would you pay good money to eat a slimehead? Probably not. But people are paying big bucks to eat orange roughy. See what happens when you go around trying to please people?

The scientific name of the Olympic mudminnow is *Novumbra hubbsi*. The worst thing that would happen to you if your name was *Novumbra hubbsi* is that lots of people would ask you where you are from.

Why should you get excited about the Olympic mudminnow? Oh boy, where do I start?

Reason #1 There are only *five* species in the mudminnow family (Umbridae) worldwide. Compare that to the 66 species in the family Salmonidae, which includes the salmon, trout, and char. Or compare that to the number of species in the family Cyprinidae, which includes the carps and true minnows. (I can’t give you an actual number because it would be a tremendous waste of tax payers’ dollars for me to sit here and count up this list I have. Let’s just say there are thousands of species in the family Cyprinidae.) So you can see that mudminnows are not your run-of-the-mill fish.

Reason #2 Those five species have a strange distribution. There is one in Washington, one in Alaska, one in the Great Lakes region, one the in the East Coast states, and one in Europe. Scientists get pretty excited about these unusually wide distributions—it presents a little puzzle that they can bore their dates with over an otherwise romantic dinner. In fact, a similarly strange distribution in the family Osteoglossidae (one in Africa, three in South America, and three in Australia) served as a clue in figuring out the theory of plate tectonics and continental drift. Actually, scientists believe that the Olympic mudminnow’s restricted range is due to having been isolated by the advance of glaciers thousands of years ago.

Reason #3 Olympic mudminnows *only* occur in western Washington, and the Chehalis River basin is probably the best place to find one. Like bird watchers, there are fish watchers who go around looking for different species to add to their life lists. If fish watchers want to see an Olympic mudminnow, they have to come here. They would probably buy some gas and a sandwich, and maybe stay in a hotel, which certainly wouldn’t hurt the economy. Anyway, they are



A male Olympic mudminnow, *Novumbra hubbsi*, from an unnamed tributary to Cook Creek on the Quinalt Indian Reservation, Washington
 Photograph by Christopher Scharpf.

the only fish endemic to Washington—which means they are the *only* fish species that lives *only* in Washington.

Reason #4 They can breathe air from the atmosphere. Olympic mudminnows typically live in boggy, weed-choked areas with very little current. I was once looking for frogs down in the Coffee Creek area, and I fell into a ditch that was so weed-choked that I didn't see it. After my so-called friends quit laughing, we netted some mudminnows out of the opening I made in the weeds. Water in these places is often very low in dissolved oxygen, which fish normally absorb through their gills. Breathing air allows mudminnows to live where other fishes cannot. The flip side of this is that they have trouble living where other fishes *do* live since they don't have any obvious way to avoid being eaten by predatory fishes. A mudminnow that finds itself mixed up with a cutthroat trout is probably a snack. In fact, one biologist in my office calls the mudminnow a "predator idiot," but I prefer to think of them as "predator challenged." (Credit Carrie Cook-Tabor for the "predator challenged" joke.)

Here's some other general information:

The first time I saw Olympic mudminnows I immediately thought they were smallmouth bass fry. Then I noticed that the fins are in the wrong places and I said, "Whoa, what's this?!" The moral of the story is that if you think you have a bass fry, look closer. Not only are the fins placed differently, but there are no spines in them.

Their average size is a little over two inches. They are not picky eaters, and will consume small worms, crustaceans, insects, and other aquatic organisms. They spawn in the spring. The male establishes a territory and warns off intruding competitors. If the intruder ignores the warning posture—*look out!* The defender hurls himself at high speed at the intruder's body. The impact can knock the intruder off his fins. Eventually, the male hopes to attract a female with his dancing and pretty blue spawning colors. She lays her eggs in the weeds, he fertilizes them, and the eggs are left to hatch without care from the parents. (See *Inland Fishes of Washington* by Wydoski and Whitney for a more detailed description.)

I haven't figured out how to neatly end this little essay, so I'll just say, "Support your local endemic fish." 