

What Kind of Fish Is That?

By Michael A. Kallok

LEARN HOW TO IDENTIFY 14 MINNESOTA FISH SPECIES.

MINNESOTA IS FAMOUS for its waters. Not only does the state have nearly 12,000 lakes, it also has more than 92,000 miles of rivers and streams. All this water is home to many different *species* or types of fish—161 to be exact.

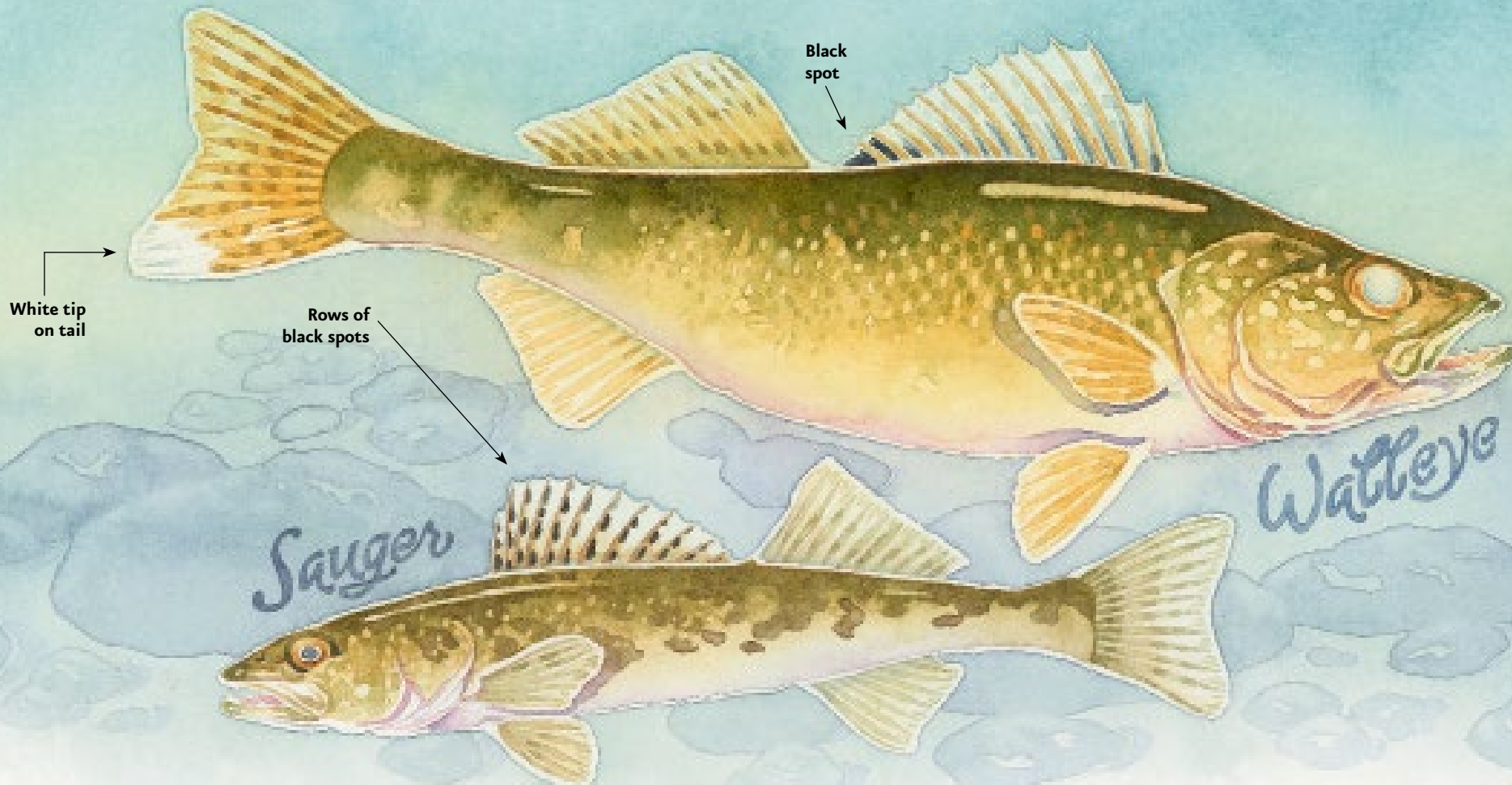
One reason there are so many fish species in Minnesota is because this water offers many different kinds of *habitat*, or places to live. Many lakes in central and northern Minnesota provide the right conditions for sunfish, bass, and northern pike. But many of those waters are too warm for trout, which thrive in the cold streams of southeastern and north-eastern Minnesota and in deep, clear lakes such as Lake Superior.

