
The Excellent but Ambiguous Golden Perch

By Simon Kaminskas

Most people would be aware that every fish, and indeed all known plants, animals and organisms, have a scientific name. Scientific names have two parts. The first part is called the genus or generic name, the second part is called the species or specific name. Scientific names are a mixture of Latin and Greek. They exist to: (1) classify life and how organisms are related to each other in terms of evolution; and (2) prevent the confusion that comes with common names. For instance, there are many fish in Australia and the world called 'bream', but there is only one *Acanthopagrus australis* (yellowfin bream) in the world. By using this scientific name, every scientist in the world knows exactly which species we are talking about. Scientific names may seem strange and unpronounceable and most people do not pay much attention to them. But scientific names can be very interesting, and there is always a story, however small, behind every scientific name.

Admittedly, a lot of scientific names for species are a bit dull. I think the describers of these species, who came up with these scientific names, could have tried harder. But some scientific names are excellent and they capture some essential characteristic of the species that they have been assigned to. I love the fact that Australian salmon are called *Arripis trutta* (Latin), and that *Arripis* means 'to suddenly seize or grab'. (The specific name *trutta* here means 'trout-like'). Many an Australian salmon has 'suddenly seized' my slice lure off the beach! Similarly, I love it that dusky flathead are called *Platycephalus fuscus*, which literally translates as 'flat-head dusky'— *Platy* = flat, *cephalus* = head (Greek) and *fuscus* = dusky (Latin).

However, there is a fish whose scientific name I have always wondered about; namely, the excellent and ever-popular golden perch, a native fish of the Murray-Darling, Lake Eyre/Bulloo and Fitzroy River (QLD) systems. The golden perch's scientific name is *Macquaria ambigua*, and I know I'm not the only person who has puzzled about that strange second or specific name. Finally, it was too much! I had to know! So I did some research and found out the story behind the golden perch's scientific name.

The story behind the first or generic name *Macquaria* is easy. This generic name comes from the Macquarie River where the first species in the *Macquaria* genus (Macquarie perch, *Macquaria australasica*) was collected (in 1820, by French scientists!) and described (in 1830, by a famous French scientist in Paris!). However, the genus name *Macquaria* was only applied to golden perch much, much later.

A British naturalist called John Richardson described golden perch (in 1845) and his original scientific name for it was *Datnia ambigua*. Richardson applied the specific name *ambigua* (Latin for 'doubtful') to golden perch because, as he states in the opening line of his species description, he could not decide which of two genera to place it in, *Dules* (now *Kuhlia* or jungle perch species) or *Datnia* (now various grunter species):

"I have had much doubt as to whether this fish should be placed in the genus *Dules*, or *Datnia*. It agrees with the group of *Dules* that has two opercular points, in the number of dorsal rays, and in the presence of palatine teeth, but in general habit it is more like *Datnia*, strongly resembling it in the strength of its dorsal and anal spines, and in the number of rays in the anal [fin]. The only two specimens [8.5 and 14 inches Standard Length] I had the opportunity of examining are dried, and are both mutilated in the caudal fin, so that I am unable to describe the form of that member, and can give no anatomical details."

Richardson's choice of specific name was, unwittingly, both ironic and appropriate. Because golden perch are neither a jungle perch nor a grunter, and Richardson also wrongly stated that the golden perch's "habitat" was "Western Australia", when in fact the species is not found in that state. Rather ambiguous indeed!

But the ambiguities keep on coming! A 24 kg fish is often referred to as the largest recorded golden perch, but this fish, apparently caught from Kow Swamp, Victoria in the early 1900s, and labeled and sold in the Melbourne fish markets as a "Murray Perch", is a very doubtful record, and is more likely to have been a mis-labeled Murray cod. The largest reliably recorded golden perch seems to have been a 15 kg fish from Glenbawn Dam some years ago ... and some golden perch estimated from their bones to have been around

15 kg, caught and eaten by Indigenous people at Lake Mungo about 30,000 years ago! Even the publication* in which Richardson published his description and scientific name for golden perch is confusing, as it is often referenced as “1844–1848”. The reason for this is that the publication was released in separate volumes over those years, and the volume containing the golden perch’s description and scientific name came out in 1845. Nevertheless, it’s the last of several confusions over a now-thoroughly ambiguous species!

Seriously though, whatever their scientific name, Aussie anglers love this handsome, brawny, lure-crunching native fish. But for those who’ve ever wondered about its scientific name, I hope I have answered your question.

Until next time ...

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* Richardson, John. *Ichthyology of the voyage of H.M.S. Erebus & Terror, under the command of Captain Sir James Clark Ross, R.N., F.R.S.* LONDON: M.DCCC.XLIV—M.DCCC.XLVIII [1844–1848]. Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans.



James Butler is suitably impressed with this brawny wild river golden perch. Barbless hooks made its release easy.