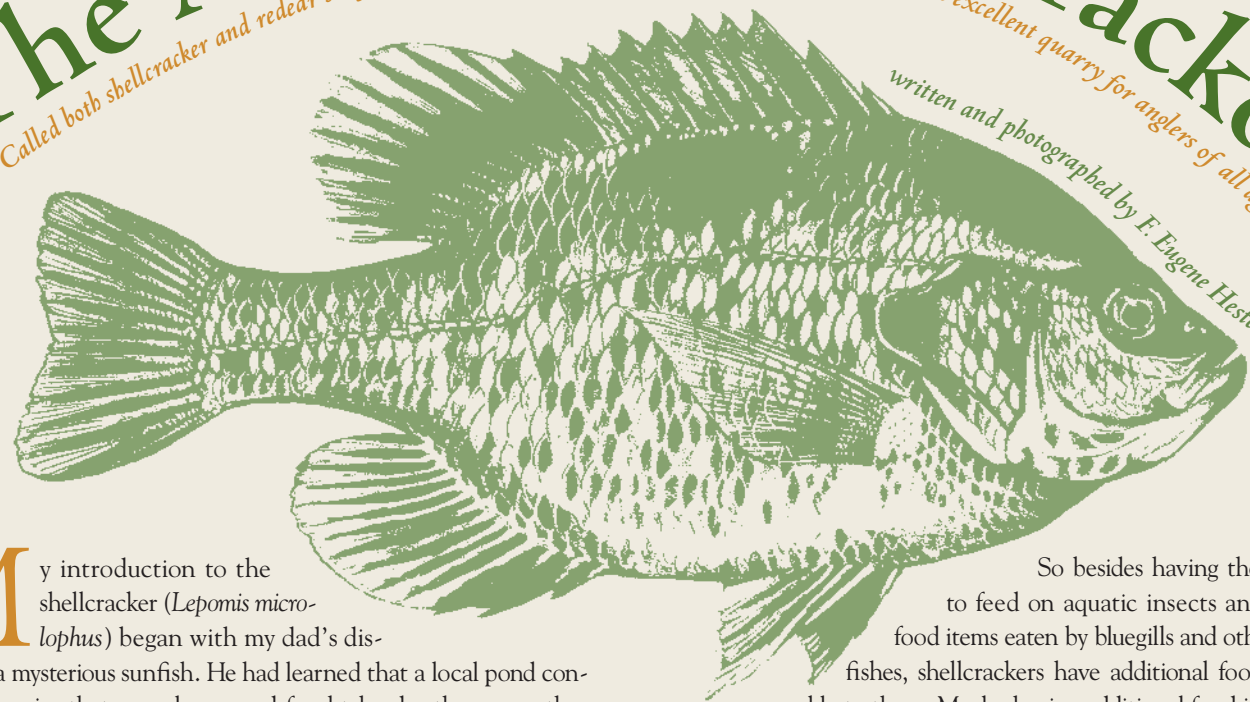


The Amazing Shellcracker

Called both shellcracker and redear sunfish, this feisty species is as interesting as it is an excellent quarry for anglers of all ages.

written and photographed by F. Eugene Hester



My introduction to the shellcracker (*Lepomis microlophus*) began with my dad's discovery of a mysterious sunfish. He had learned that a local pond contained a species that grew larger and fought harder than any other sunfish he had been catching. He knew them as "strawberry bream," and he was eager to fish for them.

That was decades ago, and the shellcracker was indeed a rare species in most of North Carolina at that time. The species' historic range was mainly in the Mississippi basin and in coastal areas from Texas to South Carolina. A few populations were also found in the southeastern corner of North Carolina.

My dad was not the only person to recognize that this fast-growing sunfish had many desirable characteristics. Experimentation by several state and federal agencies found that though this fish was not a substitute for bluegills in stocking new ponds and reservoirs, it was a good addition. From then on, the standard stocking program for new ponds became a bass-bluegill-shellcracker combination. The shellcrackers become something of a bonus by growing larger and consuming snails that usually are not eaten by other fish.

Over the years a lot of people have come to know and appreciate the shellcracker. The species gets its nickname from its habit of feeding on snails and small clams that it cracks open with special teeth in its throat. The teeth are not the needle-sharp type found in the mouths of chain pickerel but are broad, pavementlike pharyngeal (throat) teeth with flat surfaces, which are well suited for crushing shells.

So besides having the ability to feed on aquatic insects and other food items eaten by bluegills and other sunfishes, shellcrackers have additional food available to them. Maybe having additional food is one of the factors that helps shellcrackers grow so fast. In most ponds where bluegills and shellcrackers exist, the shellcrackers will be about 50 percent larger than the bluegills.

Shellcrackers also produce fewer young than bluegills and therefore help limit competition for food. Shellcrackers are wary, too. Instead of being aggressive when nesting, they quickly retreat to deeper water when disturbed. This makes them less vulnerable to predators.

In my early experiences with shellcrackers, I learned of this wariness. In shallow water near a pond border, I could see about two dozen sunfish nests. They were large nests, with the rims almost touching each other. I could see adult fish in the nests. But when I approached, the adults quickly disappeared by swimming into deeper water.

When I later tried sneaking up on the area and gently casting a small floating popping bug over the nests, I learned something else about these fish. They did not attack this floating lure as a bluegill would have. Instead, they ignored it. From that experience I learned of their wariness and reluctance to take surface lures.

In the spring, prior to spawning time, shellcrackers often gather in groups under a large log or other cover in shallow water. This is similar to the way dozens of crappies school up under a bush or a brush pile.



Though it might be confused with the bluegill (above, right), the shellcracker (above, left) can grow much faster.





