



This wooden lure is called a pikeminnow. Most of these are collector’s items today. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

## The lure of the pikeminnow



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Back in my single-digit years, when I lived with my grandparents, I would sneak down into a long-forgotten corner of the basement. The small area was the storage place of my grandfather’s old tackle boxes and long abandoned fishing tackle. This collection of relics was from the days he actually went fishing. Some of this stuff dated back to his youth, but he had not gone fishing in many years. He claimed he tired of it, but I could never understand how that could be, as fishing was all I wanted to do back then.

There were Pflueger Supreme reels, bamboo rods, and rusted tackle boxes full of ancient wooden lures and plugs. I used to sort through the plugs and lures, in case there was something I might want to fish with.

One of the lures that stand out is the pikeminnow. It was modeled after a freshwater baitfish known as the cisco. Some of you who may have fished northern waters for northern pike and musky may remember this brand of lures. What tripped me into thinking about the old lure was an article I read about the Colorado pikeminnow.

The Colorado pikeminnow dates back some 3



A Colorado Parks and Wildlife employee displays a pike minnow before releasing into the Colorado River. (Courtesy photo)

million years. They used to be called northern squawfish but in 1998 the name was changed by the American Fisheries Society. Calling them a minnow is really not a fair description and almost a play on words. The pikeminnow is the largest minnow in North America.

Early explorers and settlers used to describe the pikeminnow as reaching 6 feet in length and topping the scales at 80 pounds, pretty good for a minnow. Today, 40 pounds is about what I would expect to see because of lack of food and water temperatures, although they can live up to 40 years.

The scientific name for the pikeminnow is *Ptychocheilus lucius* which roughly translates to “folded lip” and “pike” referencing the large mouth folding back behind the jaws. They are an olive green and gold in color, with a very

silver-white belly. The pikeminnow has small eyes and no teeth. They have a bony, circular structure in their throat to process food, called a pharyngeal teeth.

The pikeminnow was once so abundant in the Colorado River and its tributaries that they were an important food source to early settlers. People would catch them in the river using a pitchfork to harpoon them. Locals claimed they were excellent eating and nicknamed them Colorado white salmon.

Young pikeminnow feed on insects and plankton while the adults feed mostly on other fish. Adult pikeminnows are perfectly adapted to life in muddy waters. They hunt their prey using chemical and electrical stimuli instead of relying on eyesight. Their large mouth and streamlined body make them very efficient predators in fast-flowing water.

Colorado pikeminnow need free flowing passage up and down the river to migrate to spawning areas from their home range. They are known for long distance spawning migration of more than 200 miles.

Pikeminnows thrive in warm rivers with large spring flows that create habitat and help stimulate the spawning migration. These rivers must have lower stable flows during the rest of the year to maintain the nursery habits for young pikeminnows. They reproduce at 5 years for the males and at 7 years for the females.

The just-hatched pikeminnow will drift along in the river current for long distances before settling to eat and grow. The juveniles live along shorelines and in slower waters while the adults prefer the main channel of the river.

The Colorado pike-

minnow was listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1967 and given full protection under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. They were listed as endangered under Colorado law in 1976 but changed to threatened in 1998.

The pikeminnow was once very abundant in the Colorado River and its tributaries in states from Wyoming and Colorado, all the way to California. It was not settlers that harmed them, it is the dams’ man has built along the rivers that prevent the pikeminnow from migrating to and from their spawning grounds.

Other nonnative and invasive fish have outcompeted them for food. Losing a place to live, a lack of food, and the inability to migrate and spawn has put the pikeminnow in peril. Small populations still exist in the Yampa and

the Green Rivers, as well as the Little Snake and the White river. They also still exist in small numbers in the Colorado River and the Gunnison river.

The Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program is working diligently to manage water and water flows to create the beneficial flows needed for pikeminnow. They are also working on constructing fish passages and screens at major diversion dams to provide access to the spawning grounds and allow and encourage normal spawning migration.

Today, Colorado pikeminnows are being raised at a special hatchery and being stocked into the San Juan river. The plan is to establish another population that will spawn new generations into the future.

Thinking back on all those old wooden lures in my grandfather’s tackle boxes causes me some pain, even to this day. Most of that stuff wound up in the town dump. It’s a shame too, because I could have retired on the dollars some of those antique lures would fetch today.

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