

Preface

Recreational fishers, managers, and outdoors persons often have a need or desire to know what kind of fish they have just caught or seen in the water. We hope this guide will make it easier to recognize the fish quickly and with an enjoyable sense of discovery.

Illustrations by the Golden Shiner Society.

Fish species are our most readily observable guides to water quality in nature. To know what species of fish are under your boat or along the shore is to know how suitable the water is for a variety of human uses. For example, if you find a Redhorse Sucker, a Pumpkinseed, and a Smallmouth Bass, you can usually count on good water quality and a good bottom substrate. The combination of species and the number of species that you see around you are the key. The judgment is not simple because we must also take into consideration the fact that combinations of fishes that suggest poor quality in cool waters might indicate clean waters where temperatures are high. The bottom line is that the more kinds of fish you see, the cleaner the water is.

And if you can figure out the names of the species, that knowledge will be both useful and satisfying.

Illustrations by the Golden Shiner Society, and Justin Franklin of the U.S. Coast

Identification of an individual fish can sometimes be frustrating because of natural variation in populations. Different colors and shapes arise from age, sex, season, emotion, and hybridization, among other things. Young fish have large eyes, females tend to blend in with their environment, males ready to mate advertise with bright colors, frightened fish may be dark or pale, and hybrids are a mess to identify (as well as a mess for the environment because they reduce the food and space available to and fitness of natural populations).

The goal of this guide is to enable accurate assessment of fish life in the Great Lakes. To the extent that people can accomplish this, our devotion to biodiversity and clean water will be enhanced.