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Great Lakes 4H Fact Sheet – Rock Bass

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

4-H Club Bulletin

Michael F. Masterson, Donald L. Garling, Shari L. McCarty, Fisheries and Wildlife

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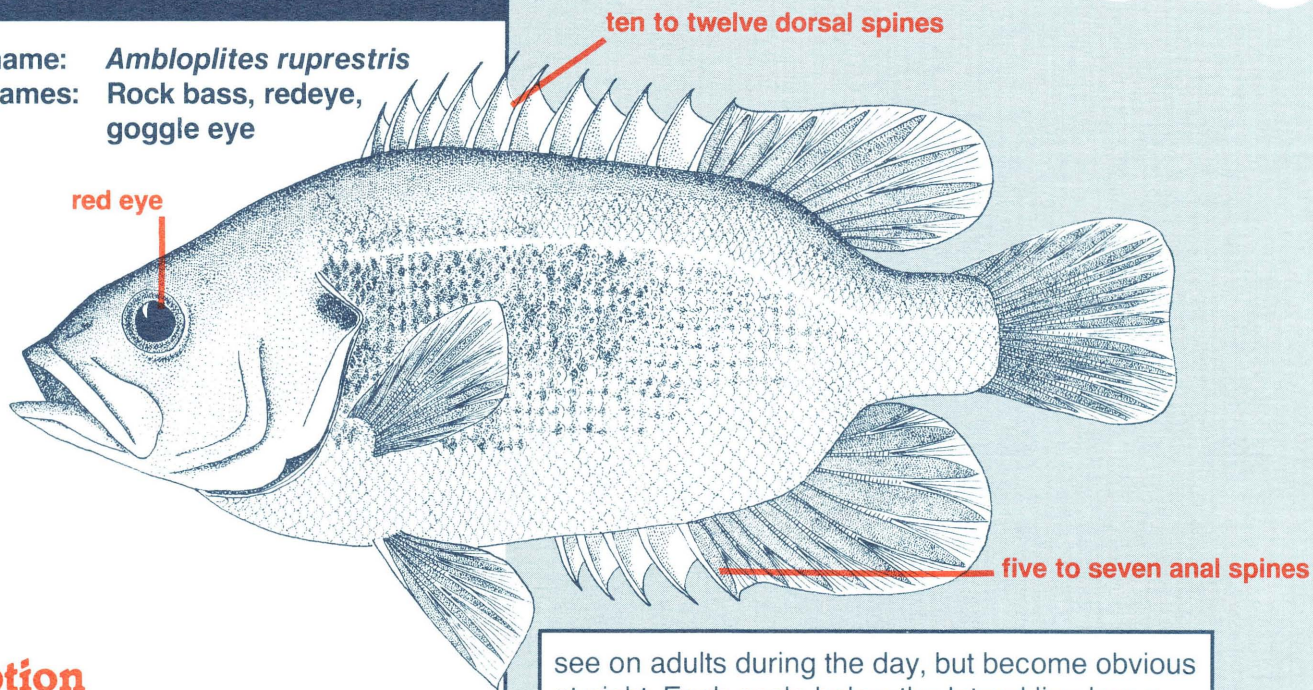
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Rock Bass

Scientific name: *Ambloplites rupestris*
Common names: Rock bass, redeye,
goggle eye



Description

The rock bass is an underrated sport fish that anglers usually catch while fishing for other fish, such as smallmouth bass. It is easy to catch, a good fighter for its size and good to eat. Most rock bass are 6 to 8 inches long and usually weigh 8 ounces or less.

The rock bass has the deep body and flattened sides that are typical of members of the sunfish family. Its mouth is very large; its upper jaw extends back past the middle of its eye, and the lower jaw extends forward past the end of the upper jaw. Small, brushlike teeth cover both jaws, the tongue, the roof of the mouth and the back of the throat. These teeth help the rock bass keep small prey from escaping. The rock bass uses its very large red eyes to seek its prey.

The back of the rock bass is golden brown to olive. This fish is white or silver on the lower part of the head and below the **pectoral fins** (paired fins, one on each side of the body). Light-colored, saddle-shaped marks run over the fish's back and down to its **lateral line**. This is a line which runs from the gill area back toward the tail. Certain cells in the lateral line detect vibrations in the water. The rock bass's saddle marks are hard to

see on adults during the day, but become obvious at night. Each scale below the lateral line has a black spot.

