

The Other Fish Species – Outdoor Canada 2002

And Now For Something Completely Different

Tired of following the crowd? Try one of these offbeat alternatives to Canada's mainstream sportfish

It was lunchtime on a typical spring day in Ottawa when linguistics professor Rob Stainton grabbed his fishing rod and breezed out of his office at Carleton University. Upon reaching the nearby Rideau River, he started casting a jig tipped with a plastic grub. For Stainton, fishing for smallmouth bass was a great way to unwind, and soon the first fish struck—but it was anything but a bass.

Several heart-pounding minutes later, he landed a 10-pound fish with a leather-tough mouth and lead-coloured scales as big as loonies. A carp. Stainton smiled as he slipped the fish back into the murky water. A few casts later, he hooked, fought and landed its twin. A piscatorial conversion was in the making. "Since that day I've become a fanatical carp fisher," he says. "I'm a total addict."

He's not alone. Thirty-seven-year-old Stainton is among a growing number of anglers who have begun fishing for a variety of species long ignored by the less-enlightened majority. Like the international visitors already drawn to this country's overlooked fisheries, they see value where many others see garbage: less competition, a fuller season, more thrills and—often—a tastier meal.

What's more, the rest of us can thank this new breed of angler for helping reduce the pressure on our favourite, mainstream gamefish—if we're not thanking them first for introducing us to a whole new world of Canadian sportfishing, that is.

CARP

Carpers, as carp anglers like to be called, converge each spring on the St. Lawrence River near the southeastern Ontario town of Morrisburg. They come from England, Holland, France, Belgium, China and Germany, and they come for just one thing: the opportunity to catch huge carp weighing as much as 50 pounds.

Evelyn Marshall sees first-hand the excitement these fish can generate. She and her husband, Senator Jack Marshall, run Inn by the Park, a bed-and-breakfast in Morrisburg. Not only is Marshall a carper, her nephew, Kevin White, operates the Canadian St. Lawrence Carp Club out of her inn. Every year between May and October, White leaves his job as a cable repairman in Liverpool, England, to run this catch-and-release guiding service.

To international carpers, especially the British, the nearby St. Lawrence is



Caught in Canada: Carp guide Kevin White with a hefty St. Lawrence River specimen

FISH FACTS

To international carpers, especially the British, the nearby St. Lawrence is carp heaven. “The boys just go crazy over here,” observes Marshall. In England, after all, carp are stocked and discussed with the same reverence North American anglers reserve for bass, walleye and trout. And these guys are definitely fanatics.

Clients depart the inn after an early breakfast and usually don’t return until well after dark. Sometimes they fish all night, sitting in specially designed chairs with retractable legs that fit the contours of the shoreline. If they doze off, they awake instantly when a bite sets off a beeping alarm with red flashing lights. When the weather’s bad, they take cover under domed tents.

Typically, they’ll battle as many as 40 carp, some approaching 50 pounds. And the only complaints you’ll hear will be about the local bowfishers killing or wounding the bragging-size carp they’ve come halfway around the world to catch and release. Not that carp don’t make for good eating—many even consider them a delicacy—but Kevin White and Co. are determined not to do anything to even chance undermining their coveted fishery.

And how does Marshall deal with all this carp mania? By slipping away herself for a few hours of carping. “I’m a big, strong woman, but these fish fight like crazy,” she says, noting that her personal record is 38 pounds. “You might think you have a 60-pounder on and it’s only a 30.” Carp, anyone? ❖

Scientific name: *Cyprinus carpio*

Common names: European carp, German carp, leather carp, mirror carp

Range: Asia, Europe, North America (where they were introduced in the 1830s by way of England)

Habitat: clear or turbid water in low-altitude lakes, ponds and rivers with sub-average oxygen levels and good weed growth

Diet: worms, crayfish, shrimp, chironomid larvae, mollusks, seeds, some types of algae and aquatic weeds

Recommended tackle: nine- to 12-foot, medium- to heavy-action rods; 20- to 30-pound-test line; rod holders; bite alarms; bait such as corn, chic peas, trout pellets, earthworms, chicken livers, oatmeal doughballs and boilies (homemade or commercially manufactured baits made of various ingredients, including chopped luncheon meat flavoured with pineapple, banana and chocolate)

AMERICAN SHAD

When Perry Munro was growing up in Nova Scotia’s Annapolis Valley, the locals really knew how to catch American shad. But their techniques of 40 years ago didn’t much resemble angling as we know it today. Instead, Munro and his King’s County neighbours would dip-net, pitchfork, spear and snag spawning shad with huge treblehooks attached to heavy line. How times have changed.

In the past few decades, residents and visitors alike have discovered that this silver-flanked fish—the largest member of the herring family—provides exciting sport on fly or spin-fishing gear. And one of their biggest fans is 57-year-old Munro, now an artist, writer, guide and owner of a maple-sugar operation in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, on the Bay of Fundy.

