

Hogsuckers featuring Corey Geving

Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there. Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week!, your audio almanac of all the fish. It's Monday, August 21 2023. And we're on a week by week tour of fish across the country with guests from all walks of life. I'm Katrina Liebich with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska,

And good golly hog molly. I'm Guy Eroh, and this week we're talking about the hogsuckers of genius Hypentelium.

Whoo. And our guest is a hogsucker fan and a native fish enthusiast Cory Geving so warm welcome to you. Thank you. I was looking around online and they've got some really funny names that I noticed that no guy mentioned what it is intro to Molly or hogmolly. There's boxhead. Stone toter. hammerhead sucker.

Pugamoo!

Yeah!

I love pugamoo. Come on. It's the best.

Yeah. What Why is it called pugamoo? And what does that mean?

I don't know. I wish I knew what region that came from. I love telling people , you know, "hey, what are you fishing for?" "Oh, I'm just pugamooing today." You know, I really make it into a verb.

And why do they call it hogsucker? I got that question from one of my little fans who's six.

Oh, I think it's the snout that, you know, when they stick it out it looks like a like a pig snout. I think that's the main reason.

Okay, describing their behavior, you're talking about them rooting around, and that's a verb that I usually associate with like pigs. So I kind of have always thought it was related to that. That said, you know, hogsucker is in some ways, kind of an unfortunate name.

Yeah

I got my I got my hog sucker t shirt on.

That's awesome. I love it.

Okay, so how will I know if I have a hogsucker in my hand? I'm guessing you're going to be keying into the business end of this fish a little bit, but can you just describe what they look like for folks who haven't seen one?

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Yes, they're a very distinctive fish. It's a small species of sucker with a subterminal mouth. The biggest thing that you'll notice about them is the head is large. It's square. The eyes are sort of protruding. It's got a black ring around the mouth. Some of my friends have started calling them goth suckers, because it looks like they're wearing black lipstick.

Yeah!

Trying to popularize that as another slang.

I like it.

And the lips are covered in tiny bumps called papillae. So it's a really distinctive fish. It's hard to confuse it with anything else. The body is like long and thin, with sparkly and black patches. So it's very cryptic, to blended with the stream bottom. And it has these large fleshy pectoral fins which are low on the body and really big for the size of the fish, they look almost like little wings sticking out the side.

The big boxy head and the concavity between the eyes is really prominent. And also that black ring around the mouth is really prominent in bigger individuals. But when they're smaller, they don't have that so much. It can be hard to distinguish between the small jumprocks and the small hogsucker. So one thing that's really good key characteristic is on the caudal peduncle and onto the caudal fin there's this white hourglass figure eight kind of shape that the hogsuckers have and jumprocks will never have that. So that's a good key defining characteristic.

That's a great point. I've only fished for the jumprocks once. And I had a great time doing that too. But they're very kind of similar fish so I could see how you could get confused, especially with the smaller specimens.

Yeah, I mean, once they get to this size, there's no mistaking a hogsucker but when they're smaller, it can be a little tricky.

You mentioned their pectoral fins. And a lot of times those can tell us a bit about where the fish is found. So I'm curious if you had any thoughts on kind of how they're using those big fleshy fins?

Oh, yeah, so this is a fish that's really adapted to swift water foraging and just holding in really fast, shallow, rocky water. They use those big fins to sort of crawl along the bottom. It holds them down against the substrate and helps them move along the bottoms.

Another note about those, you hold one out of the water you can look at it at least these are the ones that we have down in Georgia, both the northern and the Alabama, and they're like a bright orange and you think that a bright orange fin would probably stand out but these fish actually camouflage really well and when you look in the stream on the sandy bottoms these rocky bottoms. We got a lot of this mica this you know that kind of shedding rock that is really reflective. I'm pretty sure that you know, I've talked with Michael Wolfe. He's a big NANFA guy about this as well as other people who are fly

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fishermen who are trying to make flies that mimic these fish for bigger ones. And they're really keying in on those fins that kind of look like that mica.