The state's big rivers, including the Mississippi, Minnesota, and St. Croix, are home to many of the fish that make the fish pond at the Minnesota State Fair such a popular attraction. The paddlefish, with its long, spoon-shaped bill, is easy to identify and hard to mistake for anything else. But identifying some of Minnesota's other fish species is not as easy.

Knowing where different fish species are found is one part of the fish identification puzzle. Size can provide another clue. But the real fun of fish identification is learning where to look to find the details that distinguish one species from another. Let's look closely at 14 popular fish to find the details that make each species different.

Illustrations by Bill Reynolds





Walleye and Sauger

The walleye (*Sander vitreus*) is Minnesota's state fish. Many anglers like to catch this species because it tastes good. Some of the best places to hook walleyes are big lakes such as Mille Lacs, Leech, Winnibigoshish, Upper Red, Vermilion, and Lake of the Woods. Walleyes are also found in about 1,700 lakes around the state and all of Minnesota's large rivers.

Walleyes can grow to weigh more than 10 pounds. This fish has a dark back, a white belly, and sides that can range from an olive brown to yellowish gold. The walleye is named for the milky color of its eye, which is caused by a reflective pigment that helps the fish hunt for prey at night or in cloudy water.

The sauger (*Sander canadense*) looks

almost exactly like a walleye but rarely grows larger than 3 pounds. Saugers are river-loving fish that are common in the St. Croix, Minnesota, and Mississippi rivers and in Lake of the Woods, Rainy Lake, and Lake Kabetogama.

Like walleyes, saugers have distinctive pearlescent eyes. A sauger often has brown splotches on its sides. These splotches can

provide an identification hint, but two fins provide the definitive marks to tell these species apart.

A walleye has a white tip on the lower lobe of its tail fin. A walleye also has one black spot at the rear base of its spiny front dorsal fin. A sauger has no white tip on its tail, and it has rows of black spots running along the spines of its front dorsal fin.

Bluegill, Pumpkinseed, and Green Sunfish

Named for their colorful scales, sunfish can often be seen swimming close to shore or circling beneath a dock. Minnesota has six different species of these pancake-shaped fish.

Most of the time, if you catch or see a sunfish in Minnesota, it will be a bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*), a pumpkinseed (*Lepomis gibbosus*), or a green sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*).

The pumpkinseed has flecks of bright orange and a dark barred pattern on its sides. This sunfish's belly is golden yellow, and its face has light blue wormlike markings.

The bluegill is the largest of the state's sunfish species and can weigh more than 2 pounds. Green sunfish rarely grow larger than 8 ounces, so size can be one clue for

identifying these similar-looking sunfish. The green sunfish, like the pumpkinseed, has blue wormlike markings on its face. The bluegill stands out from both of them with a mouth and gill cover rim that are solid light blue.

The best key to telling these fish apart is found on that ear-shaped flap of skin on the back of the gill cover. A bluegill's ear flap is solid dark blue. A green sunfish's ear flap is dark blue with a light rim around it. The pumpkinseed has a bright red patch on the lower part of the ear flap.

Sometimes you might see a mixed-up sunfish that seems to have characteristics of different species. This can happen when species mix and create a fish known as a *hybrid*.





Northern Pike and Muskie

Northern pike and muskies are torpedo-shaped fish built for short bursts of speed to chase down prey. These stealthy predators will kill and eat other lake creatures including amphibians, young waterfowl, small mammals, and other fish. They're found in lakes and rivers around the state.

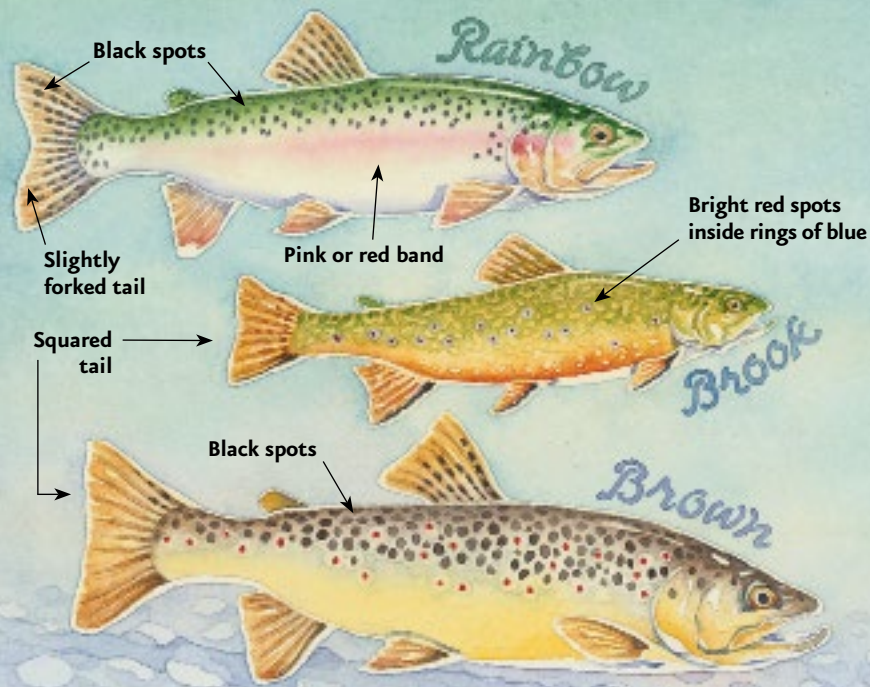
Body markings are one way to tell these fish apart. Northern pike (*Esox lucius*) have light spots on a dark greenish body. Muskies (*Esox masquinongy*) can have spots or vertical bars, but the marks on a muskie are always dark against a lighter body color. Some northern pike