Munro’s personal attitude adjustment toward American shad came 25 years ago when he and a friend hit a hot spot on the Annapolis River during their annual netting expedition. In a few hours the pair hauled in 75 fish, but it was the five that Munro caught with the spinning rod he had brought along for the first time that made him see the light. “I couldn’t believe how much fun it was,” he says.

Munro welcomes the growing respect for shad, which has seen most locals trading in their nets for rods and reels. Even catch-and-release is now common, since shad are so full of



Tough customer: Shad may not jump like salmon, but fan Perry Munro says they “fight like demons”

bones that few people eat them unless the fish are smoked. Shad roe is valuable, however, with a plate costing U.S.\$16 in New York restaurants.

Part of this jump in the shad's stature can be attributed to declining populations of salmon and brook trout, forcing both residents and visitors to try out alternative species. As well, many anglers from New England have begun chasing shad runs in Atlantic Canada because their own populations are on the decline due to pollution, dams and overfishing.

The last two weeks of May and the first two weeks of June mark the peak of shad season, when it's not unusual to catch 40 to 50 fish a day ranging in size from three to seven pounds. And while hooked shad may not jump like salmon or rainbow trout, they are nonetheless tenacious fighters. Says Munro: "They fight like demons." ❖

BURBOT

When most anglers are still sawing logs, Zdzislaw Lelek is often already up and at 'em. That's because one of the Calgary electrician's favourite fish—burbot—feed most actively in the dead of night. "If you're in bed, you miss out on good fishing," says Lelek, a Polish national who moved with his family to Alberta in 1992.

Not that other anglers would necessarily share his enthusiasm. In fact, most think this freshwater cod is scary-looking enough in the daytime, let alone at night. And since they're bottom feeders, burbot are doubly scorned as trash fish. That assessment may be ill-founded, but there's no question burbot wouldn't win any beauty contests.

Along with a broad, flat head and gaping mouth, burbot sport a single barbel hanging from their chins and barbel-like tubes protruding from each nostril. Their smooth, slimy bodies are cream-coloured on the belly, with mottled olive-green and shades of brown along the back.

Appearances aside, it's what's inside, delicious, flaky, white flesh, that really counts, says Lelek, who is also president of Calgary's Polish-Canadian Fishing Club. "It doesn't look good," he admits, "but it sure tastes good."

The key to preparation, says Lelek, is to remove the skin and fillet the fish soon after it's caught. Boiled and buttered, its sweet flavour has earned the fish the title of "poor man's lobster." Burbot is also excellent when smoked, and Lelek's wife, Renata, has created a dynamite fish burger recipe that's perfect for the tasty, boneless flesh.

Good eating aside, burbot also provide good sport, says 47-year-old Lelek. Strong, bullet-shaped fish, they tend to hug the bottom and wrap line around submerged rocks and roots. In particular, Lelek recalls an 11-pound specimen he caught one autumn using a frozen smelt on Calgary's Glenmore Reservoir.

Several times during the prolonged tug-of-war, Lelek thought he was going to lose the fish. "It was very strong, a good fighter," he says, noting that often times in the dark it's hard to tell what's on your line until you reel it in. Concludes Lelek: "If you're lucky, it's a burbot." ❖

FRESHWATER DRUM

Twenty years ago, Patrick Campeau was an 18-year-old aspiring pro angler when he entered a freshwater drum tournament on southern Quebec's Richelieu River. Problem was, he'd never fished for drum before and didn't know anything about them.

FISH FACTS

Scientific name: *Alosa sapidissima*

Common names: alose, Atlantic shad, common shad, Connecticut River shad, Delaware shad, North River shad, Potomac shad, shad, Susquehanna shad, white shad

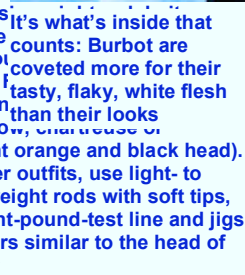
Range: along the Atlantic coast from southern Florida, and from Alaska

Habitat: on their native drift down to spend two to three weeks before returning

Diet: zooplankton

Recommended fishing: use nine-foot, soft

It's what's inside that counts: Burbot are coveted more for their tasty, flaky, white flesh than their looks (white, yellow, orange or fluorescent orange and black head). For spinner outfits, use light- to medium-weight rods with soft tips, six- to eight-pound-test line and jigs with colours similar to the head of the Jig Fly



FISH FACTS

Scientific name: *Lota Lota*

Common names: American burbot, eelpout, freshwater cod, lawyer, ling, loche, lush, maria, methy



No problem, the tournament organizer advised him, just put a live crayfish on a hook, attach a weight 18 inches up the line to hold the bait on the bottom, cast out and wait. Campeau followed the instructions to the letter and soon hooked onto his first drum.

