



The Black Bass in Maine

by David B. Ledlie



Contemplation of the gentle art normally evokes visions in the mind's eye replete with leaping salmon or trout of the genus *Salmo* or *Salvelinus*—but rarely that of *Micropterus*, that is the Black Bass. According to Henshall, author of the *Book of Black Bass* (1881), Black Bass were indigenous to “the whole of the United States, east of the Rocky Mountains, Ontario, and East Mexico” with the “exception of the New England States and the Atlantic Seaboard of the Middle States.” Henshall reigned supreme as the authority on Black Bass. His book, in concert with a plethora of articles that appeared in several of the sporting periodicals of the day, served to popularize fly fishing for Black Bass at a time when stocks of our native trout and salmon were being fast depleted. By the time Henshall's book had gone to press pisciculture had developed to a point where virtually any species could be hatchery reared and stocked at will in any body of water. It is no surprise, then, that by 1881 the Small Mouth Black Bass had infiltrated New England as well as the Eastern Seaboard.

Black Bass first came to the State of Maine in 1869. A contract was initially made with Livingstone Stone (author of *Domesticated Trout*) of Charlestown, New Hampshire. He was to deliver 15,000 young black bass to several points within the state. However, due to complications at his hatchery the fry did not develop properly and he was unable to fulfill his commitment. Other sources were quickly found:

- a) Thirty-four fish (one year and older) from Newburgh, N. Y. were stocked in Duck Pond in Falmouth.
- b) E. S. Woodford of West Winsted, Conn. supplied a large lot that were distributed between Fitz Pond (Dedham), Newport Pond and Philips Pond.
- c) George Shepard Page (President of the Oquossoc Angling Association¹) purchased bass from Walter Brown of Newburgh, N. Y. and stocked them in Cochnewagen Pond (Monmouth) and Cobboosecontee Lake (Winthrop and adjoining towns).

The bass (Small Mouth) were not stocked in a random fashion; rather, considerable thought was given to their distribution. In

fact, the State of Maine Fish Commission (founded in 1867) was not even sure at first that bass should be stocked in Maine waters.

I include below several pertinent excerpts taken from early reports of the Maine Fish Commission which relate to the introduction of the Small Mouth Bass in Maine. On page eighty-four of the first report (1867) the following general statement is made:

In introducing new kinds of fish to any water, it is of course, presupposed that the kind to be introduced is superior in some important respect to the kinds already inhabiting it: superior either in its value as an article of food, in its game qualities, in the degree to which it will thrive in its new home, or in its ability to utilize some waste product of the waters. Moreover, the kind to be introduced must [not] possess certain negative qualifications: it must not be unduly destructive of other valuable species.

Remarks relating specifically to the Black

Bass are found on page eighty-six of the same report.

Regarding the black bass (*Grystes nigricans*,² Agassi), we have collected some information. It is a very common species in all of the Canadian lakes, except Superior, and on the St. Lawrence River, Lake Champlain and its tributaries. It is also found in several localities in the interior of New York, and has been introduced into some of the waters of Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. From S. T. Tisdale of East Wareham, Mass., we have the following: "They were introduced to the waters of this region by myself, in 1850, '51 and '52, to the extent of some two hundred, with which I stocked some ponds in this vicinity. They were procured at Saratoga Lake, N. Y., and brought here. For some five years all fishing for them was discouraged, after which they were caught in great abundance, from two to four pounds in size, and are now caught, in the season for fishing, of similar size, with a few of larger size,—five to seven pounds; the largest yet known to be caught weighing seven and one-half pounds. Incessant fishing has depleted the supply somewhat, still our ponds afforded a good supply last year. The season for taking them is confined from June 1st to December 1st, with stringent law for any violation. They spawn in May, in four to ten feet depth of water, excavating shallow basins, where they remain protecting their spawn and young until able to provide for themselves. They will increase as rapidly as perch, and

as a table fish and affording sport in their capture, rank in the first class. They are now taken in two of the ponds first stocked; others were stocked, but being smaller are not so much fished. I stocked a lake in New Hampshire last May, taking twenty-one fish from one of my ponds, and sending them to their destination. This number, or even less, will stock any large water so that in a few years the result will be satisfactory. My plan is to catch the fish, keep them in tanks or cans until they are hardened, then forward. The success of introducing black bass into the waters of New England is a fixed fact. The first experiment was made by myself, and some twenty-five ponds in this county have been stocked from their progeny."