and muskies have no spots at all.

Another clue to tell a northern pike from a muskie is to look at the shape of the tail. The tips of the northern pike's tail fins are rounded, and the tips of the muskie's tail fins are pointed. Another identification key is found on the cheek. A northern pike

cheek has scales all over it. The cheek of a muskie has scales only on the upper half.

These two fish species can occasionally mix to create a hybrid known as a tiger muskie. A tiger muskie has a rounded tail fin tip like a pike—and a dark barred pattern against a light body like a muskie.



Brook, Brown, and Rainbow Trout

The streams of northeastern and south-eastern Minnesota are home to three species of trout: rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), brown trout (*Salmo trutta*), and brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*). These silvery, fine-scaled fish are also found in Lake Superior and other deep, clear lakes where they are stocked. At first glance, these three species can look similar. The tricks to trout identification are tail shape and black spots.

Rainbow trout and brown trout both have black spots on the upper half of their bodies. The brook trout does not have any black spots. The rainbow trout

is silver with a pink or red band along its side and black spots on its slightly forked tail. The brown trout is golden with a square tail that has no spots. Unlike rainbow or brown trout, the brook trout has tan worm-shaped markings on its dark green back and a white edge on the front of its pectoral, pelvic, and anal fins.

Of these three species, brook trout are the only one that is *native* to Minnesota—that is, it has lived here for a long time. Brown trout and rainbow trout were brought to Minnesota by people during the late 1800s and early 1900s.



Flathead and Channel Catfish

Some kinds of fish are known as catfish because they have whiskers like a cat. In Minnesota, the two most common species that people call catfish are channel catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*) and flathead catfish (*Pylodictis olivaris*). Channel and flathead catfish are mostly found in the Mississippi, St. Croix, and Minnesota rivers. Channel catfish are stocked in some lakes and southern Minnesota streams, but one of the best places in North America to catch a large channel catfish is the Red River of the North, on the border between Minnesota and North Dakota.

Catfish get big—really big. The state rec-

ord flathead catfish weighed 70 pounds, and the state record channel catfish was 38 pounds.

The shape of the tail fin is the best way to tell these fish apart. The sleek, gray channel catfish is the only catfish in Minnesota waters that has a forked tail fin. The flathead catfish, which is often dark brown or yellowish brown, has a squared tail fin. If the fish has whiskers, a square tail, and is less than 3 pounds, it could also be one of Minnesota's 3 bullhead species. Bullheads are considered members of the catfish family, but, unlike flathead catfish, no bullhead species have a protruding lower jaw.



Largemouth and Smallmouth Bass

Some anglers love to catch bass because they are action-packed fish, fighting and jumping as they are reeled in. Largemouth bass are most abundant in Minnesota in central and western Minnesota, but they are also found in northern border lakes and river backwaters. A long time ago smallmouth bass were found only in the Mississippi River and the northern Lake Superior basin in Minnesota, but people moved

these fish into other lakes and rivers. Today smallmouth bass are found in 300 lakes and 45 streams and rivers in Minnesota.

Both largemouths and smallmouths have similar football-shaped bodies, and at first glance their mouths don't look all that different. But look more closely and you can tell the two apart. Imagine a line coming straight down from the back of the fish's eye. If the

jaw extends behind that line toward the tail, it is a largemouth bass. If not, it is a smallmouth bass.

Colors can provide other clues. A largemouth bass typically has a dark green back and a whitish belly separated by a thick dark band running down the

middle of its side. A smallmouth bass can range in color from dark green to bronze. All smallmouth bass have dark lines that radiate straight out from the eye, which is often red. A smallmouth bass usually has about 12 darker vertical bars along its sides. 