



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Life is full of firsts, and unfortunately, lasts. The firsts are usually the happy ones, like first camp out, first hike, first bike ride without training wheels, first hunt, first knife, first gun, and of course first fish. For many people, the first fish is the steppingstone to a lifetime journey of chasing fish with rod and reel.

Paleoanthropology suggests that hominins like Homo habilis and erectus were fishing as much as two million years ago, and that modern humans, Homo sapiens, were catching fish 40,000 years ago, for personal consumption. The science suggests it was probably a bluegill or some trout. I am not sure just how they know all this, but they probably found an ancient fishing reel all snarled up with the line in a major backlash, where the ancient fisherman discarded it after giving up any hope of untangling it.

Many traditions mark a child's first catch; for

instance, in Tennessee, it is customary for the child to kiss their first fish as a gesture for good luck. Many cultures carefully prepare the fish, and small pieces are shared with everyone, especially the other children and the elders, emphasizing gratitude. Some Native North American tribes clean the fish and return the bones to the river or lake, ensuring a return next season.

I fished many years in the Florida Keys, and we had many traditions, like every bonefish was given a kiss before being released back in the water. When someone caught their first sailfish, we threw dimes into the water as an offering to Salacia, the Roman goddess of salt waters and ocean depths, wife of Neptune.

My first fish occurred in the summer of 1961. My grandfather had a summer home in Northern Wisconsin where all the family would spend at least some of their vacation time. My grandparents from my mother's side owned a resort a few hundred yards down the shore from our place. My first fish involved both set of grandparents.

My grandfather, or Pa as I always called him, took me and my grandmother to the resort of the other grandparents, to borrow a rowboat for a morning fishing trip. The idea was to catch a basket full of panfish for the



This is my first fish from 1961. My Pa had in mounted for me, and although it is quite aged, it still preserves a precious memory. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

entire clan to enjoy a fish fry that evening.

Previous to the trip, I was presented with my own fishing rod and reel. It was a Zebco combo, called the 202. The 202 first came out in the spring of 1961, and I felt I really had something with this fine pushbutton piece of hardware, even though I had absolutely no idea how to use it.

My grandmother gave me a paper lunch sack, full of cookies and peanut butter crackers, and lectured my Pa about being careful with her little grandson. I was completely covered in one of those old-fashioned orange life jackets, the kind they probably wore on the Titanic. Nevertheless, I felt like a big shot, walking down the dock wearing my PF Fliers, my bag of snacks, a new rod and reel, and a can of worms.

Pa rowed us out onto the lake, some half mile away, to a place he was

sure there were plenty of panfish. He hated fishing for panfish, calling them "guppies" and would have rather spent his time chasing a musky or a stringer of walleyes, but he was following orders from the War Department, and taking me out.

The old man tied a hook on my line, put a small split shot above it, and a bobber. He baited the hook with a worm, carefully threaded onto the hook. The bait was then cast into the water and the rod handed to me with the instructions, "when the bobber goes down, set the hook and reel the fish in. Let's get this over with."

Little did I know at that moment, but I would hear that line repeated as the entire process of rebaiting and casting was done, over and over ad nauseum. You see, I was not really quick enough to set the hook when the bobber went down.

Actually, I rarely noticed when the bobber went down, because I had the attention span of a monkey chewing a fly swatter. Pa would have to yell at me that the bobber was down, and by that time, the fish had eaten the bait. All the while, my Pa was filling the fish basket with an assortment of panfish, one after another, sometimes several on a single worm. The man was a master in my eyes.

I had pretty much lost interest in this whole fishing thing, when suddenly, the rod began pulling down. Somehow, a fish had managed to hook himself while trying to steal the worm. I cranked and cranked on the reel, until the prize on the end was finally in the boat.

Like many other people before and after me, my first fish was a bluegill, or Lepomis macrochirus because you knew I was going to tell you anyway. The bluegill is a proud member of the sunfish family, and mine was a whopping seven inches long, and weighed upwards of four ounces. Not exactly the biggest, but he was mine. I was so excited that even my Pa got a big smile over it, although probably because he knew he could go home now and the War Department would be happy.