You can tell the rock bass apart from other basses, sunfishes and crappies by counting the spines in the **dorsal fin** (back fin) and **anal fin** (single fin near the tail). Like other basses and sunfishes, the first dorsal fin of the rock bass has 10 to 12 spines. Crappies have only six to eight spines in their dorsal fins. On the rock bass, the anal fin has five to seven spines. Other basses and sunfishes have only three anal spines. Rock bass also lack the colorful "ear flap" seen on many of the other sunfishes.

Life History

The rock bass is **native** to (found naturally in) the streams, lakes and ponds of east central North America. It has also been stocked in many western states. As its common name indicates, it prefers rocky areas of clear, cool- to warm-water streams and lakes.

Rock bass spawn (breed) in the spring when the water warms to 60°F to 70°F. The male uses his tail to sweep an 8- to 10-inch-wide nest in very shallow water. He fans away the silt and

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NEWAYGO COUNTY
817 S. Stewart
Fromont, MI 49412
(616) 924-0500

other debris down to the layer of coarse sand or gravel in the lake or stream bed. Female rock bass gather in pools near the males' nests when they are ready to spawn. Each male drives a female onto his nest and guards her until she has finished spawning. The female lays only a few eggs at a time, which the male fertilizes as they are released. This process takes about an hour, then the female leaves. Later the male may spawn with a second female. He then guards the eggs and nest.

The eggs stick to the sand or gravel until they hatch, 3 or 4 days after they are laid. About 800 young fish (called **fry**) are produced in each nest. The male continues to guard the fry for several days after they hatch. Eventually the young leave the nest and stay in shallow water or around dense beds of aquatic plants for a few months. Rock bass mature in 2 or 3 years and can live for up to 8 years.

Rock bass eat **aquatic** (water-dwelling) and **terrestrial** (land-dwelling) insects, **larval** (young) insects, crayfish and small fishes. They feed most actively in the morning (between 7:30 a.m. and noon) and evening (5 to 7 p.m.). Young rock bass are important food for smallmouth bass, walleye, northern pike and muskies.

Fishery

Rock bass are most often caught in rivers and lakes near brush, fallen trees, rock piles, submerged logs and other types of **structures**. Usually rock bass are caught in water too shallow for smallmouth bass, northern pike and musky. They prefer clear, clean water with sand or gravel bottoms, but they can also be found in **turbid** (cloudy) water with silty or **marl** (soft mineral) bottoms. **Anglers** use live baits (such as small minnows, crayfish and worms) or artificial lures (flies, small spinners, plugs, poppers and so forth) that look like the rock bass's favorite prey. **Still-fishing** (letting the bait

sit still) or fishing with a very slow retrieve with light tackle produces the best results.

Rock bass have firm white flesh and taste terrific when fried in a light batter. Unfortunately, most people don't eat their rock bass catch because they are so small. Since most states don't have size or possession limits on rock bass, you can easily catch enough for a tasty meal. Always check fishing regulations, available where licenses are sold, before seeking this or any other fishes.

Written by:

Thomas Herron, Student Assistant
Donald Garling, Fisheries Specialist
Shari McCarty, 4-H Youth Specialist
Department of Fisheries and Wildlife

Illustration by:

Maureen Kay Hein



Glossary

- Anal fin**—the fin on the underside, between the anus and the tail
Angler—one who fishes
Aquatic—water-dwelling
Dorsal fin—a single fin on the back, usually central in position, with rays or spines or both
Fry—young fish
Larval—young, immature
Lateral line—a line which runs from the gill area back toward the tail; used to detect vibration in the water
Marl—a mixture of minerals forming a soft lake bottom; sometimes used as fertilizer
Native—a species that occurs naturally in an area without being stocked there
Pectoral fins—paired fins, one on each side of the fish
Still-fishing—fishing technique in which the angler casts the bait, then lets it stay still in the water
Structure—undercut stream banks, shoals, fallen trees, brush, rocks, submerged logs or other objects which provide habitat for fishes
Terrestrial—land-dwelling
Turbid—cloudy water caused by small soil particles and other materials

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