

FISH

Status: Native to Northeast S.D.,
Introduced Statewide

SMALLMOUTH BASS

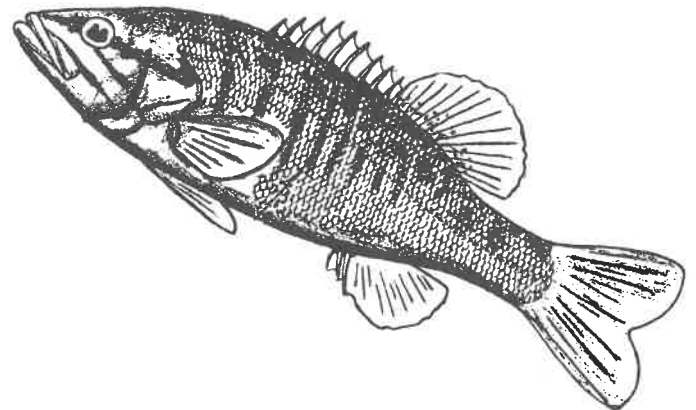
(*Micropterus dolomieu*)

Description

Smallmouth bass are moderately large, robust fish, usually attaining a length of more than 12 inches (30.5 cm), and rarely more than 20 inches (50.8 cm). In South Dakota, these fish can weigh up to about 5 pounds (2.3 kg), but the average weight is probably around 1 pound. Their color ranges from dark, olive brown to pale, yellow green with dark vertical bars on the sides. The belly is a *mottled*, dusky off-white, which gives it a salt and pepper look. On the head are 3 or 4 "tiger stripes" that *radiate* from the eye rearward. The eye is usually red or orange. The upper jawbone does not extend behind the eye. Thus, this fish has a small mouth when compared to the look-alike largemouth bass whose upper jawbone extends beyond the eye.

Distribution

Smallmouth bass were originally found in most *freshwaters* of East-central North America. In South Dakota, they were limited to the upper Minnesota River *drainage* in the extreme northeastern corner of the state. Smallmouth bass were first stocked in the *tailrace* below Ft. Randall Dam near Pickstown. They have since been introduced to the rest of the Missouri River, reservoirs, lakes and other rivers across South Dakota.



Natural History

Smallmouth bass belong to the sunfish family, Centrarchidae. Other members of the family include largemouth bass, rock bass, crappies, and the various sunfishes. All sunfish family members are nest builders. The male uses his tail to sweep away decaying *vegetation* and *debris* to clear a nest on a sand or gravel shoreline. He then attracts one or more females to the nest to lay eggs. After fertilizing the eggs, he guards the nest and resulting *fry*. A few days after hatching, the young fish leave the nest and disperse to find their own food and living space.

In South Dakota, smallmouth bass exist in lakes, reservoirs, and rivers. They prefer rocky-gravelly areas in clean water. In lakes and reservoirs, smallmouth bass

frequent areas of moderately deep water that are devoid of *vegetation*. In rivers, they are found in areas of moderate to slow current near the cover of rocks or tangled roots.

Smallmouth bass feed during spring, summer and fall when the water temperature is near or above 50°F. Almost no feeding occurs during the winter. Adult fish feed on insects, crayfish, and small fishes, such as minnows, suckers, shad, and even bullheads. Growth is moderate, with smallmouth bass reaching 4 to 6 inches (10.2-15.2 cm) their first year, and 8 to 13 inches (20.3-33 cm) in three years. The largest smallmouth bass recorded for South Dakota is a 5 pound, 5 ounce (2.4 kg) fish caught in Pickerel Lake in 1991.

Smallmouth bass seldom roam far from their home territory. During one study, fish that were tagged and released in Lewis and Clark Lake were usually recaptured at the original release site, although two fish were recaptured 25 miles upstream from the release site.

Significance

Smallmouth bass are *voracious predators* in any *habitat* they occupy. By feeding on many types of aquatic life, they serve to convert energy from many small forms to a larger one that is more suitable for use by larger *predators*, such as humans.

Young smallmouth bass may also serve as food for other fish.

The sporting quality of smallmouth bass is legendary. They have been the topic of many books and articles in sporting magazines. In South Dakota, smallmouth bass have become a popular sport fish. They provide much angler excitement and enjoyment wherever they are found.

Conservation Measures

Smallmouth bass populations in South Dakota are secure because of their presence in many waters. Game, Fish and Parks fishery personnel monitor smallmouth bass populations to determine abundance and size. Studies are also conducted on angler enjoyment, success, and harvest of the species to determine angling impacts. Information from studies is incorporated into management plans and activities to ensure that the smallmouth bass populations remain healthy. This information is also used to develop fishing regulations that restrict the number of fish an angler may take home for eating. When necessary, fish hatcheries can readily raise *fingerlings* for stocking into waters where smallmouth bass populations need to be replenished or augmented. Anglers are also helping conserve smallmouth bass by practicing catch and release fishing. Fish are released to be caught again rather than being taken home for eating.

Glossary

Debris - remains of broken down plants.

Drainage - area of land drained by a stream or river.

Fingerlings - small, young fish.

Freshwater - lakes and rivers where water is not salty; not oceans or salt water.

Fry - recently hatched fish, usually less than 3 inches long.

Habitat - type of site where something lives.

Mottled - having colored spots or blotches.

Predator - an animal that eats another animal.

Radiate - spread out from the center.

Tailrace - river immediately downstream from a dam.

Vegetation - plants.

Voracious - having a huge appetite.

References

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- Tomelleri, Joseph R. and Mark E. Eberle. 1990. Fishes of the Central United States. U. Press of Kansas. Lawrence, KN
- Wickstrom, Gerald. 1993. Discover the Smallmouth, South Dakota Conservation Digest, 60 May/June (6-7).

Outreach

- American Creek Fisheries Station. S.D. Dept. Game, Fish, and Parks, 1125 N. Josephine St., Chamberlain, SD 57325. Phone: 734-6633.
- Blue Dog Lake Fish Hatchery, RR 1, Box 22 A, Waubay, SD 57273. Phone: 947-4657.
- Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, RR 1, Box 293, Yankton, SD 57078. Phone: 665-3352.

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