That's cool.

Yeah, yeah.

Very cool. I'm excited to go see this fish out in the wild. I've never seen one before in person.

You went to school at Virginia Tech, how have you never seen a hogsucker?

I didn't see a hogsucker.

Did you try?

I saw some of the other species. I'd go fishing!

You probably did see one but it was too camouflaged.

There have been plenty of times when I've been there, like working a pool for minnows or darters, or something else. I'll have been there for 10-15 minutes, and then realize there's been a hogsucker there the whole time that I've just been ignoring, because I think it's like shadows and rocks. They got those black saddles on them. And yeah, so it really messes with your head between those fins and those saddles and the rocks and just shadow. It's hard to see them.

It actually breaks it, makes it look like it's two objects with a shadow in between them kind of. It's crazy. They're hard to see.

Yeah, it reminds me in many respects, of, you know, you got these reef fish where they're whole camouflage is more disruptive than it is trying to blend in with anything. So you know, you'll see like those trigger fishes, you're like, "Well, how does that help them hide they're so colorful?" It's really just makes it look not like fish. And that's in a lot of ways, kind of what this is doing. But in a brown color palette of a stream bottom.

Yeah. And you got a lot of it is from above to I think the main predator on hogsuckers are predatory birds, like ospreys and things like that. So when you look directly down at them, they're almost impossible to see.

Yeah, it's hard to appreciate him if you can't see them, at least I mean, I wasn't familiar. Like, I'm in Alaska now for a number of years. And that's just like, yeah, that camouflage really does fish a little bit of a disservice with the public who's not like a hardcore angling public because they are very hard to just see by design.

Yeah. Whereas in Alaska, you look in the river and the fish are often like, bight,

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Red. Yep. They kind of remind me, have you ever seen those antelope the Saiga antelope with the giant snout? They look ridiculous. I was looking at pictures online. And man, they're like their doppelganger. So really, really kind of funny like and fish but really neat.

Yeah, they have that sort of squared off snout that sort of bends over and blends into the little tube-like mouth.

What is their mouth going to be doing when they're holding along the bottom? It's very distinctive, like you said, but like, what are they doing with that mouth?

Well, they're able to produce suction. So being, you know, a bottom feeder, a benthic foraging animal, they use it to just suck little insects, crustaceans, invertebrates of different kinds off of the rocks. And interestingly, they're one of the few fishes that actually manipulate the stream bottom by turning over rocks are moving them around and pushing them with their head, flipping them over. And so while they're feeding on the same kind of things that like a trout or a bass might feed on, they're actually not feeding in the water column, they're turning over rocks and feeding on hidden animals that are underneath the rocks. And I think too, they can actually suck the little insects out of the crevices and cracks with the suction that they produce with their little, little tube mouth.

It's interesting. They're a frequent sight when I've been snorkeling in these rivers. And as opposed to a lot of fish that, you know, they'll find a bit of prey and then they'll go and they'll have their feeding behavior, they'll scarf it down. Seems like the hogsuckers are just always kind of working a little bit as they go up.

Oh, yeah. As an avid fly fisher too, there's a phenomenon called the "hogsucker hatch" that you can look for. Like if you see a feeding hogsucker, oftentimes, you can look just downstream from them like 5,10,15 feet, and there will be other fish that are sort of feeding on the leftovers because as the hogsuckers root around on the bottom and flip rocks over, a lot of these little crustaceans, scuds, things like that'll get dislodged. And so fish like you know, Creek Chubs, and trout and other species will feed on whatever the hogsucker is churning up and it's something you can look for in the stream to pick up more fish.

That's awesome.

Kind of helpful to those other fish. That's neat.

I like that term, that hogsucker hatch. That's a cool, I'm gonna use that. Awesome. I'll credit you Cory.

