

Suckers

Steve Moore, FOMR friend and property owner along the Middle River, caught this sucker in February 2018 near Frank's Mill. Nice photo, Steve!

From what I gathered from Freshwater Fishes of the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware by Rohde, Arndt, Lindquist and Parnell, there are at least 3 different genera of fish that fall under the family, *Catostomidae* and are referred to as "suckers" in the Augusta County area:

- Northern hog sucker, *Hypentelium nigricans*
- Torrent sucker, *Thoburnia rathoeca*
- White sucker, *Catostomus commersonii*

Suckers have big lips— their most identifiable feature. And the lips are positioned on the underside of their "chin", so they can vacuum up invertebrates and clams on river bottoms. Because they feed on the bottom, they don't like heavily silted or anaerobic (no oxygen) river bottoms. Suckers are mostly solitary, sedentary fish, who like a bottom-life existence.

In contrast to their reputation as "trash" fish, they prefer clean, unpolluted waters and some species can even be found living amongst trout.

Virginia Tech's Virtual Aquarium lists other features of most suckers:

- Somewhat long bodies, well rounded or somewhat compressed
- Short dorsal fin base, adult dorsal fin well-rounded
- Male anal fin has two lobes, female has one
- Males have 3 tubercles on each side of snout and a few on the anal fin
- Black stripe on side of young, as well as reddish dorsal and tail fins

Suckers are an abundant, but small fish and may account for much of the fish biomass in rivers and streams. Right about now in the early springtime, they make mass upstream migrations to spawn. The eggs are sticky. They sink to the bottom and stick to gravel.

Their greatest value of suckers is as their link in the food chain, eating primary consumers and serving as prey for sport fish. Suckers are sometimes raised and sold as bait fish for pike and muskellunge. A small commercial fishery for suckers exist in some states, where they are erroneously sold for food as "mullet." Suckers' meat is reportedly firm and tasty but contains a lot of inter-muscular bones— just like minnows and pike— thus they are often sold pickled or smoked (VA Tech, 2018).

About Fish School: Watershed Administrator Kate here! I am certainly no angler, but want to know what is under my kayak. I figure there may be other Friends who would benefit from some beginner fish introductions, too. So I plan to share my learning journey regularly in FOMR newsletters and Facebook. I may (am likely) to make mistakes or silly statements about fish along the way so, anglers, feel free to gently inform me when my scholarship goes astray! Or, if you have a good picture of a fish you caught in the Middle River—even better if **you** are in the picture— send it on to me and I'll either use it as a basis for a Fish School article down the line, or I'll post your picture on our Facebook page! Send pictures to info@friendsofthemiddleriver@gmail.com with Fish School in the subject line.

References:

Rohde, C., Arndt, R., Lindquist, D., and Parnell, J. (1994) *Freshwater Fishes of the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (2018). *EFISH, The Virtual Aquarium of Virginia Tech*. Retrieved 3/12/18 from <http://web1.cnre.vt.edu/efish/>