

Hey, That's Not a Trout:

A LITTLE INFO ABOUT SOME OF THE COOL FISH YOU CATCH NOW AND AGAIN FLY FISHING

By Jacob Rash and Luke Etchison

As any fly angler could tell you, there are few things as exciting as making a perfect cast or having an exact drift that leads to your fly or indicator disappearing. That does not always happen, but when it does, that excitement turns to anticipation quickly as you wonder what is on the other end of your line. Occasionally, you get that answer in short order as you see what appears to be 18-inch Brown Trout break off your tippet, but sometimes it takes reeling all the way up to your tippet and holding the fish in your hand before you realize that you have something different.

With that in mind, I wanted to take this column to share some information about a few non-trout you might encounter during your outings. To do this, I have

enlisted the help of Luke Etchison, Western Region Aquatic Wildlife Diversity Coordinator for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. Like me, Luke is passionate about fish, but his professional efforts focus on those species that are not considered gamefish.

Let's return to our scenario that we presented above. If you are standing a stream in western North Carolina holding a small fish that you did not expect to catch, there is a pretty good chance that it is one of these two species: Warpaint Shiner *Luxilus coccogenis* or Rosyside Dace *Clinostomus funduloides*. There are certainly other candidates (e.g., chub species), but the potential habitat and diet overlaps with trout make these

two minnows the most likely fish you will encounter. Here is a little more information about each of them.

Warpaint Shiners

Often found in creeks and rivers that are clear and cool, Warpaint Shiners are a relatively large minnow that can reach sizes up to 5.5 inches. They also prefer streams that are well oxygenated, with a wide insect prey base. Similar to trout in those environments, Warpaint Shiners utilize available prey and respond to insect hatches. Whether they are eating a mayfly nymph or an adult caddisfly, their large mouth allows them to eat almost any insect (or fly) that hits the water. Warpaint

Shiners can be easily identified at any size or sex by their yellow to red streak on their cheek and red "lipstick" (Photo 1).

Rosyside Dace

Rosyside Dace are a minnow species (up to 4.5 inches) that can be found in runs and pools of small to medium sized, cool water streams. At first glance, they may look somewhat similar to Warpaint Shiners, but they are a smaller minnow species and have finer scales. Like Warpaint Shiners, Rosyside Dace have a large mouth that allows for a wide prey base that overlaps with trout. Rosyside Dace are often seen schooling with juvenile trout in large mixed-species groups, which can likely

decrease predation risk on early life stages of trout. They are most easily identified by the brown or golden yellow stripe, and breeding males are more obvious with a broad deep red streak (Photo 2).

Admittedly, it can be frustrating when that perfect presentation does not yield the trout we set out to catch. However, catching fascinating species like Warpaint Shiners and Rosyside Dace gives us a glimpse into the diversity of aquatic resources that are in our watersheds – something we may not always be aware of. Hopefully the small amount of information that we shared with you here will help with not only identification but also with awareness of the other fishes in our waters.

These two minnows are only a fraction of the native species that exist here in the state so needless to say their presence and persistence are important symbols of the health of our aquatic resources. We are so fortunate to have the waters that we do, and as those that are concerned about trout and coldwater conservation, it is important to remember that trout conservation flows downstream.

In the end, the good work done to help trout and their habitats has impacts beyond our favorite fishing holes. Often those impacts are not seen directly, but as we just discussed, sometimes you do get to take a peek. 

