

1879

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Recommended Citation

Tiffany, W. L. (1879). The Black Bass in Minnesota. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science, Vol. 1 No. 6*, 374-381.

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THE BLACK BASS IN MINNESOTA.

BY W. L. TIFFANY.

With an outfit of lakes estimated at no less than seven thousand in number, to say nothing of the countless running water courses with which the State is supplied, Minnesota is naturally highly fertile in fish. Together with the brook trout, white-fish and Superior salmon (of two varieties), the pickerel, black bass, wall eyed-pike, channel cat-fish, and many of their kindred of lesser fame, are notably abundant within her borders. From its more widely diffused distribution, however, as well as its marked value as a game and food species, the fish held in most general esteem in this region is the Black Bass.

Excepting the utterly stagnant sloughs and shallowest brooks, this fish will be met with in all the various waters of the State, whether river, lake, mill-pond or creek. As seen in the angler's basket, its weight usually runs from one or two to perhaps four pounds; specimens of greater bulk than this last named figure turning up very rarely.

In Minnesota, as elsewhere, the bodily thrift and table excellence of the Black Bass is found to be largely dependant upon the kind of water which it inhabits. The most perfectly developed, as well as the finest flavored specimens of the race, are undeniably the product of the clear aerated lymph of the Mississippi and its tributaries. Next, the larger and colder lakes breed the best fish, while such portions of the tribe as may be the offspring of muddy, sluggish waters, are invariably observed to be of degenerate color and energy, as well as of little account for culinary uses.

The breeding customs of this variety furnish one of the most interesting studies of the kind which the observer may hope to meet with. The proceedings naturally begin with the mating of the fish—a rite that among the interested parties becomes the occasion of much solemn deliberation. Gathering together in large schools, for the most part early in May, the marriageable members of the tribe slowly traverse the circumference of their native lake or pond, or range up and down the banks of the stream or river, as the case may be, in the meantime apparently pondering the question of their amorous preferences with the closest attention. At the close of a period varying from two to four or five days, a solution of the problem seems to be reached by the assemblages, and, as if at a given signal, they break up into pairs which at once hurry off at full speed to the shallows, where they indulge themselves in the pleasures of love-making to their hearts' content till the spawning period arrives. In our latitudes this interesting event usually takes place in the earlier days of June, but with a favorable season it may be somewhat hastened. The eggs differ but little from the like productions of most of our fresh-water fishes, consisting of clusters of yellowish-hued, jelly-like globules, in each of which a darker speck is to be discovered—the real embryo of the forthcoming king of the tide. These germs of her future household hopes, the mother fish, with an instinctive solicitude shared only by a meagre proportion of our Minnesota finny races, carefully deposits in a nest about the size of a dinner-plate, scooped out amidst the sand and pebbles of some reef or flat covered by a depth of perhaps three or four feet of water, and secure from the action of any disturbing flood or current.

Having persevered thus far with their procreative mission, the pair are now observed to exercise the same careful watchfulness over their nest and its contents, which is so notoriously characteristic of many of the birds under the same circumstances. Voluntarily, at least, they never absent

themselves from its immediate vicinity during all the incubatory period, and the visitation to their little territorial domain by other intruding fishes is most promptly repelled. One likewise notices that they mostly refuse all food at the time; and especially it is remarked that while so engaged the attempt to attract their attention to any lure known to the fisherman, is an utterly futile undertaking.

With the appearance of the young—an occurrence said to take place sometime early in July—the office of the male fish as a family character suddenly ceases, and the sole supervision of the fortunes of the fry passes, as is reported, to the female, by whom the growing school is instructed where and how to provide itself with suitable food.

In commenting on the habits of the black bass, Seth Green, one of the fish commissioners of the State of New York, takes occasion to remark as follows, by which statement he seems to authoritatively settle the question as to the practicability of attempting to propagate this species by any other method than those followed by it in a state of nature:

“It has many times been asked of me,” says he, under the date of June 25, 1877, “why the black bass was not hatched artificially by the (New York) Commission. I have not answered it because I do not like to write, and because I thought that some one would make the discovery from actual observation. As it is so simple, I will explain. There are some kinds of fish that cast their spawn, and the parents never look after them again. Nature has provided the young of this family of fishes with a yolk sack that furnishes them with food from seven days to forty-five days, at the end of which time they need food and know how to look for it. The above family of fish do not hatch one fish to every thousand and that are cast in the natural way, and should be hatched artificially, and if they were not they would soon run out. But there are other kinds of fish that make their nests, cast their spawn, and take care of them until they are hatched,

"and then take care of their young two or three weeks after they are hatched. There is no need of hatching them artificially, and if you did they would not live, as they would need a mother's care for some days after they are hatched. They are hatched with scarcely any sack, and need food. They cluster around the mother, and she takes them where the food is, and teaches them how to get it, until they learn how to get their own food—just as an old bird teaches her young after leaving her nest how to get their own food. Then she teaches them how to take care of themselves. It would be just as impossible for a young fish belonging to the black bass family to take care of itself just after it was hatched, as it would be for a bird just hatched to take care of itself." With this affirmation the writer concludes his statement by recommending those desirous of stocking fish preserves with the black bass to supply such places with living adult fish, and leave the rest to their ordinary reproductive instincts.

