COMMON

# FISH OF NORTH DAKOTA







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### **PIKE FAMILY**





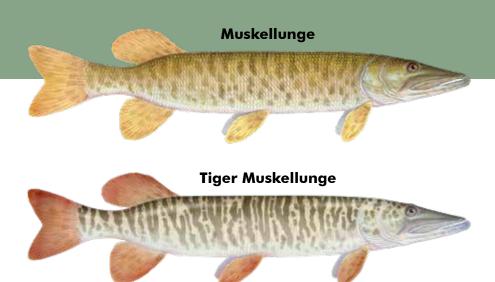
There are two members of the pike family in North Dakota, the northern pike and muskellunge. Both have long bodies and long snouts with large teeth. The dorsal fin is located far back on the body.

#### **Northern Pike**

Pike are marked with horizontal body spots and never have more than five pores on each side of the lower jaw. Pike have scales covering their entire cheek. The northern pike was named North Dakota's state fish in 1969.

Pike feed on a wide variety of foods including other fish, aquatic insects, salamanders, frogs and even baby ducks. Pike often get a bad rap, because of their protective slime coating. They are excellent fighters and one of North Dakota's best-tasting fish. In North Dakota, pike can reach lengths over 40 inches and live into their teens.

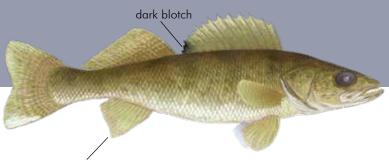
### PIKE FAMILY



#### Muskellunge

Muskellunge commonly have vertical dark bars on their sides, though spotted and clear variations are also found. Muskellunge have 6-8 pores on each side of the lower jaw, which helps distinguish them from northern pike. They have scales only on the upper half of the cheek. Muskie are found in a select few North Dakota waters and can attain lengths exceeding 50 inches.

The tiger muskie is a hybrid, a cross between a female muskellunge and a male northern pike.



2 spines and 11-14 soft rays in anal fin

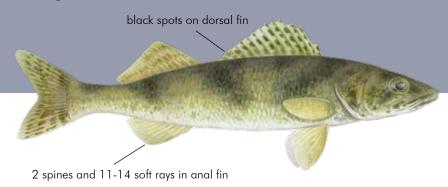


Members of the perch family have two completely separated dorsal fins. The first fin is spiny, while the second fin has soft rays. Walleye, sauger and yellow perch are popular game fish in this family. Darters, which seldom exceed 4 inches, also belong to the perch family.

#### Walleye

Walleye are dark-olive, with an overall golden brown mottling and a white belly. A black blotch on the lower rear portion of the front dorsal fin helps identify this fish. Walleye prefer sand and gravel bottom areas, habitat commonly found in our large waters. With large eyes highly adapted for gathering light, walleye are most active during low light periods.

Walleye are highly sought by anglers, especially in the big systems of Lake Sakakawea, Lake Oahe, Missouri River and Devils Lake. Stocked fish also do well in many of North Dakota's prairie lakes. North Dakota walleye can reach lengths in excess of 30 inches and live more than 20 years.

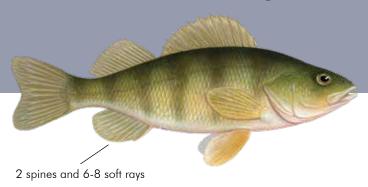


#### Sauger

Sauger are a native fish that resemble walleye but are usually thinner in build. They have a blotched body color and rows of dark spots on the dorsal fin instead of the one black blotch of the walleye.

Sauger typically inhabit turbid and fairly fast-moving water of rivers, such as the Yellowstone River, and streams.

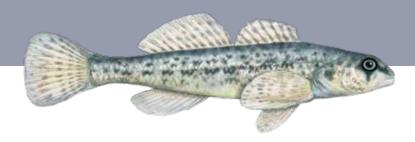
The saugeye is a cross between a walleye and sauger but cannot be positively identified by external physical characteristics.