Gotcha. They also sort of turn over the substrate, which is, you know, in some of the more impaired waters, the rocks and gravel gets sort of, they call it substrate embeddedness I believe where it it's no longer biologically productive if it's buried in sand, and there's a lot of erosion on some of our especially in agricultural regions. But the hogsuckers will flip those rocks over and that helps keep it aerated and keep the substrate productive.

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That probably helps the other fish too that can't do that with their mouths like some of the smaller fish.

Oh, for sure. Yeah, like darters need those little rock openings to spawn in. So I mean, I think they're almost entirely in some of these impaired waters that you wouldn't see darters if you didn't have Hogsuckers turning over the rocks like that.

Nocomis chubs, they need the rocks like that in order to build their nests. So Though it's all kind of built together.

Yeah, yeah. And diversity is stability and productivity in a lot of these aquatic ecosystems. So I think it's important to recognize that, you know, they're there. They're supposed to be there and really important for the whole, you know, the whole stream ecosystem.

That's cool.

Catostomids, there a really neat kind of group of fish. They're mostly exclusive to North America. And this includes your hogsuckers, your buffalo, red horses, those types of fish. How did these guys kind of fit in amongst the other cool native suckers in terms of where they are on that family tree if you know,

Well Hypentelium has its own genus, and I don't know if it's a sister clade to the redhorses, but they seem to have some affinity for the red horses, but they are their own thing. And there's three, I believe, just the Roanoke, the Alabama and Northern Hogsucker. And I've only encountered the northern hogsuckers.

Your Midwest like, are you Minnesota or Wisconsin?

I'm up in Minnesota. So I caught my first hogsucker on the St. Croix Wild and Scenic River, right between Minnesota and Wisconsin. So that's my stomping grounds.

That's kind of towards the northern end of their range, right. Or how far north did they get?

Yeah, that is, I think that's almost at the end of their range, you know, by Lake Erie. There's a small amount of Canada that they occur in, but yeah, that St. Croix River is about as far north as they get.

Nice.

Guy, which species have you caught of those three?

I've caught Northern and Alabama. I've been briefly in the watershed where you can find the Roanoke that one's a tough one that's only in like the Dan and upper Roanoke rivers. They're in Virginia, North Carolina. My mom's actually on a flight to Roanoke as we speak, and I told her to go look for some Roanoke Hogsuckers for me, I don't know if she'll be able to.

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She better catch one.

I told her to go over to White Sulphur Springs Hatchery too, but I don't think that she's gonna get to do that. She's a busy woman.

Hi Guy's Mom. That's funny.

I'd be curious how you're catching them, given their feeding ecology and how they're rooting around trying to bottom oriented. How are you targeting? Are there any specific times of year or just general tips?

Yeah, I don't know that there's a specific time of year. But why is there a specific habitat, one of the reasons people don't encounter them very often is anglers in general typically don't fish like fast, shallow, rocky water. It's a very difficult sort of environment. But you know, in a bigger river, you would fish you know, a bait like a worm or a piece of shrimp on the bottom in fast, rocky water. But in a small stream, you'll often fishing by sight. So you can wait around and look for them. And while they're hard to spot, if you have a clear eye, you can see them sometimes and then you can present a bait to them by sight, which is a lot of fun. Yeah,

I read this on roughfish.com Give roughfish a shout out. But I've noticed that myself too, that, you know, we talked a little bit about their camouflage, you can really get pretty close to these fish. Oftentimes, they'll just kind of hold still. So you're talking about sight fish, and they're not really apt to get spooked and run off or you can get within a rod's length of them often.

Oh, yes, yeah, they're very, I wouldn't call it passive, but I think they're very confident in their camouflage. So if you're approaching one, they are just well, "my best survival tactic is to just remain unseen and still here." I don't know if other people have noticed this, but me and a few of my fellow Hudsucker fishing minions, they're very also very passive in the hand. I mean, when they're fighting, they're very, you know, strong fighting fish for their size. But once you have them in your hand there, they also just tend to lay still. So I noticed some of the guys like to balance the hogsucker on their fingertips for their like pictures. And the fish doesn't tend to flop around very much.

