

# Mottled sculpin

*Cottus bairdii* By Jim Pashby

Unless they work as a fisheries biologist, most people have never seen a mottled sculpin, one of Montana's most unusual native fish. Yet in every fly shop across the state there's a bin filled with artistic feather and deer-hair renderings of these small stream dwellers. Just ask for a Muddler Minnow.



## IDENTIFICATION

The mottled sculpin is a three- to four-inch fish that looks like a cross between a toad and a baby sauger. Its flat, disproportionately large head has two big, bulging eyes and a wide, lipped mouth. The body tapers back to a rounded tail. The pectoral, dorsal, and anal fins are all oversized compared with those of most other fish species. Like all sculpins, mottleds are scaleless, with a slick skin. The body is mottled in a splotchy camouflaged pattern of brown and black.

“Sculpin” is Latin for “sea scorpion,” which freshwater sculpins closely resemble.

## RANGE

Montana is home to three sculpin species—torrent, spoonhead, and mottled—all living in the riffles of cold, clear streams and rivers and sometimes along rocky lake-shores. The torrent is found only in the state's far northwestern corner, in the Kootenai River basin. The spoonhead is confined to the small Saskatchewan River basin in and near northeastern Glacier National Park. The mottled is the most widespread, living in rivers and streams from the Continental Divide as far east as Havre, Lewistown, and Big Timber.

Elsewhere, the mottled sculpin ranges throughout the Rockies and from Manitoba through most of eastern Canada and south to the Great Lakes states and Appalachia.

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## SCIENTIFIC NAME

*Cottus* comes from the Greek “kottos,” meaning fish, and *bairdii* refers to S.F. Baird, head of the U.S. Fish Commission in the late 1800s.

Colorful regional nicknames include spoon-head, miller's thumb, and cockatouch.

## FEEDING

Mottled sculpins feed on midge pupae, mayfly and caddis fly larvae, aquatic worms, and small crayfish. They use their massive pectoral fins to hold themselves steady in fast current, wedging their head between flat stones in search of prey.

## REPRODUCTION

In spring, the male mottled sculpin finds a cavity below a flat rock and waits for a mate. He chases rivals away, rapidly opening and closing his mouth like a barking dog. When a female approaches, the male shakes his bulky head and bites her head and fins as a sort of welcome. She enters the cavity and turns upside down. He does the same, and, as they press up against the underside of the rock ceiling, the two vibrate to release milt and eggs, which stick to the hard surface.

## THE FLY

The Muddler Minnow, invented in 1937 by Minnesota native Don Gapen, is one of the

most popular trout flies in North America. Gapen tied it to imitate sculpins he found in the bellies of the monster brook trout he caught in Ontario's Nipigon River, where he worked as a fishing guide. He is credited with being the first fly tier to spin deer hair to create a dense, bulky head. Matched turkey wing quills and gray squirrel tail hair are tied behind the head, and gold sparkle braid wraps around the heavy streamer hook shank.

The Muddler Minnow is mainly fished like a streamer in riffles, using a sink-tip fly line or a few small split shot pinched to a heavy tippet to keep it low to the bottom. The fly is especially effective at night, and in the fall when brown trout feed aggressively before spawning.

The Muddler Minnow was first popularized in Montana during the early 1950s by Dan Bailey of Livingston, who pitched it to clients for catching trophy browns on the Yellowstone River.

Later variations by inventive fly tiers include the Marabou Muddler, Tunghead Muddler, Zuddler, Kinky Muddler, and Conehead Bunny Muddler. 🐟