#### **Yellow Perch**

Yellow-green in color, yellow perch have 6-8 dark bars running up and down their sides. They have two spines and 6-8 soft rays in the anal fin, while walleye and sauger have two spines and 11-14 soft rays in the anal fin. Spawning perch drape gelatinous ribbons of eggs, called skeins, over flooded vegetation or other structures. This spawning characteristic results in perch populations thriving in waters with newly flooded vegetation.

Perch are a popular ice fishing target as they can be easy to catch and are quality eating. Perch rarely live longer than 10 years of age.

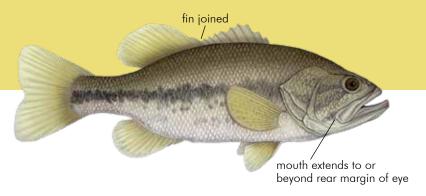


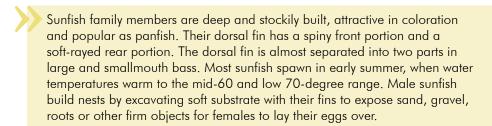
#### **Johnny Darter**

The Johnny Darter is one of several species of darters found in North Dakota. The colorful species can be identified by the series of black "w" or "x" shapes scattered across its sides.

Darters live in swift-moving streams and apparently are not important prey for larger fish because of their small size and habit of hiding under rocks and in crevices

Adults are typically 1.5 to 2.5 inches long. They feed on small aquatic insect larvae.

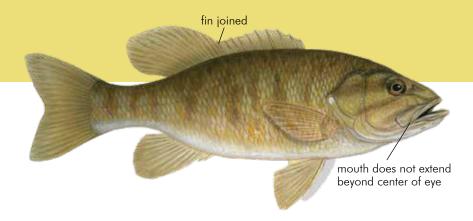




#### **Largemouth Bass**

The back and upper sides of the largemouth are dark green and its sides have dark irregular patches. As its name implies, the mouth is large, with the end of the upper jaw extending to or beyond the rear margin of the eye. It prefers small lake habitat, with ample shallow water and weed beds. Largemouth bass typically feed on other fish, especially bluegill when they are present.

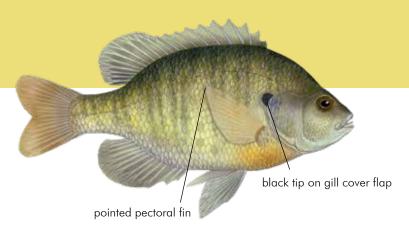
Largemouth bass are more common in southern states, where water is warmer throughout the year. They are excellent fighters on hook and line, being a favorite pursuit of anglers for their sporting qualities.



#### **Smallmouth Bass**

The smallmouth is similar in color to the largemouth, except for barred markings on its sides. The mouth is smaller and the rear of the upper jaw does not extend beyond the center of the eye. It prefers rocky habitat and is common in many of North Dakota's larger reservoirs.

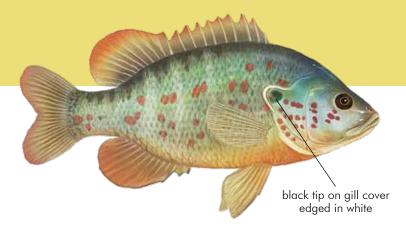
Smallmouth bass are an underutilized resource in North Dakota and provide an excellent fight on hook and line. Smallmouth bass eat a variety of fish, insects and invertebrates. They are particularly fond of crayfish.



#### **Bluegill**

This wonderful and scrappy little fish varies in coloration, but usually is dark olive above, with dark vertical bars on the upper sides and orange or yellow on the throat and belly. Its gill covers are blue with a black tip on the flap. Bluegill have a relatively small mouth, and often feed on insects or other invertebrates.

It is probably the most popular member of the sunfish family in North Dakota, however, at times it may be stunted due to overpopulation. They are often called sunfish or sunnies.

