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Great Lakes 4H Fact Sheet – Yellow Perch

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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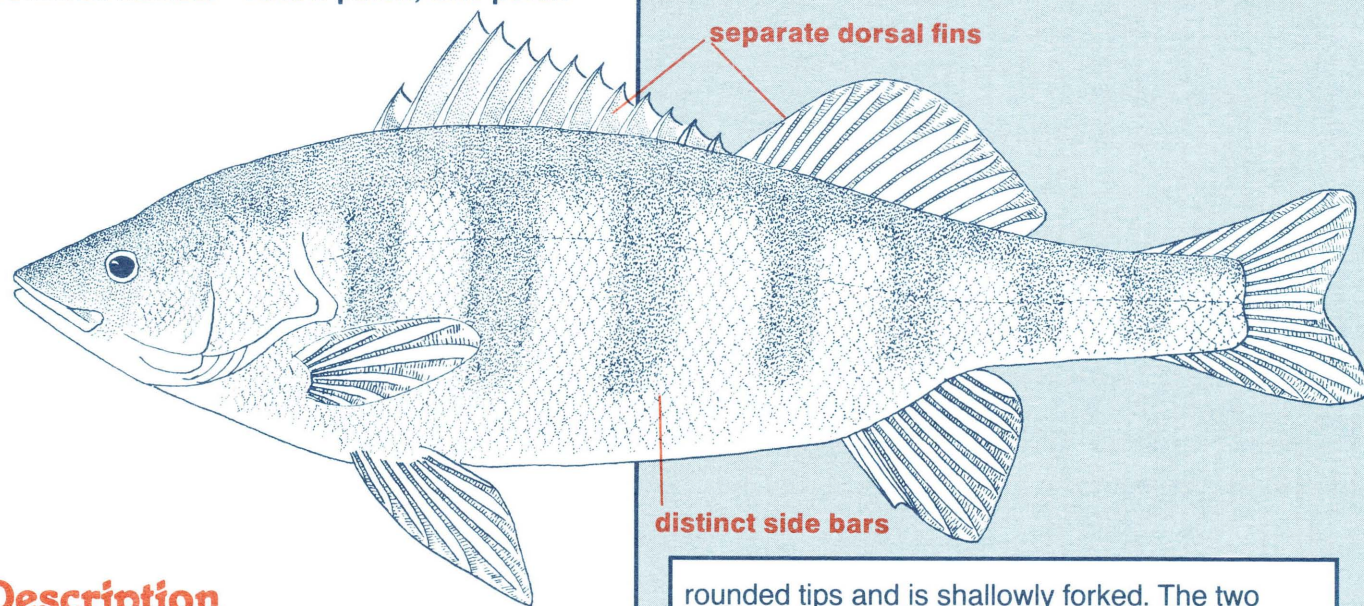
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## Yellow Perch

Scientific name: *Perca flavescens*  
Common names: Yellow perch, lake perch

M.S.U. EXTENSION  
NEWAYGO COUNTY  
817 S. Stewart  
Fremont, MI 49412  
(616) 924-0500



### Description

**T**he perch is a favorite sport fish of Michigan anglers. This is not surprising given the perch's delicious white, flaky flesh and abundance. Perch average 4 to 10 inches long, but the Michigan state record perch was over 20 inches long and weighed more than 3 pounds.

Perch vary in color according to their size and habitat. A perch living in shallow weedy waters will tend to be a "yellow belly," while one in deeper waters will have a whiter belly. Typically the back is green, olive or golden, with yellow-green or yellow sides. The perch has about seven tapering bars extending down its sides. These bars are the same color as its back.

The body of a perch is long and oval. The head is fairly deep and is rounded at the tip, ending with a medium-sized mouth. Like all members of the perch family (Percidae), perch have two separated **dorsal** (back) **fins**. The first dorsal fin has 13 to 15 sharp spines and the edge is often black. There is also black between the first two and last four or five spines. The second dorsal fin (toward the tail) has one or two spines but is mostly soft-rayed. The tail, or **caudal fin**, has

rounded tips and is shallowly forked. The two **pectoral fins** arising from the fish's sides are rounded and broad. The two **pelvic fins** have one spine and five rays, and are located well forward on the body, just behind the pectoral fins. The single **anal fin**, on the fish's underside near the tail, also has both spines and rays.

The perch is easily distinguished from its closest relatives. The walleye has a light-colored spot on the lower tip of the tail and lacks the distinct vertical bars of the perch. The sauger has a dark spot at the base of each pectoral fin and has dark crescent-shaped spots on its front dorsal fin.

### Life History

**T**he perch is found throughout North America, from Nova Scotia in the north to Florida in the south, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In Michigan, perch are found in the bays and shallows of the Great Lakes and in inland lakes and ponds. It is usually a shallow-water fish, most often found in less than 30 feet of water. Young perch can be found nearer the shore and in shallower water than adults. Young perch often mix with other small fishes in

**schools** (large groups of fish swimming or feeding together). Adults are often in schools of 50 to 200 fish, staying closer together in summer than in winter.

Perch prefer water temperatures of 66°F to 70°F, although they are found in a variety of water temperatures. They are most numerous in the open waters of lakes which have some weeds, clear water and bottoms of muck, sand or gravel.

Male perch usually are mature at age 3 and females at age 4. In the spring, when water temperatures reach 44°F to 54°F, perch spawn (reproduce) in lake shallows or rivers which drain into lakes (called **tributaries**). Spawning usually occurs near aquatic plants or other cover. Perch spawn at night or in the morning, but don't make nests. Females lay an average of 23,000 eggs in a jellylike mass up to 7 feet long. The eggs usually hatch in 8 to 10 days. The young are inactive for the first 5 days while they absorb their yolk. After that, they grow rapidly, although the rate varies with habitat and population size.

Perch feed from morning to evening throughout the year. Their diet depends on the season and their size. Their main foods are aquatic insects, other **invertebrates** (animals lacking backbones) and the eggs and young of other fish. They themselves are eaten by almost all **predatory** fishes found in the same waters, including other perch. Many species of water birds also prey upon perch.

## Fishery

**P**erch support both sport and commercial fisheries in the Great Lakes. In the United States the perch is mainly a sport fish, while Canada emphasizes the commercial catch.

**Anglers** usually still-fish for perch using worms, 2- to 2½-inch-long minnows, wigglers or small crayfish as bait. Since perch feed year-round, they are taken through the ice as well as during the warmer months. In the spring and fall, most successful anglers focus on shallow waters 4 to 8 feet deep and move to deeper water in the summer. The greatest perch fishing successes come around **submerged** (underwater) weedbeds or rocks.

Preferred tackle is the "perch rig," made up of a sinker on the end of the 2- to 10-pound line. The perch rig has two hooks (#6 to #8) about 18 inches apart that are attached above the **sinker**.

The perch strikes the bait gently, so anglers must watch carefully for the bite, set the hook firmly and keep steady pressure on the line as they bring it in. Although perch are not known as great fighters, their abundance and great taste more than make up for their gentleness.

### Written by:

Steve Stewart, Michigan Sea Grant Agent  
Donald L. Garling, Fisheries Specialist  
Shari L. 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**—a person who fishes

**Caudal fin**—tail

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

**Invertebrates**—animals which lack backbones

**Pectoral fins**—paired fins, one on each side of the fish

**Pelvic fins**—paired fins below the pectoral fins, or between the pectoral and anal fins

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

**School**—a large number of fish swimming or feeding together

**Sinker**—weight used to carry a lure or bait to a desired depth

**Submerged**—under water

**Tributary**—a small stream or river which drains into a larger, main stream or river, or into a lake



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