

THE SUNFISH:

By Gerald Lewis

In most cases, it would be a safe assumption that the first fish we can remember catching as a youngster was a sunfish. These feisty relatives of the largemouth bass, smallmouth bass and crappie are usually the most abundant species and easily caught with just a worm as bait. There is nothing more basic than a youngster, fishing pole, bobber, worm and sunfish. While the sunfish may not be the most numerous species present in some of our larger impoundments, almost without exception they are the most common fish available to the angler in the smaller West Virginia lakes, farm ponds and even some streams.

Seven species of sunfish live within the Mountain State. These include redbreast sunfish, green sunfish, pumpkinseed, orange-spotted sunfish, bluegill, longear sunfish and redear sunfish – colorful names for colorful fish! All these fish have the same panfish-like shape and similar life histories. They spawn in the mid-spring through early-summer, and males build and guard nests where females lay eggs. Most sunfish have very small mouths, and therefore can only eat small-sized items including insects, crayfish, worms and very small fish. Males, like most bird species, are more colorful than their female counterparts. Most sunfish do not grow much more than six inches long, and a 10-inch sunfish should be considered a great trophy for West Virginia waters. The best-suited sunfish for our ponds and lakes are bluegill.

Sunfish spawning time is a primetime to catch the large males as they perform nest-guarding duties. Spawning will occur in groups of fish in fairly shallow



Daniel Miller

Talia Miller proudly holds her first fish — a green sunfish — caught in Dixon Lake in Monongalia County.

OFTEN, A YOUNG ANGLER'S FIRST CATCH

water. This activity can be observed, if the water is clear. In lakes, these spawning areas can be found near shore. Fishing spawning areas thoroughly can yield several large and colorful male sunfish. The largest nesting areas occur in water from two to six feet deep.

Live bait and small artificial lures can be equally effective regardless of the sunfish species. As previously mentioned, fishing a spawning bed full of large males will provide some of the fastest action imaginable. After the spawning season and as summer progresses, fishing near brushy and weedy cover with bait such as earthworms, mealworms, crickets and grasshoppers on a size 6 or smaller hook will prove very effective. Small plastic grubs and crappie tube jigs of 1/32-ounce or 1/16-ounce size and bright in color will be readily grabbed by hungry sunfish. During the hottest summer months, sunfish may feed in shallower water early and late in the day. Fishing deeper, cooler water that contains adequate dissolved oxygen will generally result in better mid-summer catches of good size “sunnies” on hot summer days.

Excellent winter action can also be found if the angler is willing to auger or chop holes through the ice, searching for schools of large sunfish. In winter, live bait, such as mealworms or tiny goldenrod gillworms, will be eagerly taken by the nearly dormant sunfish. A good supply of the gillworms can be obtained by splitting open the swollen nodes of goldenrod stalks during the fall and winter to reveal the small grubs. Use a small hook, about size 10, for these small winter baits.

Most sunfish species readily hybridize, and accurate identification is often tricky and generally unnecessary. The important thing is that they are always eager to devour the angler's offering. This trait has resulted in the sunfish putting more smiles on youngsters' faces than any other fish. For this, I salute the diminutive cousins of the largemouth and smallmouth bass. May they continue to fulfill their important role in the development of our future generation of anglers.

Gerald Lewis is a retired DNR fisheries biologist.



Pumpkinseed sunfish.

Courtesy of www.biology.ucok.edu



Orange-spotted sunfish.

Courtesy of briancoad.com



Bluegill.

Steve Shaluta



Redear sunfish.

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