They're very photogenic.

Yes, extremely photogenic. Yeah, I love it.

Some fish you can't get a picture of like an eel if you catch an eel they like wrap around your rod and your hand. But these guys Yeah, I found some really nice pictures online and they're awesome.

Yep. Typical.

How many people are fishing the hogsuckers? I know that they're kind of maybe a little underappreciated, but just have you come across many other fisherfolks?

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yeah, there's a lot of people that want to get them for life listing purposes, you know, people that just are obsessed with catching every type of fish. But there is a big spearfishing group in Missouri to the point where they had to institute strict limits on hogsuckers in the Missouri Ozarks in the Current River, because they're very popular food fish down there. Okay, they do have a strong following for people who are essential food, but I think they're kind of adorable, so I usually let him go.

I want to follow up a little bit more about that gigging down in Missouri, if we can dig into that a little bit cuz that's something that we haven't really talked about much. You're talking to out these fish are in these really shallow habitats. Are people, do they have like a personal light on them? Because I think they're doing this at night? Yeah. Do they have a boat that can get up into these really showers? Are they all on foot? How are they doing that?

I think they do it from a shallow draft boat at night. They're just sort of polling or maybe slowly paddling a small boat through the shallows.

That's interesting.

And I don't know that they're in the fast water and I haven't honestly fish for them at night very much. So I don't know that much about their nocturnal behavior. But it could be that they they retreat to some more still type water.

And when you're fishing for them, like hook and line, I assume that you're probably bait fishing for him. That's usually how I have to go about it. Can you feel them manipulating the bait? You mentioned sight fishing, are you actually watching for the bite too?

Yeah, if your sight fishing, typically, when they shoot that little sucker mouth out, you can see that and that's a dead giveaway that they've got the bait. Yeah, it's like a little wink of motion there at the head end of the fish. So if you're just fishing them and you can't see the fish, like the water is too deep or the surface is too roughly and broken. They are very light biting. So you need a pretty sensitive rod tip and you have to pay very close attention to the tip of the rod to see the bite. It's easy to miss.

In terms of appreciating kind of these under appreciated native fish. I'm just kind of curious if you've seen any perceptions where you are with, you know, these types of suckers, the native suckers versus some of the non native fish and just kind of what your mission or thought is about kind of building appreciation for these types of fish.

They're really only under appreciated by certain cultures. You know, obviously, the Native Americans have appreciated these fish since time immemorial. You know, the up here in Minnesota, we have the month of February called Namebini Giizis day, which is the Sucker Fish Moon, which is a time of year when the suckers are beginning to stage for spawning. And the Native people always harvested them at that time and considered it a gift. When the Europeans came here, they kind of harvested everything. But at some point in time, we divided the fish into game and rough fish and the game fish are things like walleye which is identical to the European Zander, the trout and salmon are all identical to the European trout and salmon. The pike is the same as the pike in Europe, the bass are all the same, they

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look very similar to the unrelated but very similar looking European bass. And that's why they were named that. So I think a lot of it is just you know,

Familiarity bias?

Yeah so Europeans want to eat European fish and these other fish are unfamiliar and strange and different. So that's kind of the, I think, the impetus for this division. But you know, and it's always been a something that, like minority groups, and people that are less up the socio economic scale have always used as a great resource. And they're a fun resource too. And it's also a regional or cultural thing. You know, like up here in Minnesota, people have at least for the last 50 years or so considered freshwater drummer a, you know, quote unquote, trash fish, but in Louisiana has always been a very highly esteemed fish. So it's a very regional thing. And I think as we're kind of not globalizing, but more, you know, we've got communication, we've got people, anglers of different life histories, different backgrounds, talking to each other online and sharing their stories. People all over are beginning to appreciate, you know, the great resource that we have in these native fish. And honestly, with the amount of, you know, popularity of the angling sport, I think it's about time people started appreciating these, because there's a lot of competition out there. And some of these fish are available really close to your home. They're very, you know, common, and they can provide a lot of sport and food. Yeah, for people who are willing to be a little bit open minded.

