



'If You Bring Fish Home,

YOU HAVE TO CLEAN THEM'

*Fish cleaning made simple, as explained by a veteran
Wildlife Commission fisheries biologist*

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I grew up fishing with my dad, granddaddy, pop pop and grandmother. They all were from a different time and culture when catch-and-release was not as popular as it is today. We harvested a lot of fish. I can remember them cleaning fish for what seemed like hours at the end of a long day of fishing.

When I was about 13 years old, I realized that the creek by my house led to a river. That river (the Roanoke) was full of fish. My parents had no choice but to let go of their worries while I embraced a newfound independence and freedom to explore the world. I began to fish on my own or with my brother in what could only be characterized as the eastern North Carolina version of “A River Runs Through It.”

When I came home with my first stringer full of fish, I knew what I needed to do. My mom’s rule was simple: “If you bring fish home, you have to clean them.” I had to learn how to clean fish. I had watched my dad and grandparents clean, so how hard could it be?

I went to my mom’s kitchen, got a big plastic white bowl and a fillet knife. My first cleaned fish looked like a handful of floppy potato chips adrift in a bowl of water way too large for the intended task. However, practice makes perfect and I soon was cleaning fish as fast as my dad, which was something I found great pride in. In short order there was an abundance of sunfish fillets in our family freezer.

My passion for fish and fishing has continued into adulthood. As I was nearing graduation from N.C. State University, I knew I wanted to get a master’s degree but I didn’t know what I wanted to study until I learned about Fisheries Management. After all, if you want to catch more fish you should learn all you can about them, right? I was amazed by fish behavior, especially migration patterns of shad and striped bass. I became hooked on the science.

I attended Auburn University for my master’s degree and had a fish fry almost every week for three years. My first job was as a fisheries biologist on the Alabama coast. When I returned to the Old North State, I took a position with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission and have been here for 11 years. During this time, I have fished and fished and fished some more. It didn’t matter if I was in a pond or 90 miles offshore. I’ve got degrees, citations and trophy fish on the wall, but I think my biggest achievement came when my aunt told me, “You are the fisherman your granddaddy always wanted to be.”

How to Fillet a Largemouth Bass



Right Tools for the Job

I can't get you into culinary school on your fish cleaning skills, but if you want to eat fish for dinner, I'm your guy. I realize that cleaning fish can be a daunting task, particularly for new anglers. I'll lead you through the steps of cleaning fish using a couple of easy techniques. Hopefully, you will learn that it is not that hard or intimidating. These two techniques will work for almost every fish commonly caught in inland waters of North Carolina.

Before we get started, I want to acknowledge that there are many ways to clean a fish. In fact, I clean fish many different ways. You might read this and think, "that's not how I do it." Well, that is OK. The methods I describe require minimal equipment, but they are certainly not the only way.

You will need a sharp fillet knife with a 6-inch to 8-inch blade. Please do not insult these fine creatures by attempting to clean them with a dull knife. That's great if you inherited a fillet knife from a relative, but don't use it if it is dull, rusty or misshapen. For \$10 you can get a very good fillet knife. You can keep using that inherited heirloom for the Thanksgiving charcuterie board.

You will also need a cutting board, fish scaler, bowl, bag (or some type of vessel in which to hold and rinse off your cleaned fish) and ice (or another way to keep fish cool to avoid spoiling). A water source will be useful for cleaning and rinsing fish, equipment, fillets, hands, dogs and children who attempt to help, or anything else that needs to be cleaned during this often messy process.

Safety always comes first. Fish are slippery, knives are sharp and accidents happen. Most good fillet knives have a textured grip that will minimize slipping. Some cutting boards have spring-loaded, fish-gripping teeth that can hold a fish while it's being cleaned. It is also important to be in a well-lit

area so you can see properly. There are also "cut proof" gloves that can help minimize mishaps. After all, you are holding a fish in one hand and poking it with a knife with the other. So again, please exercise caution. "Slow and steady" not only wins the race, it can also save a finger.

How to Fillet a Largemouth Bass

First, let's do a skinless fillet on a largemouth bass. This method will work for almost every fish commonly caught in North Carolina waters. The fillet is the most popular style of cleaning fish because it is boneless, there is

no skin (which in some species can add a fishier taste due to oils in the skin) and it is quick and easy to complete.