On page eighty-five food value, game qualities and the possible threat of the Black Bass to trout populations are among the topics discussed:

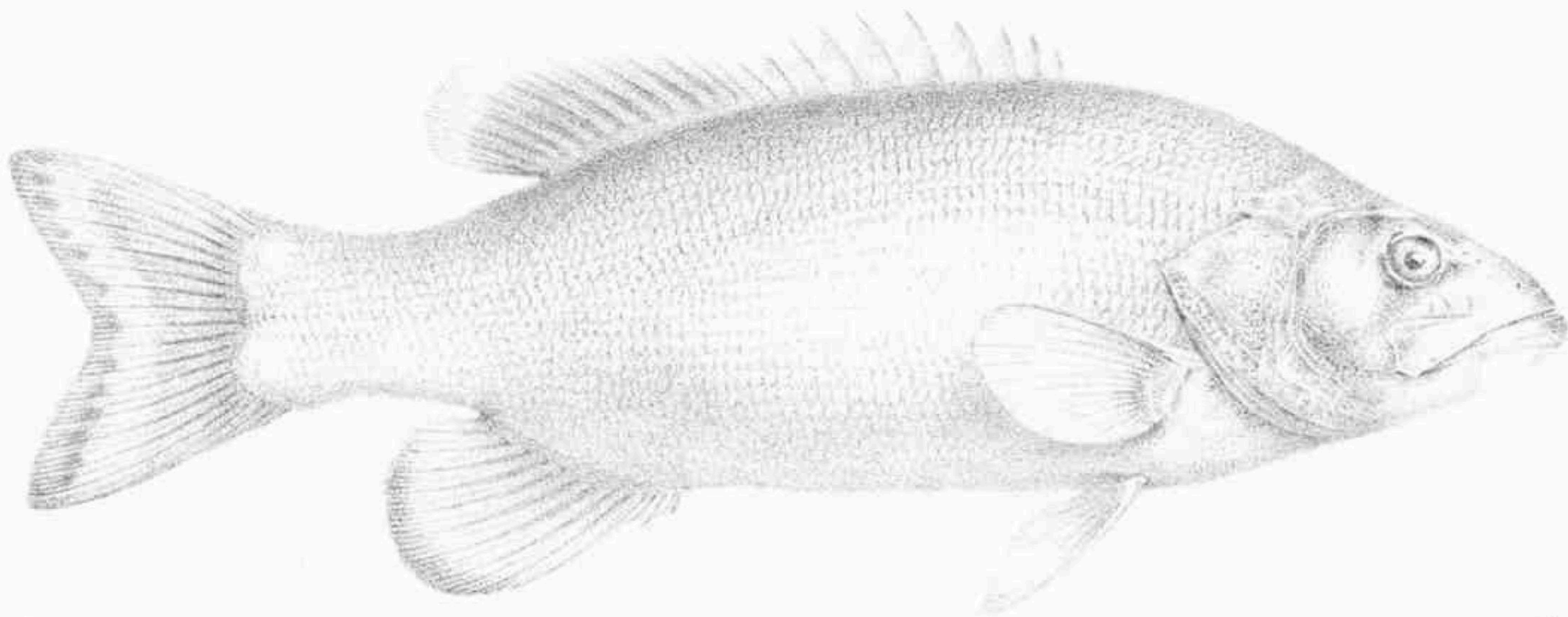
As an article of food the black bass has an excellent reputation; his game qualities are among the first; we cannot doubt that he would thrive in most of our waters, and would be a decided advance on yellow perch and pickerel. Yet he has some bad characteristics. He belongs to the perch family, and like the yellow perch and striped bass is very voracious. He would feed to a great extent on other fishes; and would not confine himself to devouring worthless species, but would prey upon young trout, salmon, smelts, white perch, shad, alewives and any kind that he could catch. Very likely he would prove as

