

From the February 1998 issue:



**Can you
recommend a
good lawyer?**

**Don't judge this
delicious fish by its
looks.**

Daniel J. Dictus

My first encounter with a lawyer was a visit to the legal counselor down the street. The second meeting was quite different, through a sheet of cold, blue ice on a northern lake.

The flag on my tip-up went up, and I pulled a specimen up from the waters that really scared me. Instead of a tailored suit and briefcase, this lawyer sported a plump golden body speckled with dark dots and a single barbel protruding from the bottom of its chin. As this creature lay slithering on the ice, I debated whether to remove the hook or simply cut the line and cautiously nudge the squiggling mass back into the depths from which it came.

“Lawyer” (*Lota lota*) is but one of the colorful common names for this type of codfish inhabiting some cold, freshwater lakes and our major rivers. You may know it as burbot, eelpout, ling, lingcod, cusk, spineless catfish, gudgeon, mud blower or mother eel. All names refer to the same eel-like fish that sends shivers up the spine of anglers who first encounter them.

In truth, it should make your stomach rumble. George Becker, in *Fishes of Wisconsin*, says burbot flesh “resembles that of the cod and haddock, and in flavor it is the equal of many game fishes.” Becker added that cleaned, skinned burbot was supplied to some of the finest hotels and restaurants in Toronto whose chefs rated the flavor as “excellent,” yet the burbot hasn’t captured the fancy of commercial markets.

The apparent problem is that anglers can't get past the burbot's outward appearance. Small scales give the fish smooth, slick skin. Long dorsal and anal fins extend from the midpoint of the body back, almost reaching a rounded tail. The fish's knife-like shape and eel-like looks intimidate anglers who think they've hooked into a decent walleye. It's a shame because lawyers are classified as rough fish -- sport anglers could eat heartily, harvesting the fish regardless of size or number.



Illustration by Virgil Beck

The lawyer has a voracious appetite and eating habits that could be described as indiscriminate. Stomach content analysis found small stones, wood chips and plastic as well as the lawyer's typical fare of crustaceans, fish and insects. The lawyer's ravenous appetite may account for its incredible growth rate. The fish can reach 10 inches in length by its second year.

Lawyers can be found in the colder northern states and Canada. They're very hardy, spawning earlier than any other fish in Wisconsin on mid-winter nights well before ice melt.

Though a forgotten or disdained species, the fish is honored for a few days each year at a festival in Walker, Minn., at the southern end of Leech Lake between Brainerd and Bemidji. The 19th annual International Eelpout Festival will be held February 13-15, 1998 roughly corresponding with the fish's winter spawn. If you want to get over your fear of the fish or you'd simply like to see a lawyer boiled, barbecued or battered and fried, make the journey. Festival details are available at 1-800-833-1118.

About the author

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