

REDHORsing AROUND IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA



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Redhorses (genus *Moxostoma*) in particular, and suckers (family Catostomidae) in general, are fascinating fishes. The first time I considered angling for them, I was extremely intimidated. I had heard all the rumors about how certain redhorse species were difficult to catch, and, to be completely honest, I had no idea what I was doing. Luckily for me, I happened to know an expert on redhorse angling, and after a little convincing on my part, we teamed up in western North Carolina for my first redhorse fishing trip. Jeremy Dunfee has spent a lot of time fishing the rivers and streams of North Carolina, and from the minute I arrived at the river I felt like I was under the tutelage of a great master. First, I learned to downsize *all* my gear (i.e., rod, reel, line test, sinker weight, and, most importantly, hooks). Redhorses and other suckers are very sensitive fishes. Their mouths feel almost everything, so a sharp hook point sticking out of a worm or too heavy of a weight is going to mean no fish. I learned which baits to use as well, which was straightforward enough: nightcrawlers and sometimes red earthworms, both readily available at bait stores in western North Carolina. The best rods to use for redhorse are usually medium or medium-heavy spinning rods, and line should be 10-pound test or less. I found small circle hooks worked wonderfully for most redhorse species. We preferred sizes 6 and 8, but we also used 1/0 and 2/0 circles for larger redhorse species.

I watched in awe and envy as Jeremy landed several Golden *Moxostoma erythrurum* and Black *M. duquesnei* redhorses. Of course, this was before I could make a Walmart run to purchase the correct gear, which I did that evening. Jeremy landed around six redhorse that day, plus a few Northern Hog Suckers *Hypentelium nigricans* and a couple Spotted Bass *Micropterus punctulatus*. I caught a beautiful White Sucker *Catostomus commersonii* and Rock Bass *Ambloplites rupestris*, but was disappointed at not catching any redhorse. The next morning, at another location on another river, I watched as Jeremy pulled out Golden and Black

redhorses again, and then Smallmouth Redhorse *M. breviceps*. I wondered what I was doing wrong, but I wasn't doing anything wrong. Jeremy was simply far more in-tune with redhorse than I was. He could sense when a redhorse had the worm in its mouth, and knew how the lined looked when a fish spit out the bait. He could time when to tighten the line and deftly set the hook.

Jeremy is truly a master angler, and I learned a great deal from him over the next few months. I joked that I was not meant to catch a redhorse, but Jeremy dismissed that notion. He was confident I could do as well as he, but told me I had to learn that redhorse fishing is a game of patience. A few minutes after he had dispensed his angling philosophy, my 13-foot collapsible crappie pole danced its way into the water, forcing me to lunge and grab the end just before it slipped away into the deep pool. I had been using this long pole for microfishing, and to my surprise I was fighting a nice Smallmouth Redhorse. The fish took my line from left to right but didn't pull away from me, which surely would have snapped the 2-pound test line (there is no reel). Jeremy sprang into action with the landing net and scooped up the beauty. It was all over in less than a minute. I had caught my first redhorse: a picture-perfect Smallmouth! After shaking hands with Jeremy and taking some pictures, I released the fish back into the river and was truly a happy person. Jeremy couldn't believe that I had gotten the fish in on 2-pound line and what was basically a fancier version of an old-fashioned cane pole.

A few weeks later, I was fortunate enough to relocate to Waynesville, North Carolina, the heart of redhorse country. Nine redhorse species are found in that area, and I decided that I

Photos by the author.

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Black Redhorse

wanted to catch all of them. The species included Black, Golden, Smallmouth, River *M. carinatum*, V-lip *M. pappilosum*, Notchlip *M. collapsum*, and Silver *M. anisurum* redhorse (plus two undescribed species: Sicklefin Redhorse and Brassy Jumprock). It was a formidable list, but I challenged myself to catch them all in one season and this is how I did it.

I started in the late summer of 2017 by returning to the first location Jeremy had taken me to. The spot was an angling gold mine, diverse in fish species including redhorses, White Sucker, Northern Hog Sucker, Spotted Bass, Smallmouth Bass *M. dolomieu*, Brown Trout *Salmo trutta*, Rainbow Trout *Oncorhynchus mykiss*, Brook Trout *Salvelinus fontinalis*, Rock Bass, and several smaller species. The Black Redhorse is by far the most common redhorse species in western North Carolina, with Golden Redhorse a close second followed by Smallmouth Redhorse. Sicklefin Redhorse are also present, but I wouldn't target these since they are a state-listed species. I initially set up two rods with bottom rigs for redhorse. This rig consists of a weight, as light as possible, with a leader of smaller line and a hook. I preferred smaller circle hooks, but would use standard "J" hooks as well. Different species of suckers prefer different spots in the river, and I would keep this in mind as I tried to catch every single species I could. I quickly caught Northern Hog Suckers and River Chubs *Nocomis micropogon* in great numbers, but to my disappointment no redhorse. I then began to pull up White Suckers, one after another. I waited and waited, and then saw one of my rod tips bump forward. I remembered what Jeremy had taught me about redhorse bites: sometimes they are really subtle, and the fish may be there on the bottom sucking the juices out of the worm. I decided to reel in, and to my surprise I felt pressure on the other end of my line. It was a redhorse, finally—a Black Redhorse! They are exceptionally beautiful in the North Carolina mountains. I took a few photos and quickly released the fish. A little later that day, after catching several more Black Redhorses, I caught a nice Golden Redhorse, making it my third redhorse species on hook and line. I was becoming a more confident redhorse angler.

