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The freshwater drum has a good number of supporters among the angling fraternity, and ranks high as a food fish. Its meat is rather dry, has a fine flavor and relatively few bones. Large drum sometimes have a gamey taste and may be tough. In the one to three pound size, however, you will find drum at its best.

The name probably was derived from the grunting or drumming sound for which the fish is known, a sound apparently produced by forcing air from one portion of the air bladder to another. The fish is known to anglers and commercial fishermen as sheepshead, perch, white perch, stone perch, gaspergou, gray perch, crooker, crocus, thunder-pumper or even gray bass. Its correct name, however, is freshwater drum.

It's unique in appearance and can be distinguished at a glance from other Missouri fishes by its humped back, fanshaped tail and silvery color. Drum from muddy water may be lightly colored but all have a silvery hue. The snout is blunt and the mouth quite large. The fin on the back is deeply notched and armed with strong spines; the anal fin has two spines, one quite strong.

Granddaddy drum gets to be quite large. Fifty to sixty-pounders were reported often in the old days and even now an occasional twenty-pounder is hooked in the Lake of the Ozarks or the big rivers. Throat bones and molars of freshwater drum found at old Indian camp sites indicate that they may have once attained sizes as great as 200 pounds! These bones probably had some special significance to the Indians, for they have been found in large numbers in former settlements which were distant from the drum's range.

The freshwater drum is unusual in its distribution -- you find it all the way from Hudson's Bay to Guatemala. The main part of its domain, however, includes the Mississippi drainage system, the Great Lakes, and the St. Lawrence basin. Its cousins inhabit salt water, but the drum family is represented by a single freshwater species in all its vast range. Most likely this branch of the family stemmed from Gulf of Mexico ancestry. Among its salt water relatives are the croakers, the drummers, and the yellowtails.

In Missouri, it is widely distributed in streams and big reservoirs. According to the state-wide creel census it made up roughly a third of the creel in the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers in 1949, and it makes up about four percent of the state-wide creel. Compared with other fishes, the hook and line catch from the big lakes is considerably less than it is in the two great rivers.

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In addition to providing sport, the freshwater drum is an important component of the commercial catch, and it reaches many tables through the commercial market. During 1948 roughly 600,000 pounds were produced in the Mississippi river between Hastings, Minn., and Caruthersville, Mo. The catch in Missouri waters where commercial fishing is permitted amounted to nearly 50,000 pounds. Along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, drum are usually marketed under the name of perch or white perch.

The drum is usually a bottom feeder, and much of its diet consists of bottom animals, including mussels and insect larvae. At times, however, it seems to go on a diet consisting largely of fish and crawdads. Perhaps this occurs when other foods are not so readily available, or it may be a matter of choice. Drum have special equipment in the form of heavy millstone-like jaws located behind the gills, for cracking mussel shells, so that the fish may feed upon the fleshy body inside. Strangely enough, some of these mussels, just after hatching, attach themselves to the gills of drum and remain as parasites until they grow large enough to shift for themselves.

Drum are good trotline fish, and a lot of them are taken on pole and line, too. The important thing is to fish on the bottom. A gravel bar is a good place to fish for them and you are very likely to find them where there are crawfish. Worms and crawdads are probably the best bait. If you are fishing in the fall, try minnows also. A fishery investigation conducted on the Missouri river showed that minnows made up the main part of their diet in September and October. Don't forget that they feed a lot at night.