

# BLACK HORSE, BLUE SUCKER



Olaf Nelson

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Unlike features such as scale or ray counts, the names of fishes—scientific and common\*—are susceptible to the same forces as any human creation. What initially seem like good ideas later fall from favor, new discoveries make old understandings obsolete, and the innovations of earlier generations are eventually old-fashioned. With this in mind, and believing them to be important, I keep track of every common or vernacular name I find for any sucker species. Old sources are especially rich in names, and I have examined hundreds of scientific, popular, and governmental publications (so far).

Thanks to the Internet Archive, the Biodiversity Heritage Library, Project Gutenberg, Google Books, and other online resources, it is possible to find obscure and very old sources. A staggering number of publications are freely available online (anything published before 1923 is in the public domain in the U.S., as are government publications), but many more remain undigitized. Unpublished sources are a problem: rare or unique sources (field notes, unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, sketches) are easily lost, and those that survive are unlikely to be known, cataloged, or scanned. Any one of them might contain fragments of information (e.g., regional fish names and lore) that their authors never managed to fit into published works. Much remains hidden.

Until the 1930s, no serious attempt was made to standardize fish names, and even scientific names changed frequently. It can be difficult to know what species early observers of North American fishes mean, even when the names used seem specific. Even the common names of trout and pike in old books are often confusing; the problem is magnified when dealing with less revered fishes such as suckers. Suckers exist in almost all areas of the continent, and have accumulated many regional or local names. Additionally, they are frequently called carp. Finally, numerous sucker species were often treated—either out of ignorance of their differences or a feeling that these fish were unworthy of more careful attention—as a single species: “suckers.”

\*Current practice is to capitalize common names. In the past this was basically random. I have capitalized even unaccepted common names (except in quotations, which follow the original).

For expanded information, a complete list of sources used in this article, links to original texts, and more images, please see <http://moxostoma.com/bluesuckernames>.



Figure 1. LeSueur’s illustration of a (dried) Blue Sucker.

## CYCLEPTUS ELONGATUS

The Blue Sucker was first described in 1817 by LeSueur as *Catostomus elongatus* (Figure 1). Hot on his heels, Rafinesque (1820) described it twice: he gives LeSueur’s *Catostomus elongatus* as his 67th species (with the common names Long Sucker and Brown Sucker), then adds a new genus, *Cycleptus*, which differs from *Catostomus* in having two dorsal fins. In this genus, as species 68, he puts *Cycleptus nigrescens*, with the common names Black Suckrel [sic] and Missouri Sucker. As usual, he was less than rigorous: he admits he has not seen the fish. If he had, he would have noticed that it had one dorsal.

Because the Blue Sucker can not actually be in the genus *Catostomus* (or, indeed, in any other sucker genus), and because Rafinesque’s *Cycleptus* was the first genus other than *Catostomus* in which the species had been placed, it is the name Agassiz assigned the genus when he sorted it out (1855). However, LeSueur’s *elongatus* remained the proper species name, as it had priority over Rafinesque’s *nigrescens*.

As evidence of the importance of common names, Agassiz writes of *Cycleptus* (and of Rafinesque’s shortcomings): “the characteristics of the genus, as given by Rafinesque, are not true to nature. Yet...I do not feel at liberty to reject his generic name; since it is possible to identify the fish he meant by the vernacular name under which it is known in the West.” In other words, because Rafinesque had seen fit to write that “it is also found in the Missouri, whence it is sometimes called the Missouri Sucker,” Agassiz could be certain that the species meant was the one still widely known by that common name.



Figure 2. They really do get *that* blue. Kansas Blue Sucker, during the spawn. May, 2011. (Photo by Paul Schumann)

Though its scientific name was sorted out in under 40 years—a quick resolution compared to some fishes—settling on a common name would take nearly three times as long, and priority would have no role at all in the decision.

#### WHEN DID THE BLUE SUCKER TURN BLUE?

The name Blue Sucker is perfectly appropriate: these fish can be strikingly blue (Figure 3). They may also be golden, pale gray, jet black, brown, or combinations of these colors and more (Figure 3). Interestingly, early descriptions of the species never mention the color blue. LeSueur states that he has only seen a dried specimen and can not comment on color. Rafinesque says *Catostomus elongatus* is “brownish” (and called Brown Sucker), while his *Cycleptus nigrescens* (which, remember, he had never seen) he describes as “blackish.” Regarding color, Kirtland writes (1845): “head dusky above, coppery on its sides. Back black, often slightly mottled. Sides and beneath dusky and cupreous. Fins dusky and livid.” The entry in Jordan’s “Report on the Fishes of Ohio,” (1882) mentions color more than most: “the males in spring with a black pigment...coloration very dark, the females olivaceous and coppery, the males chiefly jet black with coppery shadings; fins dusky.”