Redear sunfish can be taken on a variety of lures and baits from beetlespins (above) to worms and a cork (opposite page).

When they are not nesting, shellcrackers are often found in deeper water close to stumps, trees or logs. Though they are reluctant to take a popping bug on the surface, they are less hesitant to go after a sinking wet fly. Some fishermen have found that a wet fly on an 18-inch line tied to a popping bug makes a great combination. The popping bug continues to attract bluegills, and the sinking wet fly trails below and behind the floating bug in the strike zone for shellcrackers. The popping bug serves to attract fish to its surface activities and entices them to the sinking fly. The popping bug also serves as a strike indicator, since it disappears when a fish takes the wet fly.

There are a lot of ways to catch shellcrackers. In addition to a fly rod with popping bug and dropper fly, ultralight spinning tackle will work to catch them. Small lead-head jigs with plastic curlytails, beetlespins and roostertail spinners are all great lures.

Probably the most often used and most effective technique is a simple cane or fiberglass pole rigged with monofilament line and a cork, sinker and hook. Earthworms are great bait, and generally the larger they are, the more effective they are. Red wigglers, garden earthworms and night crawlers are readily taken by shellcrackers. Placing the worms as close as possible to trees or stumps in water about 3 feet deep is a great approach.

Shellcrackers are most often found in warm, quiet, clear water with plenty of stumps, logs, aquatic vegetation or other cover. But they sometimes inhabit brackish water, too. And in North Carolina, they sometimes exist in tidal creeks alongside small flounders, pinfish and stumps with barnacles.

The shellcracker is a deep, slab-sided sunfish with a small mouth. It is similar in appearance to its close relatives, the bluegill and pumpkinseed. Its back and sides are usually yellow, golden or a light olive green. Sometimes dark vertical bars are visible, but they are seldom present on adults.

Shellcrackers have long, pointed pectoral fins and a rounded earflap with a thin, flexible margin. The earflap has a whitish border and a prominent red or orange spot in adults, from which the fish gets the name "redeer sunfish." Shellcrackers do not have the blue wavy lines across the cheeks so prominent in pumpkinseeds. When in spawning condition, male shellcrackers have a dark, smoky appearance.

Shellcrackers have the capacity to grow very fast and very large. It is not uncommon to catch one weighing a pound or more. At various times and places, they grow much

bigger. Over the years, monster shellcrackers have been entered in the North Carolina records. On Feb. 3, 1968, Bill Arnold caught one weighing 4 pounds, 4 ounces in a Lee County pond, using a worm. His fish held the state record for 20 years until June 12, 1988, when Ronald Sweet caught a shellcracker weighing 4 pounds and 6 ounces in Lookout Shoals Lake, using an orange roostertail. Six years later, also on June 12, the record was tied when young Scott Miller caught one the same size in a Union Mill farm pond.

Fisheries biologists with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission make extensive evaluations of fish populations. Through electrofishing and other techniques, they are able to capture fish and return them alive to the water.

I asked a couple of biologists about good places to find good numbers and sizes of shellcrackers.

Fisheries biologist Chad Thomas identified the Chowan and Roanoke rivers as having exceptional redear populations. "Redear are second to bluegill as the most abundant sunfish in the Roanoke, comprising 29 percent of our total catch," Thomas said. "Redear between 8 and 10 inches were the most abundant size group in our spring collections." He found the population to be relatively stable over the past several years.

Thomas also found a high number of 8- to 10-inch redear sunfish in the Chowan River. "Interestingly," he said, "we have seen a tremendous increase in the number of redear sunfish in the Chowan River over the last 10 years. Currently, redear sunfish represent 27 percent of our sunfish samples in the Chowan River, compared to 1 percent just 10 years ago.

One thing that jumps out every year, Thomas added, is the number of large redears in the sample. So many big fish suggests that either few anglers know about this fishery or, more likely, that redear sunfish are more difficult to catch than the other sunfish.

Redear sunfish spend large amounts of time in deeper water or in heavy cover. The best time to catch them is when they move onto the spawning beds, usually at water temperatures between 66 and 70 degrees, Thomas said. "We usually find them on softer substrates along the edges of lily pads." He explained that redear are scarce in the Pasquotank, Perquimans and Scuppernong



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rivers, where pumpkinseeds are second to bluegill as the most abundant sunfish.

"How about big redear sunfish?" I asked.

Thomas told me about shocking them up to 1.5 pounds in the Chowan River and a 2.5-pound giant in the Roanoke River. I asked him where I would likely have the best chance of catching shellcrackers.

"On the Roanoke, we see the greatest number of redear sunfish downstream of Jamesville, where the river widens and the mud flats appear," he said. "Redear densities are high all the way down to the sound. Creek mouths seem to be pretty hot, especially the mouth of Broad Creek, Middle River and Conaby Creek. On the Chowan, we have good catches in creeks including Sarem, Barnes, Catherine's, Bennetts and the Wiccacon."

Biologist Keith Ashley told me of other great places to find redear sunfish. He identified the Black River in Bladen County, especially near N.C. 210 near Rowan, just above and below the N.C. 53 bridge, and the area upstream from Ivanhoe. He has found redear sunfish as large as 1.5 to 2.25 pounds in this river. He advised fishing among spatterdock growing along the downstream ends of islands.

Virginia, Florida and other southeastern states also have state-record shellcrackers weighing between 4 and 5 pounds. And the world-record redear sunfish—a whopping 5 pounds, 7 ounces—was caught in the Division Canal near Charleston, S.C., in 1998.

If snails and clams are such favorite foods for shellcrackers, does anybody use these for bait? I haven't met anyone yet, but maybe these will be the hot new baits of the future. ☐