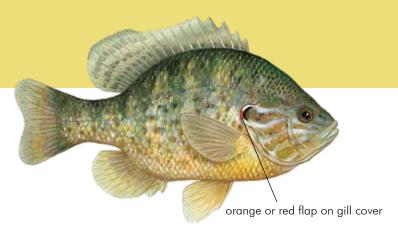


#### **Orangespotted Sunfish**

The orangespotted sunfish is similar in shape to the bluegill, but usually smaller in size with adults only 3 to 4 inches in length. It is a very colorful fish, owing its name to the abundant orange spots on its head and sides.

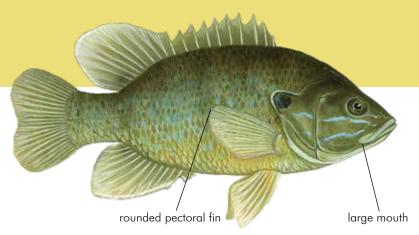
It has a black tip on its gill cover that is edged in white. It prefers shallow, turbid lakes and rivers. It is not common in North Dakota.

These fish are seldom caught by anglers and therefore are not observed often.



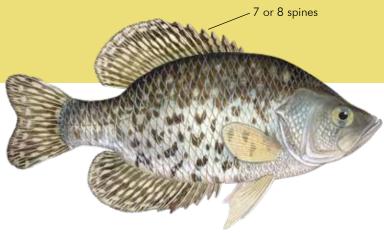
### **Pumpkinseed**

Similar to the bluegill, but lighter in color and usually not as large. It has a red or orange spot on the flap of the gill cover. It may hybridize with bluegill and is not abundant in North Dakota.



#### **Green Sunfish**

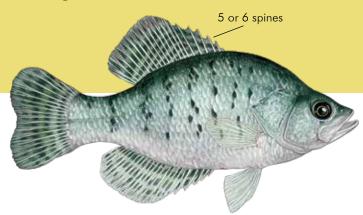
The green sunfish is small and hardy. Able to tolerate a wide range of environmental conditions, they often over-populate waters. It also resembles a bluegill, but has a much larger mouth and a black tip on the gill cover, edged in a lighter color. Most common in southwestern North Dakota, it will hybridize with bluegill where both are present.



#### **Black Crappie**

Flat and silvery and marked with irregular dark spots, the crappie is an attractive and desirable fish. The black crappie is positively identified by its 7-8 spines in the dorsal fin.

It prefers clear water conditions and feeds primarily on small fish as an adult. Black crappies can reach lengths of 17 inches and live into their teens.

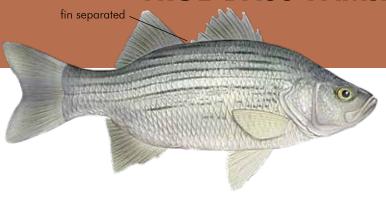


#### **White Crappie**

Looks similar to the black crappie, but only has 5-6 spines in the dorsal fin. The dark spots on its sides are consolidated into vertical bars. The white crappie is more tolerant of turbid water and well-suited to reservoirs where those conditions exist.

Black and white crappies are commonly caught together. Anglers will often locate crappies suspended in the water column, typically in relation to creek or river channels in reservoirs.

## TEMPERATE OR TRUE BASS FAMILY





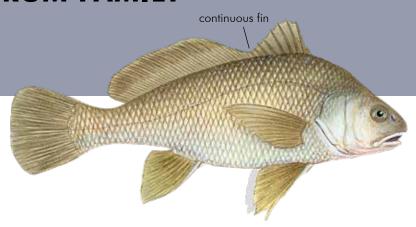
The introduced white bass is the only member of this family in North Dakota. The dorsal fin of the bass family is separated, not joined as in the sunfish family.

#### **White Bass**

This silver-gray fish has rows of broken, dark, narrow stripes running partially the length of its body. At times, it reproduces abundantly and then the population seems to almost vanish until conditions are favorable. It has done well in our large waters such as Devils Lake. Some call this fish a silver bass.