Yep. And they are very neat. I mean, if you just kind of look and we're digging into what they look like, and their habits, I mean, they really are a neat type of fish. And each fish has like, it's very specific kind of niche. Yeah, just interesting features. So it's, it's good to dig in and get to know all of them.

Yeah, it's so cool. I mean, in learning about them and their lives and how they make a living is really a lot of fun. It's, I mean, it's a lifelong pursuit.

A lot of people I hear their issue with these fish. You know, we talked about this quite a bit on the common carp episode that we just did. The intramuscular bones are kind of a put off to people in the modern Western world. But I was reading somewhere that if you score the fillets to allow the heat and the oil and whatever you're cooking in to kind of get in there that can help kind of cook the bones. Do you have any experience with that?

Oh, yeah, I just started scoring the fillet. Like keeping the fillet hole and then scoring it and frying it to make a scored fish. And I just started that two years ago. I have an annual sucker fry, you know, on the river every spring, and up until that this time, we've mainly just used a meat grinder and ground the fish to chop up the bones and the little tiny bits and then made them to do, essentially at crabcake. And it's really delicious. People love it, we put jalapeno peppers and some of them. But then a couple of years ago, we sort of started to branch out because people just kept going on and on about how good they were as scored and fried hole. And I did that for the first time and I was hooked. That's really good.

Does it work?

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Yeah. Oh, it works. It works great. It works better than you imagined, really. And all you do is you fillet the fish, take out the rib bones, scale it, and then you just cut it from the flesh side down to the skin once every quarter inch or so down the length of the fillet and bread it with a little bit of breading of some kind and fry it in hot oil. You will not notice any bones at all. It's delicious.

Really?

Yes. Yeah.

I'll have to try that. You said throw some breading on there and stuff. Do you put any sort of seasoning or any spices in there or anything?

I like a little bit of Old Bay, not a lot more than that. It's really, you know, sweet, white flaky fish. So it doesn't need a lot. You can dip them in some tartar sauce or something. I always like to do that.

Who's the sucker fry for? What's his annual event? Is this just a private thing?

I mean, there's about 50 people now, which is about all the little campground can handle this. So yeah, we've been doing it for I think 20 years now with suckers on the river and have a little species derby, which is we see who can catch the most species in three hours, which is a challenge. It's a challenge. It's an interesting type of competition where it doesn't matter what you catch, or how big it is. It matters what diversity of fish you can catch a photograph during that three hour period.

What's the most that somebody's caught?

I think someone got seven one time. Quite a bit. That's a lot.

Like a bio blitz.

And it depends on the year. You know, some years I think people will have won with three.

And what kind of suckers are you frying up?

It's Redhorse, white suckers. Very rarely a hogsucker. Silver, shorthead and golden redhorse of the three. It's a great counter argument for the "you can't eat them so what good are they?" sort of argument. I mean, every fish has its ecological services it provides like I was talking about how you know, hogsuckers provide food for other fish and increase the productivity of the stream. But just being able to say, "Hey, these are good food for humans" is a great way to just demonstrate that they have value.

So your brother is Drew right?

Yes, Drew. Yeah. You already had him on.

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Yeah, I was wondering if you guys compete at all with your fishing lists or if like what of us like a bigger fan of certain fish or just kind of what's going on there?

