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Great Lakes 4H Fact Sheet – Carp

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

4-H Club Bulletin

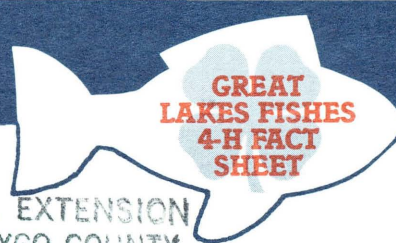
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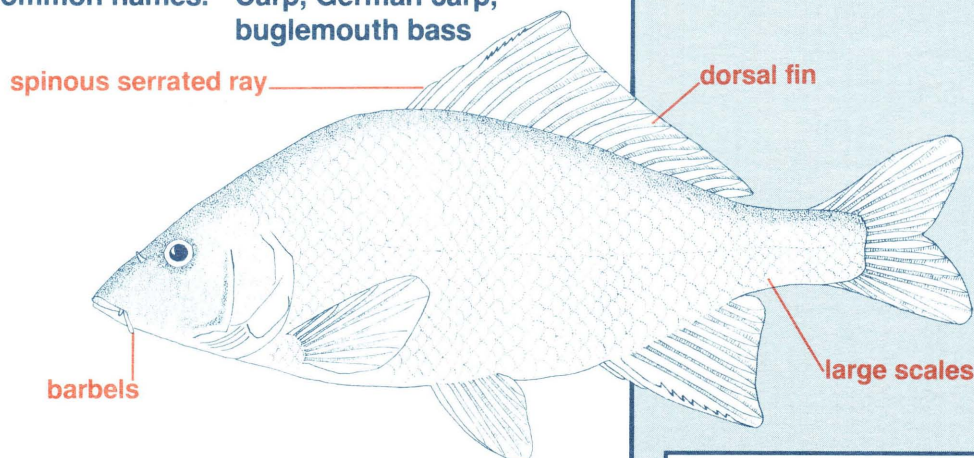
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## Carp

**Scientific name:** *Cyprinus carpio*  
**Common names:** Carp, German carp,  
buglemouth bass



### Description

**M**ost anglers think the carp is a “trash fish.” This reputation is undeserved, however. The carp is one of the largest members of the minnow family; it is a muscular, excellent fighting fish. The carp has a triangular head with a medium-sized mouth. The mouth has fleshy, extendible lips and two **barbels** (small fleshy “whiskers”) on each side of the upper jaw. The carp is closely related to the goldfish, which does not have barbels.

The back and sides of carp vary from orange to brassy olive green. Their bellies are yellow or cream. The forked **caudal** (tail) and **anal fins** (on the underside of the body near the caudal fin) are often reddish. Carp have a single long **dorsal** (back) **fin**. Both the dorsal and the anal fins have one **spinous** (hard) **serrated** (sawlike) **ray** followed by several flexible, **soft rays**. The body is usually covered by very large round scales. In some **strains** (mirror carp), scales may cover only part of the body or be absent altogether (leather carp). These strains are actually different varieties within a species of carp, just as there are vegetable varieties such as beefsteak or cherry tomatoes. Each strain has slightly different physical traits and may be from a different geographical area.

### Life History

**C**arp begin to spawn (breed) in the spring when water temperatures reach about 63°F. They continue spawning throughout the summer, or until water temperatures reach about 82°F. One female will usually spawn with two or three males. They spawn in shallow, grassy or weedy areas of rivers, lakes and ponds. When spawning, the carps’ splashing makes a considerable amount of noise. The female scatters her very small (1 mm to 2 mm) eggs, which stick to aquatic plants. A single female can produce over 2 million eggs.

The **larval** (young) **fish** hatch in only 3 to 6 days, depending on water temperature. For the first few days after hatching the fish remain attached to or near the plants while they absorb their **yolk sacs**. Soon they begin feeding on small **crustaceans** (hard-shelled, joint-legged animals such as crayfish). As they grow, carp eat a variety of plants and aquatic insects (they don’t eat garbage) from muddy lake or stream bottoms. Their feeding behavior often makes the water even muddier.

Until they reach about 3 pounds, carp are eaten by game fishes and by fish-eating birds. Carp weighing more than 3 pounds have few, if any, **predators**. Carp begin to spawn when they

are about 2 years old, and can live to about 20 years. Adult carp can grow to 60 pounds or more, although most carp caught by **anglers** weigh 10 to 15 pounds.

## Fishery

**T**he carp was imported to the United States in the 19th century from Europe, where it was considered a superior game and food fish that could be easily raised in ponds. Only a few carp were stocked in U.S. waters at first; however, those few fish multiplied and spread quickly. In 1831, several dozen French carp, goldfish and carp-goldfish hybrids were stocked in a New York pond and the Hudson River. In 1871, California received five German carp. Most of the carp in the United States today are descended from 345 **domesticated** (tame) carp that the U.S. Fish Commission imported from Germany. These carp were raised in ponds (including those near the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C.) on the East Coast. From 1879 to 1896 the federal government distributed carp throughout the United States and Canada.

There are several reasons why the carp became less popular as a game fish in the United States. First, fisheries biologists discovered that carp crowd out many prized native game fishes. Anti-German feelings during World War I made many Americans dislike the so-called "German carp." And finally, people began to think of the carp as a "trash fish" because it is one of the few fishes that can live in rivers polluted by industrial waste and raw sewage. Today most carp management efforts involve removing carp from rivers and lakes to help more popular game fishes.

Many anglers who have caught carp would disagree with their second class image. Carp are an important recreational fish in much of the Midwest. Some people even pay to catch carp from stocked fee fishing ponds. In many urban areas, carp fishing is a popular activity.

Hook-and-line anglers fish for carp using worms, crayfish tails, corn, potatoes or doughballs. One doughball recipe takes one cup of wheat flake cereal, a few drops of anise oil (licorice flavoring) and just enough water to work the mixture into a doughy ball. Pieces of this doughball will stay pressed around a hook. These baits are usually fished on or near the bottom of a lake or river.

Anglers rest their rods in y-shaped sticks and watch the tips for quick jerks. The hook must be set quickly; carp will spit out the bait if they feel

the hook. Anglers also go after carp with spears, and bows and arrows during the spring.

Small- to medium-sized carp are prized as food by many anglers. Smoked and canned carp are also considered delicacies. Canning causes many of the carp's small bones to dissolve. Large carp (over 5 pounds) sometimes contain toxic substances in their fat deposits. These contaminants may make the large carp unsafe to eat. Check your state fish health advisories to find out whether carp from your fishing waters are safe to eat.

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## Glossary

**Anal fin**—the fin on the underside, between the anus and the tail

**Angler**—one who fishes

**Barbels**—small fleshy "whiskers" a fish uses to taste food that is still outside its mouth

**Caudal fin**—tail fin

**Crustacean**—a hard-shelled, joint-legged animal which breathes through gills (such as crayfish and shrimp)

**Domesticated**—tamed

**Dorsal fin**—fin on the back, usually central in position, with rays or spines

**Larval**—young, immature (larval fish do not look like adult fish)

**Predator**—an animal which feeds on other animals

**Soft rays**—soft rods that support the fins

**Spinous serrated ray**—single hardened sawlike ray at the front of the dorsal and anal fins

**Strains**—members of the same species, but with different physical traits or from different geographic areas

**Yolk sac**—sac containing food for larval fishes; this food is consumed before the young fish begin to eat plants and animals



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