White bass are commonly found in schools, and feed on a variety of insects, invertebrates and small fish.

### DRUM FAMILY



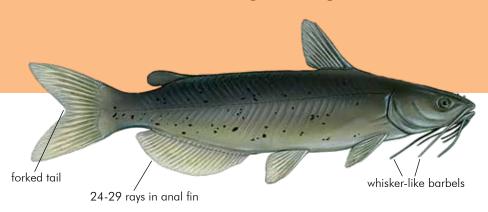
This family contains many saltwater fishes, but only one that lives entirely in freshwater. Some drum species have complicated swim bladders and make audible sounds, especially during spawning season.

#### Freshwater Drum

Also known as sheepshead and grunter, it is silver-gray and deep-bodied. The top fin is long and almost separated into two parts. The tail is rounded. It has two "lucky stones," or ear bones, located in its head. These stones are called otoliths and are used by fish for balance, orientation and sound detection. All fish have these structures, but they are larger and more pronounced in drum.

The drum resides on the bottom in calm areas of deep water bodies. At first glance, this fish can be confused with a white bass. Drum are excellent to eat after removing the thin layer of red, fatty meat on the skin side of the flesh.

### **CATFISH FAMILY**





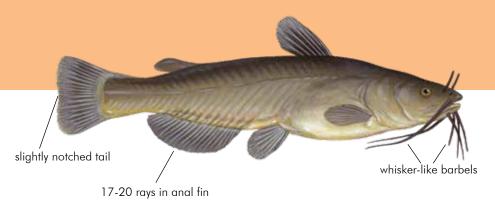
Catfish family members range in size from small to large. Catfish have adipose fins, and get their name from their whisker-like barbels. They do not have scales and their smooth skin contains taste buds across their entire body.

#### Channel Catfish

The channel catfish is our most widespread member of the catfish family. It has a deeply forked tail, is a grayish brown color, and sports an anal fin with 24-29 rays. Small channel cats often have small black body spots. Channel catfish have relatively poor vision, and use their highly developed sense of taste to locate food in turbid waters.

The Red River, Missouri River and Lake Oahe are excellent catfishing locations. Catfish are an underutilized resource in the state and are excellent eating. Large channel catfish in North Dakota can exceed 30 pounds and live more than 20 years.

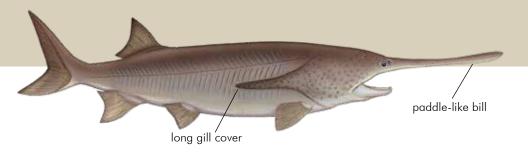
### **CATFISH FAMILY**



#### **Black Bullhead**

The black bullhead is our most common bullhead. Compared to catfish, bullheads are stockier, darker in color, have a more rounded, slightly notched tail, and are not as large. North Dakota also has yellow and brown bullheads. The black bullhead has 17-20 rays in the anal fin. There are also variations in color in the three bullhead species as the names suggest, but not as noticeable as might be expected.

### **PADDLEFISH FAMILY**



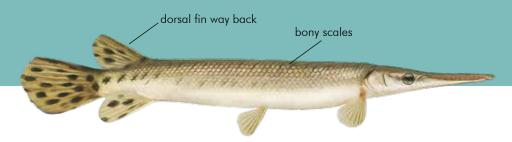
There is only one member of the paddlefish family in North Dakota and it is easily recognized by its long, paddle-like snout.

#### **Paddlefish**

Almost shark-like in appearance, the paddlefish skeleton is made almost entirely of cartilage. The paddle-like bill, known as a rostrum, and long gill covers are covered with electro-receptors that are used to locate prey. It is a large fish that feeds on plankton, so it seldom is taken on lures or baits. Snagging is the accepted method of taking paddlefish during a special season in North Dakota. This prehistoric fish is closely managed to avoid overharvest. Paddlefish have an established spawning run upstream from Lake Sakakawea into the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. Also called spoonbill in southern states, female paddlefish commonly grow to 100 pounds.

