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Around this time of year, it seems you can't go into a coffee shop or candle store without seeing pumpkin latte this or pumpkin spice that. In keeping with this popular autumnal theme, let's learn a few things about the **pumpkinseed sunfish**.

It's remarkably beautiful and one of our most colourful freshwater fish. One might muse that God broke out his jumbo box of crayons when creating the pumpkinseed, especially the breeding male, which seems to shimmer with vibrant hues of yellow, orange, green and red. It has ruddy spots across a disc-shaped body and wavy iridescent blue lines along the cheek. One characteristic in particular really helps to discern the pumpkinseed from other sunfish species or bluegills: located just behind the gill, look for a black ear flap *edged in white with a distinctive red-orange spot at the rear edge*. This summer, I caught a few fish that looked like 'seeds', but they lacked the red spot behind the ear flap. I photographed a few to show an expert in fish biology and learned that they were pumpkinseed X bluegill hybrids. The average pumpkinseed is 4-8" long, but it can grow larger – up to 10" -- making it difficult to get a hand around its slab-sided girth.

You can find the pumpkinseed in lakes, reservoirs, ponds and slow-moving streams that host abundant vegetation. Its mouth may be small, but its appetite is big. It schools up in the shallows, aggressively preying on aquatic insects, mosquito larvae, invertebrates, and small fish. Specially adapted teeth enable it to consume snails. If you drop a worm or other small morsel among a dock-side school of these fish, more often than not a fiercely competitive frenzy will ensue. Though active throughout the day, feeding peaks in the afternoon. At night, the pumpkinseed rests near the bottom in places offering protective cover.

Most anglers fondly recall "sunnies" as the first fish they ever caught as kids, usually on a simple worm and bobber set up, dangling from a cartoon-character fishing pole. They may also remember, somewhat less fondly, being painfully stuck in the hand by the sharp dorsal spines that protrude from the back of this species. Some people are surprised to learn that the pumpkinseed shares the same family with large- and smallmouth bass; and when its more coveted game fish cousins aren't biting, the hard-fighting, easy-to-catch sunfish can salvage an otherwise dud of an outing.

Here in our area, the pumpkinseed spawns in early summer, just after the bass have moved off their nests. The male sunfish creates the nest – a shallow, circular depression – by fanning his fins on the bottom. The female fish arrives when the nest is finished (multiple females may visit one nest). After courtship behaviour, including swimming side-by-side in circles, she deposits between 1,500-3,000 eggs while he releases milt. The female then departs, leaving the male to aggressively guard the eggs that hatch in just 3-5 days. He will continue to protect the hatchlings for another week or two. The young fish remain in or near the shallows where they hatched and grow to around 2" during their first year.

The pumpkinseed sunfish can live 8-9 years in the wild. In captivity, it has reached 12 years of age.

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summured on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.