Yeah, so I think I let me think of what year I caught my first hogsucker. This was a competition between us for like many years, like maybe a decade where I caught a hogsucker. And he hadn't caught one. And we traveled everywhere. I just I still have I remember the day when we were wading the Red Cedar River in Wisconsin and he caught this fish and and immediately it was a big hogsucker you could tell it sort of splash on the surface. And he had this panic in his voice like "IT'S A HOGSUCKER!" He had considered himself cursed...

So he landed it.

Yeah, he landed it and got a picture of it with a huge smile on his face. Because it caught up to me.

I'm so lucky that I managed to get this one. I thought I was snagged I was fishing for white suckers just trying to catch them on the fly. It was sort of tough I nymphing with like a gold ribbed hare's ear or something sort of just buggy looking. And so I went upstream into sort of the some of the shallower water and my indicator was like bobbing down for probably good 10 seconds and I swear I thought I was stuck and and all of a sudden, oh no, that's a fish. And I'm up 10 feet on a bank. I have to jump down to kind of get down and grab that fish. Yeah, but like you're saying you kind of have your story with Drew like once you see it rolling up. It's obvious it's not a Catostomis. It's yeah, clear what it is.

That's so cool. I actually caught my first one at night. I was fishing for catfish or something and just reeled in this tiny fish. That was one of those things to where I had read about it in the you know, field guides. The old ones I think for the hogsucker just had a sort of text description that was really confusing. I'd never seen a picture of one but then when once I had read this one and I thought, oh, that's what they were talking about. Discovering that fish kind of set me down on the road to being a native fish enthusiast.

Oh, that's cool.

And sucker angler.

Your gateway fish?

Yes gateway fish, exactly.

Who is a better fisherman?

I gotta I'd have to pick Drew. Drew's better.

How many fish are on your life list?

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Oh, boy. I have 137 species. And that includes saltwater. Only large species. I don't track minnows. Yeah, so that's 137. Freshwater I have 88.

How do hogsuckers stack up for you in terms of enjoyment of fishing or just like ability with some of the other species on your list?

I think one of the things is I love where they live. You know, there's a lot of these warm water, small, rocky streams where you can go and find hogsuckers. And no one else is ever there. There's not a, you know, a trout population for anglers. So you end up in these just beautiful little streams, no one else around where you can enjoy a very like, kind of intimate mini golf style fishing experience. You know, where it's very visual, it's very satisfying. And you're kind of you know, interacting with the ecosystem. I think a lot of modern angling has become really you're like interacting with the environment through this mediated electronic or mechanical interface. Like I know, if people are out walleye fishing, they'll be staring at a screen sitting in a comfy chair, you know, with carpet under their feet. And that's the fishing experience. Whereas hogsucker fishing, in addition to just interacting with a really cool animal, you're also you know, you're watching the birds, you're feeling the water against your legs, you're seeing the sunlight glinting off the little sparkly scales, you know, on the back of the fish as you go for it. If it's a very interactive and sort of immersive nature.

That sounds awesome.

Thank you.

The hogsucker, you mentioned that it's cute. I think whenever we're taking kids out to sample for the first time, whether they're young or college age, you know, everyone's always like when they get a big hogsucker. Everyone gets really excited. And you know, people pass around. You mentioned them being passive people will kiss it on the lips because they got those big lips. So I don't think it's, it's, it's an easy fish to love.

Absolutely. I think if the hogssucker got to be bigger, it would be the best - the coolest game fish in the world. I mean, it's, like 10 pounds. It would be like lights out the hardest fighting coolest fish in stream. Oh, yeah.

That's cool. Very cool.

Thanks for listening to Fish of the Week! My name is Katrina Liebich. And my co host is Guy Eroh. Our production partner for this series is Citizen Racecar. Produced and story edited by Tasha AF Limley. Production Management by Gabriela Montequin. Post production by Alex Brower. Fish of the Week! is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Regional Office of External Affairs. We honor thank and celebrate the whole community, individual tribes states, our sister agencies, fish enthusiast, scientists and others who have elevated our understanding and love as people and professionals of all the fish