For almost 100 years, no one mentioned the color that features in most descriptions since the mid-1900s. Not until Forbes and Richardson’s *The Fishes of Illinois* (1908) does a description include blue: “color dark, bluish black about head; fins dusky to black; spring males almost black.”

One reason for the omission may be the loss of color in preserved specimens. Also, coloration may change over the course of the year, vary geographically, or re-

spond to local water conditions. Still, is it possible that *none* of the biologists who wrote about it saw blue fish? Did “dusky,” a word most of them used (probably the second most common descriptor of color after black), mean the gray-blue of Blue Sucker fins? Since specimens were more easily collected in the spring (during the spawn), and since fish are often reported to be darkest at that time, most biologists who saw live or fresh fish were seeing them at their darkest. However, I have personally handled—and have seen many photos of—very blue Blue Suckers during the spawn (Figure 2).

No one used Blue Sucker for *C. elongatus* until the 1920s, but the name was not new. Rafinesque (1820) reports it as a “vulgar name” for his Black-back Sucker (*Catostomus melanotus*; actually Central Stoneroller, *Camptostoma anomalum*). A list of Manitoba fishes received by The Smithsonian (1883) includes *Catostomus teres* (now *C. commersoni*, the White Sucker) as “Blue sucker.” A “Large-scaled sucker, or blue sucker,” (no scientific name given) appears in book of food items available in the markets of East Coast cities (1867), but it is too small to be *Cycleptus*. *Goodholme’s Domestic Cyclopaedia of Practical Information* (1889) has “blue sucker” twice: under Chub, then under Sucker (as small, pale-blue, and not worth eating. As a final example of misdirection, *The Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission* (1897) gives Black Sucker and Blue Sucker as common names for *Pantosteus jordani* (now *Catostomus platyrhynchus*, the Mountain Sucker).

The earliest use of Blue Sucker as a common name for *Cycleptus elongatus* (that I have found so far) is in two articles by Robert E. Coker on the fish and fisheries impacts of the Keokuk Dam (1928), published in the *Bulletin of the U. S. Bureau of Fisheries*. In the first (“Keokuk Dam and the fisheries of the upper Mississippi River”), he twice identifies the species as “Missouri or blue sucker,” but after that uses only “blue sucker.” In the second (“Studies of common fishes of the Mississippi River at Keokuk”), he consistently uses only Blue Sucker, though he does give “bluefish” as an alternative common name, along with Missouri Sucker.

While Coker worked at Keokuk (roughly 1913–28), other publications continued to use the older names. *The Encyclopedia Americana* (1920) has “Blackhorse, a fish, one of the suckers of the Mississippi Valley (*Cycleptus elongatus*); also known as the Missouri or gourdseed sucker. It is about two feet long, with a small head, suggesting, in profile, that of a horse, and becomes almost jet-black in spring.” Forbes and Richardson, in *The Fishes of Illinois* (1908 and 1920 editions), are

#### THE MANY NAMES OF *CYCLEPTUS ELONGATUS*

Common names found in various publications, 1820 to 1950.

Black Buffalo	Gourd Sucker	Schooner
Blackhorse	Long Sucker	Slenderhead(ed)
Black Sucker	Long Buffalo	Sucker
Black Suckerel	Mississippi Sucker	Shoemaker
Bluefish	Missouri Sucker	Shoemaker
Brown Sucker	Muskellunge (Wa-	Suckerel
Gourd-mouth	bash River, IN)	Sweet Sucker
Gourdseed Sucker	Razorback Sucker	Sweet Suckerel

inconsistent. The common name given first is Missouri Sucker, but a few pages later the name is “Black-horse.” Still later, they report that “to Illinois and Mississippi River fishermen in this state it is commonly known as the Missouri sucker, or occasionally as the black sucker. The name ‘black-horse’ we have not found in current use.” Jordan, Evermann and Clark’s *Check List of the Fishes* (1928) provides four common names, none of which are Blue Sucker. Two works published in 1935 mention *Cycleptus*: Greene’s *The Distribution of Wisconsin Fishes* gives Blue Sucker as the sole common name, while Pratt’s second edition of *A Manual of Land and Fresh Water Vertebrate Animals of the United States* gives only Blackhorse and Missouri Sucker, despite stating in the preface that the main purpose of the new edition is to provide updated names.