The small mouth bass, as it appeared in the Third Annual Report of the Commissioner of Fisheries of the State of Maine, 1869. from the author's collection.

great an enemy to trout as is the pickerel,—perhaps greater. If he should get down into the shad rivers, as he undoubtedly would, to a certain extent, he would devour many times his weight of young shad;—yet we must bear in mind that if the young shad should go down to the sea instead of being eaten by black bass, something else would eat the most



Illustrations on this page ("Maine Guides preparing Lunch") and on the previous page ("Fishing with Lampreys in deep Water") are from Louis Rhead's The Basses (1905).



GRYSTES FASCIATUS .
(BLACK BASS.)

of them there, and that they have always had a worse enemy close at hand in the striped bass. It is difficult to say whether on the whole the black bass would do most good or harm; but considering that we have so many fresh water ponds now inhabited by yellow perch and pickerel, shiners and other small fish, which yield nothing of consequence, considering that the black bass is of superior size and probably equal quality to the white perch, considering that he would be able to make his way and thrive against any foe that he would find, we are inclined to think that more good than harm would come from putting him into those waters. Yet inasmuch as we have a large aquatic territory inhabited principally by trout which are highly prized by most of the people, the black bass should be carefully excluded from all trout waters.

And in the "Conclusion" of the first report the statement is made "that Black Bass not be introduced without the approval of some competent authority."

In the following year (1868) Black Bass had still not been stocked. As reported on page thirty of the 1868 report,

No attempt has yet been made to introduce black bass. We do not know of any experiments with the spawn of this species. They have been introduced to many new waters by carrying the live fish. The most extensive transportation of which we have any accurate

account was accomplished by Dr. W. W. Fletcher of Concord, N. H. He was employed by the Commissioners of New Hampshire to introduce black bass to some of the waters, and succeeded in bringing from Lake Champlain, and liberating in good condition in New Hampshire waters several hundred (we think the exact number was 221), at an expense of about three dollars each. Dr. Fletcher thinks they could be brought from the same point to Maine for five dollars apiece. We are of the opinion that no fish promises to thrive so well and give so much satisfaction generally in our perch and pickerel ponds as the black bass. But as there are several species known by this name, it might be well to ascertain whether the species inhabiting Lake Champlain is the best, or is equal to any other kind of black bass.

But in 1869 the deed was done. In his opening remarks for the report for 1869 Fish Commissioner Charles G. Atkins first states:

My attention has been directed, principally, during the year now ending, to the construction of fishways and the introduction and dissemination of black bass and Schoodic salmon.

And then on page 18 of the same report:

Black Bass—This superior fish was described on page eighty-six of the report

for 1867. A further acquaintance justifies all that was said in his favor, and relieves him in part from the accusation of being a gross feeder upon his fellow fishes. He is by no means so voracious as the pickerel,—probably not more so than white and yellow perch. All things considered, it was believed that it was very desirable to introduce this species to our waters.

Arrangements were made and the initial stockings (described earlier) were carried out. Certainly the bass has been successful in Maine. It has supplanted the native trout in some waters which *Salvelinus fontinalis* can no longer tolerate, and it has thrived in the warmer ponds which could never support trout for sustained periods of time. As a recent "State of Mainer" living in an area of less than adequate trout populations I am grateful for the decision of 1869; the *Micropterus* of nearby ponds have afforded me many an evening's fly fishing pleasure.

¹With the exception of the Schuylkill Fishing Company, this is the oldest angling club in the United States. It is still in operation.

²This designation was later changed to *Micropterus*.

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