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AN UNAPPRECIATED CALIFORNIA GAME FISH, THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN WHITEFISH, *PROSOPIUM WILLIAMSONI* (GIRARD)¹

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During several seasons of creel census work on the Truckee River in California, the authors have been made aware of the scanty knowledge possessed by anglers of the Rocky Mountain Whitefish. At well-fished "holes" it is not uncommon to see many whitefish strewn on the banks to rot. Many anglers throw away their entire catch of this species—believing it to be worthless. Several reasons may be assigned for this:

(1) A close relative of the salmons and trouts, the whitefish differs from them in possessing larger scales, weaker teeth, and a smaller mouth. The snout of the male whitefish, particularly during the spawning season, is somewhat produced. These characters plus its absence of bright colors give it a somewhat superficial resemblance to a sucker (family Catostomidae). Hence, anglers mistake it for one, and since, "No one would eat a sucker"—it is discarded. Ironically enough, a true sucker of the Truckee river which develops a "rainbow" on its sides during breeding season is often mistaken for a trout by some of these same anglers!

(2) In California the term "whitefish" is rather indiscriminately applied to several of the larger minnows (family Cyprinidae). This term is used particularly for *Ptychocheilus grandis* (Ayres), the Sacramento Squawfish, also known as Sacramento pike, pike, hardhead, hardmouth, etc. *Ptychocheilus* is considered inedible by most fishermen, who complain of its many bones. Because of the similarity of common names and the fact that *Prosopium* is reputed (although unwarrantedly) to be too bony (even by those who have never eaten one), it is possible that it is also confused with this minnow.

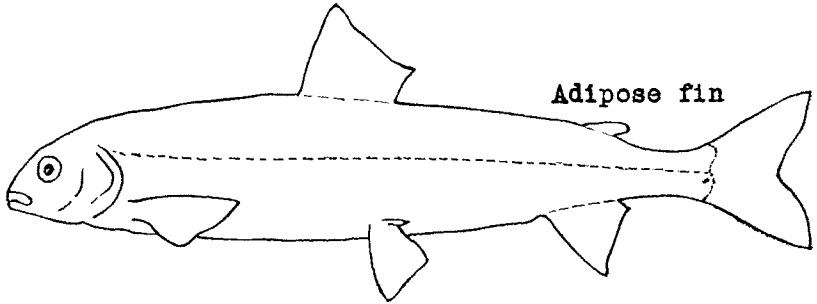
(3) Although the whitefish is classed in the California Fish and Game Code as a game fish, there is no limit to the catch. It is a very human characteristic that unless a "price" or restriction is set upon something it is apt to be considered valueless.

While our whitefish may not be as gamy as a trout, still it rises to a fly and puts up a very creditable battle. Furthermore, it is an excellent table fish—its flavor comparing well with that of any other salmonid.

Since its distribution in this State is limited to a few streams and lakes on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada (Truckee River, Trout Creek, Fallen Leaf Creek, Lake Tahoe, Donner Lake, Lower and Upper Twin Lakes, Walker River, Carson River), and since its increase is

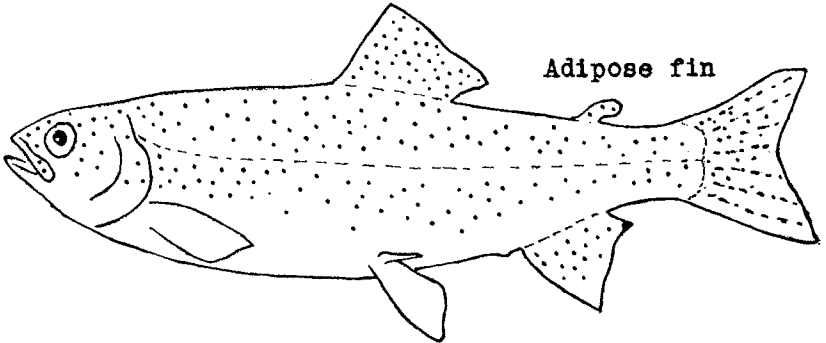
¹ Submitted for publication, March, 1939.

dependent entirely upon natural propagation, it is hoped that this waste will not continue. The presence of an adipose fin will easily distinguish whitefish from either suckers or minnows. (See Fig. 85.)



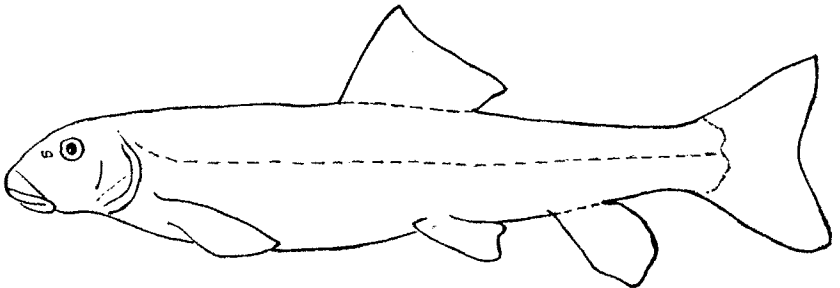
Adipose fin

ROCKY MOUNTAIN WHITEFISH



Adipose fin

TROUT



SUCKER

FIG. 85. These drawings illustrate the differences in appearance between whitefish, trout and sucker. Of all the fish found in the mountain streams and lakes of California, only the trout, salmon, catfish and Rocky Mountain whitefish have adipose fins. The sucker is the only fish in those waters with the mouth situated beneath the head.