It came to the surface without much of a tussle, but when it saw the boat, it dived to the bottom and hung there. The fish did that four times before Campeau slipped it into his net. It ended up being the smallest of the six drum he caught that day, the largest one weighing in at eight pounds.

In handling the silvery, deep-bodied fish, Campeau soon learned how they got their name—a croaking or rumbling sound that emanates from their air bladders. But what he recalls most is that each one fought with the spunk and strength of a 10-pound-plus walleye. “It was fabulous, simply amazing,” says Campeau, who indeed went on to become a successful pro angler.

Although he didn’t win that particular tournament, Campeau did develop an enduring soft spot for this particular species. So much so that even now, 20 years later, he still enjoys catching and releasing freshwater drum. And this is an angler who has won dozens of pro fishing events, including the 2000 Bass Quebec championships.

Sometimes the Laval angler inadvertently catches drum while jigging for walleye or bass. But more often he catches them on purpose, just for the thrill of it. “If there’s a fish that people should fish more for,” advises Campeau, who also happens to be one of *Outdoor Canada’s* field editors, “it’s the freshwater drum.” ❖

SPINY DOGFISH

Bob Jones has heard the taunting barks many times. Whenever he hooks a spiny dogfish in his home waters off Vancouver Island, it generally evokes a disdainful chorus of “Arf, arf” from nearby anglers. But Jones doesn’t mind. When he’s battling one of these toothy, 20-pound fighters, he’s having far too much fun to let the jeers get to him.



Lots of action: European and Japanese anglers love dogfish, the world’s most abundant shark

“When you get a fish nudging four feet on the line, you’re talking a great deal of sport,” says Jones, author of *Fly Fishing Canada* and editor of

FISH FACTS

Scientific name: *Aplodinotus grunniens*

Common names: croaker, drum, gray bass, grunter, Red River bass, sheepshead, silver bass, sunfish, thunder pumper, white perch

Range: much of the U.S. between the Rockies and the Appalachians, south to eastern Mexico and north through Manitoba to Hudson Bay, as well as parts of Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan

Habitat: prefers clear water, but can withstand turbid conditions; commonly found in large lakes and deep river pools; favours deep water, staying at the bottom but moving shoreward at dusk

Diet: snails, clams, crayfish, insect larvae, minnows, other small fish. It can grow to 50 pounds, but the average is three

Recommended tackle: a six-and-a-half-foot, medium-action rod with eight-pound-test line and crayfish for bait

Island Fisherman magazine. "Pound for pound, they will outfight freshwater gamefish, like lake trout, walleye and pike."

A retired air force sergeant, 66-year-old Jones lives in Courtenay on the eastern shore of Vancouver Island along the Georgia Strait. While the strait is renowned for salmon and halibut, Jones knows that when the action slows down for those preferred species, he can count on tackling dogfish, the world's most abundant shark. Averaging two to three feet in length and weighing up to 20 pounds, dogfish tend to school in large numbers close to the surface, which makes for great sport.

FISH FACTS

Scientific name: *Squalus acanthias*

Common names: blue dog, California dogfish, common spiny fish, dogfish, dog shark, grayfish, Pacific dogfish, Pacific grayfish, Pacific shark, picked fish, spiky dog, spinarola, spotted spiny, spurdog, Victorian spotted dogfish, white-spotted dogfish

Range: temperate and subtropical waters in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, from Chile to Alaska; they can travel 8,500 kilometres a year, migrating with cooler waters as seasons change

Habitat: prefers water up to 1,200 feet deep, but has been found at 2,400 feet

Diet: jellyfish, lobsters, crabs, herring, sardines, anchovies, smelts and smaller dogfish

Recommended tackle: medium to heavy saltwater spinning or fly-fishing gear; wire leader; Buzz Bombs or Zzinger lures; herring strips

Jones has been

catching dogfish since 1958, at first from the shores of a local marina using trout-weight spinning gear and a weighted spinner. “You’ve got your hands full on a light outfit like that, believe me,” he says, especially considering dogfish sport needle-like teeth and sharp, poisonous spines.

Although he releases almost all his dogfish, Jones considers them a delicacy. In 1981, a friend offered him a variety of baked fish sticks, half made with ling cod, the rest with dogfish. Jones preferred the dogfish, and since then he’s been a devotee, even ordering dogfish in restaurants, where it’s billed as Pacific shark.

And he’s not the only one with a taste for dogfish: his European and Japanese friends are thrilled to catch and eat the slender shark. According to Jones, the taste and texture of a small dogfish is superior to many popular white-fleshed fish. If that alone has inspired you to head out after dogfish, remember to ignore the barking of fellow anglers. They’re just jealous. ❖