With three redhorse species under my belt, I was feeling more confident every day. I had even caught three Sicklefin Redhorse by accident while trying to catch other species. From my home in Waynesville, I drove a little over an hour east to the Green River for Notchlip and V-Lip redhorse, along with Brassy Jumprock. The scenery was breathtaking; the spot I selected was at the bottom of the Green River Gorge in North Carolina. It was basically a long winding road that led to the fishing spot, which was also a tourist destination. I had arrived early however, and there were no other cars around. I set two rods out just before the sun came up, and immediately began catching all three species of trout in North Carolina (Rainbow, Brown, and Brook), but no redhorse. I remembered something that Jeremy had taught me previously, somewhere along the lines of having to catch every species in a body of water first before the redhorse will bite. After a few more trout, I reeled in what I thought was a large White Sucker. Upon closer examination I discovered that it was a Notchlip Redhorse, and I had my fourth Redhorse species on hook and line. At another nearby location on the Green River, I caught my V-Lip Redhorse and Brassy Jumprock. I was getting closer to completing my goals.



Golden Redhorse



Smallmouth Redhorse



Shorthead Redhorse



Notchlip Redhorse



Blacktail Redhorse



River Redhorse



Silver Redhorse



Brassy Jumprock



V-lip Redhorse



Striped Jumprock



Sicklefin Redhorse



Greater Jumprock

In the spring of 2018 I decided to make a trip north to meet Jeremy in Pennsylvania. I made the long drive and did a little microfishing on the first day, along with some darter fishing. I caught several species of minnows, along with Johnny *Etheostoma nigrum*, Rainbow *E. caeruleum*, and Greenside *E. blennioides* darters, but I would soon get to bigger fish. I had come up for two redhorse species that were difficult to catch in North Carolina: the Shorthead Redhorse and the Silver Redhorse. The Shorthead Redhorse that is found in North Carolina may be a future species split and is currently being called the Atlantic Shorthead Redhorse. I would have to save that species for a future date. Jeremy quickly got me on a genuine Shorthead Redhorse, and this was the first big fish I pulled up in Pennsylvania. The spot also boasted huge numbers of Quillback *Carpoides cyprinus*, and I was really hoping to add one of those to my lifelist, but it wasn't to be this trip. The next morning, Jeremy had his personal favorite spot in mind for huge Silvers, and I was ready to tangle with one. The stream was no more than thirty feet wide, but at the bottom of the largest riffle there were hundreds, if not thousands, of Silver Redhorses, along with Rainbow Trout. For about an hour, I dropped bait after bait in front of countless Silver Redhorses but to no avail. I caught a few Rainbows but quickly unhooked and threw them back; frustrating work. At the end of the day, when I was about to quit, I finally hooked into a large Silver. I was using a medium-action rod with six-pound line, and the fight was unbelievable. The large Silver took out my line as fast as he could, and I reeled it back as fast as I could without breaking my line. The small size of the stream ended up helping me, and within a few minutes Jeremy had most of the fish into the net so we could take pictures. The fish was beautiful, every bit of ten pounds, and healthy. We kept the pictures to a minimum and released the fish unharmed to go back to his friends. It was a good day and a good trip, but I was eager to get back to North Carolina to catch my final wanted species, the River Redhorse.

The far reaches of western North Carolina was where I was going—the middle of nowhere, really—and that's about as much as I can tell you. The spot was great for Rivers, Silvers, and Sicklefins, but I was only there for River Redhorse. In the past I had tried in water too deep for them, not knowing they were in the shallower runs and riffles. These would be the spots in the river that I would try to set up my rigs. I had a good sunny day, and I could actually spot them in shallow water just barely covering their heads. Casting to them in shallow water can be a challenge, so you cast past them in line with where they are going to be, and then reel up the slack until the bait comes right up to them. Doing it this way you won't spook the fish. The technique worked, and I caught two nice River Redhorses in the span of a few hours. The River Redhorse was my ninth redhorse on hook and line in one season, and I was really proud of myself for accomplishing so much in so little time. I thanked Jeremy a lot for helping me learn so much about redhorse angling and about redhorses in general. They truly are gentle and unique fishes. A few months later, at my favorite V-Lip Redhorse spot on the Green River, I helped Jeremy get another Redhorse species for his life list, a nice V-Lip of his own. My tenth redhorse came in early June 2019 at the NANFA Convention in Mississippi when I hooked a nice

Blacktail Redhorse *M. poecilurum*. I was surprised, but very happy, that I caught it as I was simply bottom fishing a night-crawler for Spotted Bass.

I learned more and caught far more redhorse species than I thought I could in such a short time. However, other non-North Carolina *Moxostoma* remain on my search list, and I hope they are not too elusive.



Northern Hog Sucker



Alabama Hog Sucker



Spotted Sucker