Paddlefish are a long-lived species, with some living past 60 years of age in North Dakota. Male paddlefish reach reproductive maturity around age 10, while females typically mature around age 17.

### **GAR FAMILY**



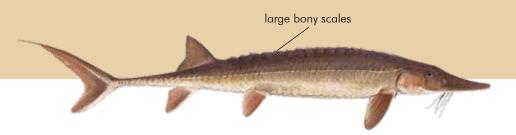


Gar are primitive fish, often referred to as living fossils. Their long bodies are reminiscent of pike when seen near the surface of a quiet Missouri River backwater. Gar have hard, diamond-shaped scales and their long thin jaws have many short, sharp teeth. Gar have the unique ability to breathe atmospheric air by gulping it into their swim bladder, which acts as a primitive lung.

#### **Shortnose Gar**

This tough, bony fish is seldom taken by anglers, but occasionally by people bowfishing when they find them sunning near the surface. Long and slim, it grows to about a 30-inch maximum length. It is armor-plated, large toothed and is an interesting fish that was probably more abundant before the large Missouri River dams were built. Shortnose gar are the only gar species in North Dakota.

### STURGEON FAMILY



Sturgeon are primitive fish with a cartilaginous skeleton, shovel-like snout, four barbels under the snout in front of a toothless mouth, long shark-like tail, and bony plates or scutes on the body. They have small eyes, and use a highly developed sense of taste to locate food in turbid water. Their streamlined body shape makes them well-suited for swift-moving waters, and they are found in the Missouri, Yellowstone and Red rivers.

#### **Shovelnose Sturgeon**

The shovelnose sturgeon, which seldom exceeds 5 pounds, is our most abundant sturgeon. It is recognized by scutes on its body, short snout and barbels located in front of the mouth. The two center barbels are almost as long as the outside barbels. Sturgeon are slow-growing, late-maturing fish with a long life span, which makes them sensitive to overharvest. The law requires that all sturgeon must be released immediately to protect the larger pallid, which looks a lot like the shovelnose at a young age.

### **TROUT FAMILY**





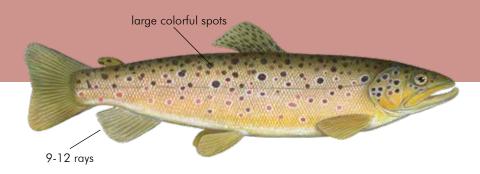
In North Dakota, members of the trout family are all introduced. Trout are beautiful fish, sporty to catch and fine eating. North Dakota habitat does not provide the conditions for trout to spawn and reproduce successfully. They must be grown in a hatchery and stocked into area lakes.

#### **Rainbow Trout**

The rainbow trout has been widely stocked in North Dakota and has been the most successful. It varies in coloring, but usually has pinkish streaks on its sides and small black spots on its sides, fins and tail. The rainbow has 9-12 rays in its anal fin.

Rainbows prefer colder water temperatures and are most active in winter, spring and fall in most lakes. They grow well in the Missouri River System, but have also done well in some smaller lakes. Trout are powerful fighters.

### **TROUT FAMILY**



#### **Brown Trout**

The brown trout is native to Europe and can survive in warmer water conditions than the rainbow. It is found in the Missouri River System and a few lakes where it is regularly stocked. Like the rainbow, it has 9-12 rays in the anal fin. It has spots that are much larger and more colorful than those of the rainbow. The spots on the brown trout may be black, brown, orange or red and surrounded with a light halo. On large browns, the spots may be irregular shaped or even x-shaped. The brown usually does not have spots on its tail.

### TROUT FAMILY



#### **Chinook Salmon**

Chinooks, also called king salmon, are stocked in Lake Sakakawea and provide anglers with a great fight on hook and line. The inside of the lower jaw is blackish, compared to the white jaws in rainbow and brown trout. They are spotted similar to a rainbow trout. Chinooks have a long anal fin that contains 15-17 rays. In late fall when they reach spawning conditions, they darken in color and gradually deteriorate until death. Chinooks thus vary from silvery to nearly black. North Dakota conditions prevent chinooks from reproducing successfully. They are the largest trout found in North Dakota.

