Live Bait Fish Identification Key

How to use key: if fish matches all conditions of 1a go to 2a. If fish does not match condition 1a go to 1b. Follow key until fish species is found. Visually compare key results with fish sketch and pictures on opposite side of key. Approved live bait species are underlined. Be responsible, DO NOT USE as live bait if you cannot identify the fish!

1a. dorsal fin with less than 10 rays (R) - not counting spines
   go to 2 (minnows)
1b. dorsal fin with 10 or more rays
   go to 17 (suckers)

2a. first dorsal fin ray spiny and/or serrated like steak knife
   DO NOT USE
   Common Carp or Goldfish

2b. first dorsal fin ray without pointed spine
   go to 3

3a. external barbels present in corner of mouth
   go to 4
3b. no barbels or flaplike-barbel hidden in groove of upper lip
   go to 8

4a. upper lip and jaw are connected without a groove
   Longnose Dace
4b. groove between upper lip and jaw
   go to 5

5a. pectoral fin tip pointed
   or
5b. pectoral fin tip rounded
   Lake Chub

6a. snout extends far beyond upper lip
   DO NOT USE
   Sturgeon Chub
6b. snout extends slightly beyond upper lip
   go to 7

7a. dorsal and anal fins highly curved
   rounded snout
   DO NOT USE
   Sicklefin Chub
7b. dorsal and anal fins not curved
   pointed snout - head wedged shaped
   Flathead Chub

8a. black spot near base of dorsal fin
   mouth extends beyond front of eye
   Creek Chub
8b. no black spot near base of dorsal fin
   go to 9

9a. anal fin length (a) at base greater than depth of caudal peduncle (b)
   body laterally compressed
   go to 10
9b. anal fin length (a) at base less than depth of caudal peduncle (b)
   go to 11
10a. long narrow body; large eye
   Emerald Shiner
10b. deep body; decurved lateral line
   golden silvery in color
   DO NOT USE
   Golden Shiner

11a. dorsal fin origin behind pelvic fin origin
   go to 18
11b. dorsal fin origin in front of pelvic fin origin
   go to 10

12a. prominent dark spot at base of caudal fin
   DO NOT USE
   Spottail Shiner
12b. no prominent dark spot at base of caudal fin
   go to 13

13a. lateral line with "==" marks
   DO NOT USE
   Sand Shiner
13b. lateral line without "==" marks
   go to 14

14a. snout projects beyond upper lip
   go to 15
14b. snout does not project beyond upper lip
   dark vertical line often present at base of caudal fin
   top of dorsal fin rounded; breeding males with fat head and tubercles (bumps on head)
   Fathead Minnow

15a. color brassy or greenish; dorsal fin tip slightly rounded
   1st ray shorter than 2nd & 3rd rays; body stout; head short; sides usually with a dusky stripe
   DO NOT USE
   Brassy Minnow
15b. dorsal fin tip pointed (may be difficult to see w/o a magnifying glass)
   1st ray usually as long or longer than 2nd and 3rd rays
   go to 16

16a. eye small (diameter < 1/5 head length); translucent skin covering front half of belly; belly surface often yellowish
   Plains Minnow
16b. eye large (diameter > 1/5 head length); body stout; opaque skin covering back half of belly; color silvery; scales large
   Western Silvery Minnow

17a. dorsal fin long and sickle shaped
   DO NOT USE
   Shorthead Redhorse Sucker
17b. dorsal fin short and not sickle shaped
   go to 18

18a. rear margin of lower lip nearly straight
   caudal fin generally bright red
   DO NOT USE
   Shortnose Redhorse Sucker
18b. rear margin of lower lip concave
   forming a distinct angle
   go to 19

19a. snout projecting well beyond upper lip; small scales along body
   go to 20
19b. snout barely projects beyond upper lip
   lip with numerous wart-like bumps
   White Sucker

20a. very large mouth, distinct notch on each side between upper and lower lips
   DO NOT USE
   Mountain Sucker
20b. no distinct notch between upper and lower lips; fine scales; snout very long
   Longnose Sucker

Approved live bait species list: fathead minnow, flathead chub, western silvery minnow*, plains minnow*, emerald shiner*, longnose dace, lake chub, creek chub, longnose sucker, and white sucker.

* = not allowed at Tongue River Reservoir or river upstream of reservoir.