That first fish started me on a lifetime journey that would see me fishing in dozens of countries on four continents. The

scorecard included 1500 tarpon releases, 1000 bonefish, countless trout, and just about every offshore pelagic species available. It was truly a first to remember.

There are the lasts as well. That fish was the last first fish my grandfathers, either one of them, ever witnessed. All of the family that visited that old cabin on the lake have crossed the last horizon. All of them. The moral of the story, if there is one, would be to enjoy all the first of your lifetime that you can and keep looking for new things. You never know when one of those firsts are going to be a last. Happy Father's Day to all the dads and granddads out there. And a special shout-out to you Pa, for starting me down a wonderful, lifetime outdoor journey.

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CPW stocks state-endangered northern redbelly dace on USDA Forest Service land in Colorado for first time

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

Colorado Parks and Wildlife, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, has stocked state-endangered northern redbelly dace into a waterbody on land managed by the USDA Forest Service for the first time in state history. On May 13, CPW aquatic biologists and USDA Forest Service rangers and biologists placed more than 18,000 dace into a small groundwater-fed creek on the Pawnee National Grassland, also marking the first northern redbelly dace stocking on federal land in two decades. CPW biologists will monitor the site for natural reproduction and population trends.

The northern redbelly dace are classified as a Tier 1 species of greatest conservation need in CPW's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), with approximately six self-sus-

taining populations in the South Platte River Basin. The small fish, growing to only two to three inches in length, is classified as a true minnow known for the namesake red stripe across the stomach that males develop during breeding. The species has a specific set of habitat requirements including cool, vegetated, slow-moving perennial water in ponds and streams with an absence of non-native predatory fishes and pollution. They serve as valuable guides to habitat change in Colorado.

"The northern redbelly dace are considered an indicator species for biologists, like a canary in a coal mine," said Matt Haworth, CPW Platte River Basin Native Aquatic Species Biologist. "If we observe their presence in a body of water, we learn a lot about that environment. If dace are eliminated from the area, we know



Top left: Northern redbelly dace spawned and reared at the CPW Native Aquatic Species Restoration Facility in Alamosa. Top right: More than 18,000 northern redbelly dace stocked into a series of ponds on the Pawnee National Grassland in Weld County. (Photos/CPW) Bottom left: The groundwater ponds represent the ideal habitat requirements for northern redbelly dace as they are thermally stable and perennially wetted without predators. Bottom right: Male northern redbelly dace display a bright red line across their stomachs during breeding season.

something in the habitat has become unstable. Due to highly specific needs for dace persistence, it's rare to find a site that meets those requirements, which is why we're incredibly grateful to the USDA Forest Service for their partnership and support in this stocking effort and,



hopefully, new population."

"We are pleased that the Pawnee National Grassland is able to provide ideal habitat for this important species," said Dana Guinn, Pawnee District Ranger. "This coordinated effort between the USDA Forest Service and

Colorado Parks and Wildlife demonstrates how we can deliver conservation benefits in lock step with activities that prioritize rural communities and economies and facilitate access to our nation's grasslands."

Northern redbelly dace are widely distributed throughout the United States and Canada at more northern latitudes, but the species is restricted to the South Platte River Basin in Colorado. Since the mid-19th century, habitat alteration and introduction of non-native aquatic species caused population declines, resulting in only one remaining indigenous population in the West Plum Creek drainage by the 1990s. This population was used to develop broodstock at CPW's J.W. Mumma Native Aquatic Species Restoration Facility in Alamosa. CPW has stocked northern redbelly

dace at approximately 30 locations across Colorado, with five becoming self-sustaining populations.

"A cornerstone goal of CPW's native aquatics team is to maintain biodiversity within our state," said Haworth. "By proactively restoring northern redbelly dace to more locations on the landscape, we are building species resiliency with a long-term target of successful reproduction in the wild that would no longer need the support of stocking."

The dace stocked in mid-May were spawned and raised in the Native Aquatic Species Restoration Facility. The facility rears twelve species of fish, focusing on at-risk native species with proactive conservation methods like expanding populations and species distribution through stocking efforts.



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