Start with a diagonal cut from the head, behind the pectoral fins (the fins on the right and left sides) down toward the pelvic fins (the paired fins on the fish's belly). This cut should run from top to bottom and stop at the backbone.

Next, angle the knife slightly toward the cutting board and cut lengthways down the fish. The tip of the knife should stop when it hits the rib cage of the fish. Once the knife is in line with the anal fin (the larger singular

fin at the bottom of the fish's body) you have passed the ribcage. Push the knife through the fish and continue to cut down the fish. Your knife should be angled slightly down, and you can use the backbone as your guide to not cut through the fish.

Take your knife and make short cuts with the tip of the fillet knife that will allow you to peel the fillet away from the rib cage and body of the fish. Once you have done this, you can simply cut the fillet off along the belly of the fish.

You are almost there. Take the fillet and gently cut the skin off the meat. The trick

is to once again slightly angle the blade at the cutting board while cutting down the fillet. Finally, there is a small row of bones on the head end of the fillet. You can feel them with your finger. A small, thin triangular cut allows these bones to be removed with ease. Repeat these steps for the opposite side to acquire two bass fillets.

Catfish Cleaning

Now, I know this will upset some people, but I don't like to skin catfish with pliers. Many people cut the skin around the fins and use pliers to snatch the skin off the

Catfish Cleaning



1

Make a diagonal cut at the head behind the pectoral fin.



2

Cut lengthways down the fish.



3

Push the knife through the fish and continue cutting.



4

Make short cuts and peel the fillet from the rib cage.



5

Cut down the fillet to remove the skin.

Bone-In Sunfish



1

Use the edge of a spoon to remove fish scales.



2

Make a diagonal cut from the head to behind pectoral fins.



3

Cut off the head, remove the organs and score the body.

fish. This leaves some fat and connective tissue on the outside of the fillet and can add to a fishier taste. My advice is to clean a catfish in the same way as I just described. In my opinion, this method works very well in both instances.

Bone-In Sunfish

My pop pop and grandma, and grandmother and granddaddy, were adamant that the bones of a fish impacted the taste of a fish. It is a taste that both couples found preferable. My grandparents' abundance of time on this earth left me totally unmatched to argue what they considered to be one of life's truths: "Bones make fish taste better."

Grandma and Grandmother's food tasted just fine to me and the added sport of having bony hazards in my meal created some excitement and drama until I mastered this eating technique. So, when I was with my grandparents, I cleaned fish by gutting and scaling. It's a great technique and very easy. This works well on panfish like the redear sunfish in the pictures.

Earlier I mentioned that you will need a fish scaler. There are many commercially made fish scalers that are cheap and work well. You do not need them. You need a spoon. In these pictures, I am using my grandmother's spoon. A metal tablespoon will work exceedingly well.

Hold the fish by the head. Use the edge of the spoon to dig under the scales and push them off the skin. Start at the tail and push scales up and off as you work toward the head.

Once you have all the scales removed, rinse the fish in water. Make a diagonal cut from the head to behind the pelvic fins. This time, cut through the backbone and remove the head, then grab organs and pull them out of the abdominal cavity.

Rinse the fish thoroughly and make sure the cavity is clean and free of any organ tissues. You may want to cut the belly to the vent (the hole in front of anal fin) in a larger fish to make sure the digestive tract is



Use a scaler or a spoon to scale your fish.

cleaned out well. Lastly, cut slits in the fish (optional) that allow for even cooking and aids

in seasoning penetration into the meat.

If you choose to fillet or scale your fish, you will need to refrigerate it quickly after you are done. You can keep the fish in the refrigerator for a few days or you can freeze and enjoy it down the road.

Fishing is a huge part of my life and my family's culture. Eating fish is an extension of this hobby. Cleaning fish is the chore in between. I hope these two simple methods will make cleaning fish and preparing them to eat easier for you. I would encourage you to involve your family in the catching, the cleaning, the cooking and the eating as often as possible. For my family, it is a wonderful way to make cherished memories. ♦

Ben Ricks is a District 2 fisheries biologist for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. This is his first article for Wildlife in North Carolina.