### **COD FAMILY**





Almost eel-like in appearance, with a small head and small eyes, the burbot is considered the only member of the cod family in our waters.

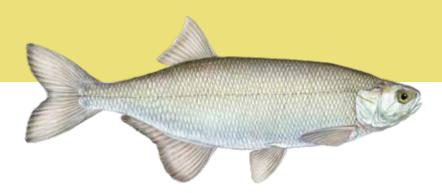
#### **Burbot**

The burbot is a beautifully colored fish, with a single barbel under its chin, rounded tail and long spineless anal and dorsal fins.

Also known as a ling, burbot are great predators and therefore can be caught on a variety of fishing tackle. Likely because of their snakelike appearance, they have been killed and discarded by anglers for no reason. Burbot are excellent eating fish.

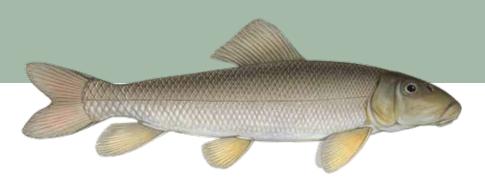
Burbot are most active in cold water and spawn under the ice in the winter or early spring.

### **MOONEYE FAMILY**



#### Goldeye

Goldeye are found in both the Red River and Missouri River systems. The goldeye is described as flat-sided and silvery, with a large golden eye and only one dorsal fin located almost directly above the anal fin. It is often called skipjack or shiner. It is important as a forage fish for predators like catfish and pike. They are bony fish, best prepared for eating by smoking.





Suckers are native fish and as their name implies, have sucker-like mouths with large lips and no teeth. They are suited to feed on the bottom and serve as forage for other fish.

#### **White Sucker**

Like other members of the sucker family, the white sucker has no spines in its fins. It has many small scales and ranges from a dark color above to a light color below, being darker in color during the spawning season. It is found in both rivers and lakes and may be taken by anglers who fish with worms on the bottom.

White suckers may become overabundant in lakes and must be managed to allow room for other more desirable fish to live. It is not legal to use suckers in most North Dakota waters as baitfish. This management technique is used to prevent introduction and overpopulation of suckers in area waters.



#### **Bigmouth Buffalo**

Buffalo have heavyset bodies, large scales and are blue-green to bronze in color. It is the largest member of the sucker family. The bigmouth buffalo has a relatively large mouth for a sucker, located at the end of its snout.

Commonly mistaken for a carp, buffalo are not related to common carp. They are native to large river habitats, and feed mainly on plankton. Thus, they are not commonly caught by anglers, but are a primary target for those who bow fish.

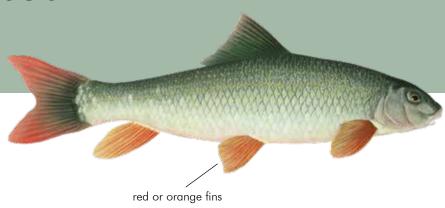
Recent studies have shown bigmouth buffalo can live to very old ages, with some fish over 100 years old recently documented in neighboring Minnesota.



#### **Blue Sucker**

The blue sucker gets its name from its bluish-gray appearance, particularly males that may become dark blue-black during breeding season in late spring and early summer. Like most members of the sucker family, they have a sucker-like mouth and feed on small bottom-dwelling organisms. They are easily distinguished from other suckers by their long dorsal fin. Blue suckers often grow larger than other suckers, reaching up to 36 inches.

Blue suckers prefer swift current and are often caught in main channel areas of large- or medium-sized rivers, such as the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers.



#### **Shorthead Redhorse**

This redhorse is generally found in rivers. It has larger scales than most other, similar suckers. Its silvery color and reddish or orange fins make it an attractive fish. However, few anglers fish for redhorse in North Dakota.