But while it will thus probably be found impossible to breed this fish on any extended scale, and so it in a great measure becomes shorn of any marked mercantile value to the angler, nevertheless, the species, as long as it exists, must incontrovertibly be held in the highest favor. As a merely sporting variety, it is doubtless unsurpassed in the world. Weight for weight, it is the superior equally of the trout and salmon, both in the voracity with which it seizes the sportsman's lure, and the battle which it inaugurates to resist being drawn from its natural element. Like all fresh water fishes, it is, however exceedingly fickle as to the times when it can be induced to take the bait. The mastery of this secret comprises, indeed, the great art connected with its capture. Given, two days of exactly the same clearness of sky and range of temperature, and using precisely the same bait, the sportsman on one day will fill his basket with fish, while with the next he will take his way homeward at night empty handed.

It is found, however, by long experience that the creature is on the whole most eager to feed, and hence is most susceptible to the wiles of the angler in the months of August and September, and especially during the hours of early morning. As at this season of the year the water of our Minnesota lakes begins to lose its summer tepidness, and with the freshness of the young day as a farther incentive to the measure, the fish now generally deserts the dense weed-grown depths which constitute his haunts for by far the most of his career, and forages freely among the shallows. Here, either by trolling the deadly spoon, or by the use of other devices common to him, the duly prompt and enterprising fisherman may count with considerable confidence on securing a generous string of the fish, sometimes in a few minutes.

The black bass is notoriously one of the most predaceous of living fishes. Even observers familiar with marine as well as fresh water fishes, fail to recall one by which he is exceeded in this respect. When he is in chase of a school of minnows—a highly favorite species of prey with him—he affords a sight long to be remembered. He generally happens upon this kind of game in some small cove where his diminutive kinsmen of many kinds resort to bask in the sunshine or hunt for the mites of insects dropping upon the water, and on which they largely feed. Suddenly as espying their opportunity, four or five black bass open a merciless attack upon these assembled innocents, in the fury and determination of their pursuit throwing themselves occasionally fully two feet above the waves, and in their downward plunge closing their jaws unerringly on the victim which they have selected as the immediate object of their aim. This predatory slaughter they sometimes keep up for hours, or as long as the supply of minnows holds out. Catching one of the marauders at this time, and opening his stomach, the receptacle is found to be filled with a mostly sodden mass of minnows packed as closely as herrings in a box. It is to be remarked in this connection that the black bass, in his ultra ravenous moments, dines as

unhesitatingly upon the weaker members of his own race as upon any other fishes of lesser dimensions, and cases have occurred within my own experience where the angler has caught two bass on one hook, the first after having taken the bait and been impaled for his pains, being furiously swooped down upon and swallowed by a larger brother, who likewise found himself pinned beyond the chance of escape.

But minnows are far from constituting the sole food of the black bass. Indeed, the species is little less than a genuinely omnivorous one, red worms, crickets, grasshoppers, fresh water muscles, frogs, crawfish, and many others of the smaller forms of animal life, being found to be included in their bill of fare. When the insect world is in full tide of activity, during the latter part of the summer, they are seen wherever the opportunity awaits them to take up a station for the express purpose of regaling themselves upon the dragon flies, moths, millers, and the like, that happen to fall upon the waves. In rambling about the State, one not unfrequently meets with lakes and ponds where a considerable portion of the growth of trees and brushwood, native to the shores, is finally swept by the winds or other natural causes into a grave in the adjacent waters. These collections of engulfed boughs and branches are habitually seen to become places of ambush for the black bass during the proper season, and from whence they greedily pounce upon any drowning grub or winged insect that they discover. To the fly-fisherman this custom of the species is an all sufficing hint; and in places of the character that I have described, the red iris, or any other gaudy fly, or failing these, a strip of red flannel is to be "played" by the sportsman with the happiest results.

By eastern observers the black bass is ranked among hibernating fishes; such, for example, as the eel, catfish, and the like, which at the approach of winter bury themselves in the mud and lie dormant till spring. In our own portion of the country this habit of the bass is at best a partial one, as he is caught in many of our lakes, as all are aware, at intervals throughout the year.

In Minnesota we only know certainly of one species of black bass—the *Micropterus nigricans*. His twin brother—*Micropterus salmonides*—appears to be more common in the Eastern States, especially New York, than elsewhere, although observers in Illinois and Wisconsin report that in certain waters of these States the two species occur together, even swimming side by side. Admitting the correctness of this statement, the inquiry is one of exceeding interest why one species only is found in Minnesota, when both abound in waters within what is comparatively a little distance from us.

From his rare courage and great vitality, as well as the habit which he has of at least measurably protecting his young, it is clearly obvious that as a species the black bass is one on which Nature has set the stamp of permanence. But one agent at all threatens the existence of the breed—Man! With his inimical and predatory attitude towards all other forms of life which attends his march across the earth, the lord of creation pursues the fish to the death in many ways; but that it will be brought to extinction, or any stage approaching thereto, by legitimate sportsmanship, we need not fear. If these results transpire at all, they will undoubtedly be attributable to the poacher with his net and spear. A decade or so ago, as we all remember, wagon loads of bass were exposed for sale in our streets where we now see merely bushels; the great decline in the numbers of the species hereabouts being almost solely attributable to the unpardonable persecution which it suffers—and more particularly during its spawning periods—at the hands of those whose theory of the piscatory art embraces merely the use of a spear.

To say that this transgression calls for strenuous legislative rebuke is but to express a truism. But for the wisest disposition of the subject, it also becomes requisite that the relations of our entire piscatory kingdom should be studied from a fresh point of view. The waters of our State are practically infinite in their expanse, and their adaptability to the support of untold varieties of fish follows as a natural consequence.

Thus, besides preserving the black bass in beautiful supply, room should be made along with it for many of its chosen brethren of the deep, exotic as well as native, since nothing is surer than that the revenues of the State, as well as the welfare of its population, are to be signally enhanced thereby.