

FISHES OF IDAHO

No. 5

Bluegill

Lepomis Macrochirus

By

JAMES C. SIMPSON
Idaho Fish Culturist

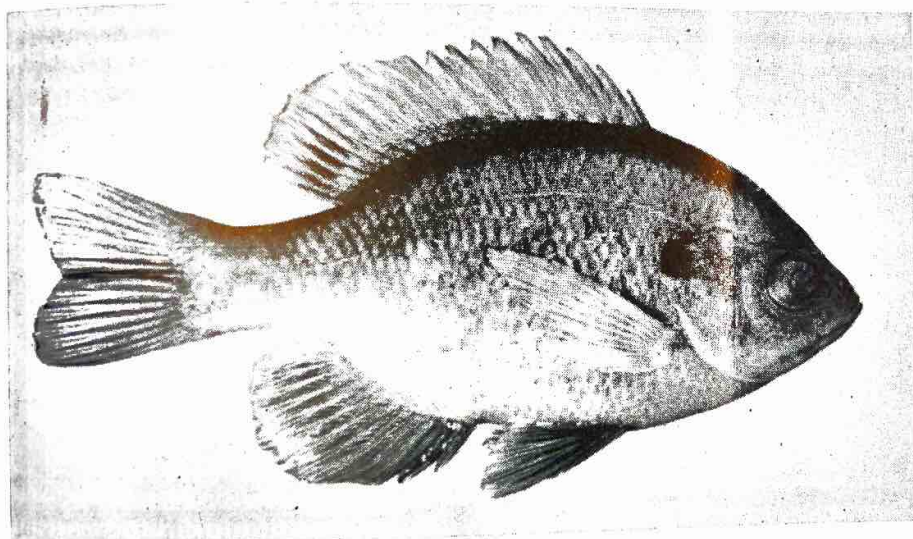
The bluegill is a fairly common warm-water fish in Idaho. In some sections of the state it is called the bream, or punkinseed. It is a highly regarded fish in other states, but plays a minor role for most adult anglers in Idaho. Like many other of the so-called "pan-fishes" it is caught mostly by casual anglers and children.

In Idaho its range extends throughout the southwestern and warm-water

ponds of south-central and eastern Idaho. It is, however, an introduced species. It is often planted with large mouth bass as forage fish.

with bait. Angleworms and grasshoppers are favorite baits. Usually the bluegill may be found in water from five to 15 feet deep on the edges of bars, or near weeds or pilings. They travel in schools, and the patient angler can frequently catch nearly the entire school. Although they do not strike viciously as does the bass, when hooked, the bluegill is a scrappy fighter. Care in landing is necessary, as the bluegill has a tender mouth and loses the hook easily.

A few simple identification marks distinguish the bluegill from other members of the confusing sunfish family. A dark blue spot on the gill cover is the most common means of identification. This spot in the common sunfish is orange, or red. The bluegill has an oval-shaped, flat body, character-



The bluegill is a sturdy Idaho panfish.

ized by a blunt, pugnacious nose. Color is evanescent greenish-yellow, shading to orange-red below. Sides of the body are crossed by from five to seven greenish vertical bars. A light-blue crescent shaped band extends along the lower jaw. On the last rays of dorsal and anal fins is a dark blot. Back fins have 10 or 12 spines, and the rudder has two or three spines.

The male scoops out a nest in gravelly shoal areas. After the female lays from 2,000 to 20,000 eggs the male stands guard over the nest, fanning the eggs with his tail to keep the water circulating. The eggs cannot stick together while the water is circulating, and the moving water brings a constant supply of oxygen to the eggs. During the hatching period the male eats sparingly and will savagely attack any intruder near the nesting site. The young are transparent, and nearly in-

visible in the water. Bluegill are fairly prolific among fishes, and tend to overpopulate warm water ponds.

Small fish, crustaceans, insect larvae and small water plants form the principal diet of the bluegill. Although they are carnivorous, it has never been determined that they do extensive damage to other game fish.

Rockchuck is Target Of Gem State Nimrods

In the spring a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of—rock chucks. At least many Idahoans spend sunny spring afternoons hunting marmota flaviventris (yeah, man!) and some of his lesser relatives.

The rock chuck, or "whistle pig" as he is more popularly known, emerges from his winter den about the time the first green grass has started. Frequently he will over-estimate the season, and come out when there is two feet of snow on the ground.

The marmot digs his own burrow, often with the entrance concealed by a hedgerow or under a pile of rocks. His home location is always betrayed by the mound of earth left after the tunnel has been dug. The animal grows to about eight pounds and a length of 15 inches. It is edible, but rarely eaten, except as a novelty.

The name "whistle pig" was attached to the rock chuck by residents of France. Each morning the chuck sits inside the burrow entrance and emits a series of shrill whistles. If nothing seems amiss, the animal will waddle out cautiously to its feeding ground, danger sends it scurrying back to the haven of its hole where it will often whistle derisively.

Curiosity is the chuck's undoing. Frequently it will poke up its head to survey the countryside, only to stop a bullet aimed by a sharp-eyed varmint hunter.

The ground squirrel, a diminutive relative of the rock chuck, is a favorite target for spring nimrods throughout Idaho. This rodent is universally disliked by farmers. In irrigated sections its winding tunnels undermine canal banks, and in dry-farm areas it initiates erosion of the soil. The Columbian ground squirrel, (*Citellus columbianus*), is the species most commonly found in Idaho. Hot summer weather drives the ground squirrel to its burrow, and it begins hibernation as early as July.