Coker’s work may be the earliest *publication* of the name, but it seems unlikely that he coined it himself. In 1913 he sent a colleague to observe the closing of the Keokuk Dam to fill the lake above it. Locals harvested fish stranded in pools below the dam (over a ton), and the list Coker gives uses mostly vernacular names (e.g., “sheepshead, fiddlers”). Among the most abundant were “bluefish (*Cycleptus*).” In this context, “bluefish” seems to be a local name. As he repeatedly cites local informants for all sorts of information in all his articles, I suspect Blue Sucker, like “bluefish,” was a name he heard from fishermen, fish sellers and other locals. I hope his notebooks or other unpublished papers survive somewhere.

Blue Sucker appears more and more frequently in the 1930s and 1940s, though the old names persist. One example, Eddy and Surber’s *Northern Fishes* (1943 original and 1947 revised editions), uses Blue Sucker, but gives four traditional common names and says in the text, “the blue, or Missouri, sucker,” as if the authors know that Blue Sucker is the leading contender but realize it is not yet universally established.

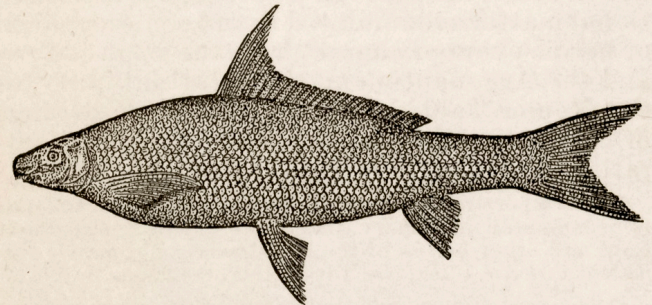
### MAKING IT OFFICIAL

Though Blue Sucker had gradually gained traction for almost two decades, it did not become the “official” accepted common name until 1947. Compilation of “A List of Common and Scientific Names of the Better Known Fishes of the United States and Canada,” released in 1947 by the American Fisheries Society (and available by mail for 25 cents) had been underway since the 1930s. It was intended to help eliminate confusion caused by the “several groups applying [different] common names to fishes [including] sport fishermen; commercial fishermen; fishculturists; and scientific workers,” and “by purely local names applied to the same fish in different geographical areas.” Having worked to make sense of common names over a long period of time, I applaud the effort.

The upstart name Blue Sucker was chosen over all of the species’ previous names. The index at the end of the list in-

**Cycleptinae** (sik-lep-tī'nē), *n. pl.* [NL., < *Cycleptus* + *-inae*.] A subfamily of catostomoid fishes, typified by the genus *Cycleptus*, with a long dorsal fin, elongated body, and no interparietal fontanel.

**Cycleptus** (si-klep'tus), *n.* [NL., < Gr. κύκλος, a circle, + λεπτός, thin, fine.] The typical and only known genus of *Cycleptinae*. There is but one



Black-horse (*Cycleptus elongatus*).  
(From Report of U. S. Fish Commission, 1884.)

species, *C. elongatus*, growing to a length of 2½ feet, common in the Mississippi valley, and popularly known as the black-horse, suckereel, gourd-mouth, gourdseed-sucker, sucker, and Missouri sucker.

Figure 3. Black-horse. (*Century Dictionary & Cyclopedia*, 1899).

cludes rejected names, but the only one of the Blue Sucker’s former names listed is Missouri Sucker. It seems unlikely that no other names were considered, given that the vast majority of published sources had consistently mentioned, in addition to that name, Blackhorse, Suckereel, and Gourdseed Sucker. Additionally, Missouri Sucker was not eligible for acceptance, since the naming committee’s rules explicitly disqualified geographic terms unless appropriate for a species with a restricted range.

The list’s introduction mentions disagreement and multiple rounds of voting (less than half the names on the list were unanimous choices), but not which fishes’ names were contentious. Though I would like to think *Cycleptus* was a hot topic, I have found no record of what—if any—discussions or debate was involved in the decision. I continue to hold out hope that notes exist in the papers of some committee members, but finding them will not be easy. The AFS is not aware of any records of the process, and Walter H. Chute, chairman of the committee, apparently left nothing in the papers archived at the Shedd Aquarium (he was its director at the time). If Reeve M. Bailey—a member of the first committee and its next chairman—left notes, they might be among his papers at the University of Michigan.

In the end, Blue Sucker was probably the right choice. It identifies the species’ family (suckers) and uses a modifier (blue) that is not applicable to other species of similar size or range. The fish is blue, of course, and the name Blue Sucker (whatever its origins) *had* been in use for at least two decades.

Still, I wish they had chosen Blackhorse.