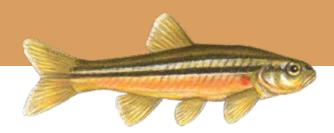


This family comprises the largest number of fish in North Dakota, with about 30 species of minnows found statewide. These minnows all have a single dorsal fin. They can be an important source of food for other fish as well as birds and mammals, and in many streams they are a good indicator of water quality and ecosystem health.

#### **Fathead Minnow**

Widespread and prolific, this abundant minnow is very important as a bait-fish. Fathead minnows are identified by their small, compacted scales near their head, which become progressively larger toward the tail of the fish. They have a soft dorsal fin, with a half-spine at the front. Males have black heads and horn-like projections across the snout during spawning.

Fatheads grow to a length of 1.5 to 3.5 inches. They are opportunistic feeders, eating algae, plant fragments, plankton or insects.



#### **Northern Redbelly Dace**

The northern redbelly dace is a small minnow native to North Dakota's prairie streams. They have two dark lateral stripes running from their snout to tail. Although their bellies are typically yellow or silver, they get their name from the bright red bellies that males display during spawning.

With relatively large eyes, northern redbelly dace are sight feeders, consuming a variety of plants and small insects. Northern redbelly dace prefer clear, cool, slow-flowing streams. They can often be found in pools with vegetation for cover and/or food. Thus, spring-fed streams with undisturbed shorelines are important habitat features for these colorful native minnows.



#### **Creek Chub**

Creek chubs have a dark spot at the base of the dorsal fin and another at the base of the tail. A dark lateral stripe from their head to tail is usually quite evident in younger creek chubs, but can fade as the fish age.

This chub may grow to 12 inches and is found mainly in rivers and large streams with relatively clear water and sand or gravel substrate. Some people like to fish for them and others use them as baitfish



#### **Common Carp**

Introduced carp have multiplied and occupy most North Dakota waters. Carp root up vegetation and contribute to turbid water conditions detrimental to game fish and waterfowl. Common carp are considered an aquatic nuisance species in North Dakota. Carp have two barbels on each side of the jaw.

### STICKLEBACK FAMILY



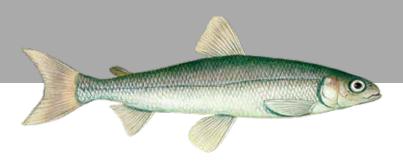


Sticklebacks are hardy little fish, with noticeable spines on the dorsal area of the back.

#### **Brook Stickleback**

Rarely exceeding 3 inches, it survives in shallow lakes and streams where few fish can live. The 5 prominent spines protruding from its back make it easy to recognize. They may be mixed in with bait minnows, so anglers may first become acquainted with the stickleback in their minnow buckets.

### **SMELT FAMILY**





Primarily a marine family that contains 10 species of small fish. Some live in estuaries and others enter rivers and streams to spawn.

#### **Rainbow Smelt**

Smelt are slender, silvery fish with a large mouth and well-developed teeth and adipose fin. Smelt eat a variety of foods, including insects, plankton, invertebrates and fish. Smelt can prey heavily on small fish, including other smelt. First stocked in Lake Sakakawea in 1971, smelt have multiplied and spread throughout the Missouri River System.

They are an important source of food for salmon, walleye and other predator fish. Most adults are generally 5-8 inches long. Smelt prefer cold water and spawn shortly after ice-out. They have a short lifespan, with few living beyond 5 years.

### **CURRENT NORTH DAKOTA FISH SPECIES**

| CURREI                 | II NOKIH L | DAKOTA FISH SPECIES   |                  |
|------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| CATFISH                |            | PADDLEFISH            |                  |
| Black Bullhead         | Native     | Paddlefish            | Native           |
| Brown Bullhead         | Native     | PERCH                 | ranve            |
| Channel Catfish        | Native     |                       | N.L. it          |
| Flathead Catfish       | Native     | Blackside Darter      | Native           |
| Stonecat               | Native     | lowa Darter           | Native           |
| Tadpole Madtom         | Native     | Johnny Darter         | Native           |
| Yellow Bullhead        | Native     | Logperch              | Native           |
| CODFISH                |            | Sauger                | Native<br>Native |
| Burbot                 | Native     | Troutperch<br>Walleye | Native           |
| DRUM                   | ridiivo    | Yellow Perch          | Native<br>Native |
| Freshwater Drum        | Native     | Zander                | Nonnative        |
|                        | ridiive    |                       | Nonnanve         |
| GAR                    |            | PIKE                  | A.L              |
| Shortnose Gar          | Native     | Northern Pike         | Native           |
| KILLIFISH              |            | Pure Muskellunge      | Nonnative        |
| Banded Killifish       | Native     | Tiger Muskellunge     | Nonnative        |
| LAMPREY                |            | SHAD and HERRING      |                  |
| Chestnut Lamprey       | Native     | Gizzard Shad          | Native           |
| Silver Lamprey         | Native     | SMELT                 |                  |
| MINNOW                 |            | Rainbow Smelt         | Nonnative        |
| Bighead Carp           | Nonnative  | STICKLEBACK           |                  |
| Bigmouth Shiner        | Native     | Brook Stickleback     | Native           |
| Blacknose Shiner       | Native     | -                     | radiive          |
| Bluntnose Minnow       | Native     | STURGEON              | NL it            |
| Brassy Minnow          | Native     | Lake Sturgeon         | Native           |
| Carmine Shiner         | Native     | Pallid Sturgeon       | Native           |
| Central Mudminnow      | Native     | Shovelnose Sturgeon   | Native           |
| Central Stoneroller    | Native     | SUCKER                |                  |
| Common Carp            | Nonnative  | Bigmouth Buffalo      | Native           |
| Common Shiner          | Native     | Blue Sucker           | Native           |
| Creek Chub             | Native     | Golden Redhorse       | Native           |
| Emerald Shiner         | Native     | Greater Redhorse      | Native           |
| Fathead Minnow         | Native     | Longnose Sucker       | Native           |
| Finescale Dace         | Native     | Quillback             | Native           |
| Flathead Chub          | Native     | River Carpsucker      | Native           |
| Golden Shiner          | Native     | Shorthead Redhorse    | Native           |
| Hornyhead Chub         | Native     | Silver Redhorse       | Native           |
| Lake Chub              | Native     | Smallmouth Buffalo    | Native           |
| Largescale Stoneroller | Native     | White Sucker          | Native           |
| Longnose Dace          | Native     | SUNFISH               |                  |
| Pearl Dace             | Native     | Black Crappie         | Native           |
| Northern Redbelly Dace | Native     | Bluegill              | Native           |
| Plains Minnow          | Native     | Green Sunfish         | Native           |
| Pugnose Shiner         | Native     | Largemouth Bass       | Nonnative        |
| Red Shiner             | Native     | Orangespotted Sunfish | Native           |
| River Shiner           | Native     | Pumpkinseed           | Native           |
| Sand Shiner            | Native     | Rock Bass             | Native           |
| Sicklefin Chub         | Native     | Smallmouth Bass       | Nonnative        |
| Silver Carp            | Nonnative  | White Crappie         | Native           |
| Silver Chub            | Native     | TEMPERATE BASS        |                  |
| Spotfin Shiner         | Native     | White Bass            | Nonnative        |
| Spottail Shiner        | Native     | TROUT                 |                  |
| Sturgeon Chub          | Native     | Brown Trout           | Nonnative        |
| Western Blacknose Dace | Native     | Chinook Salmon        | Nonnative        |
| Western Silvery Minnow | Native     | Cisco                 | Nonnative        |
| MOONEYE                |            | Cutthroat Trout       | Nonnative        |
| Goldeye                | Native     | Lake Trout            | Nonnative        |
| Mooneye                | Native     | Lake Whitefish        | Nonnative        |
| ,                      | -          | Rainbow Trout         | Nonnative        |
|                        |            |                       |                  |

### GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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Game and Fish



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