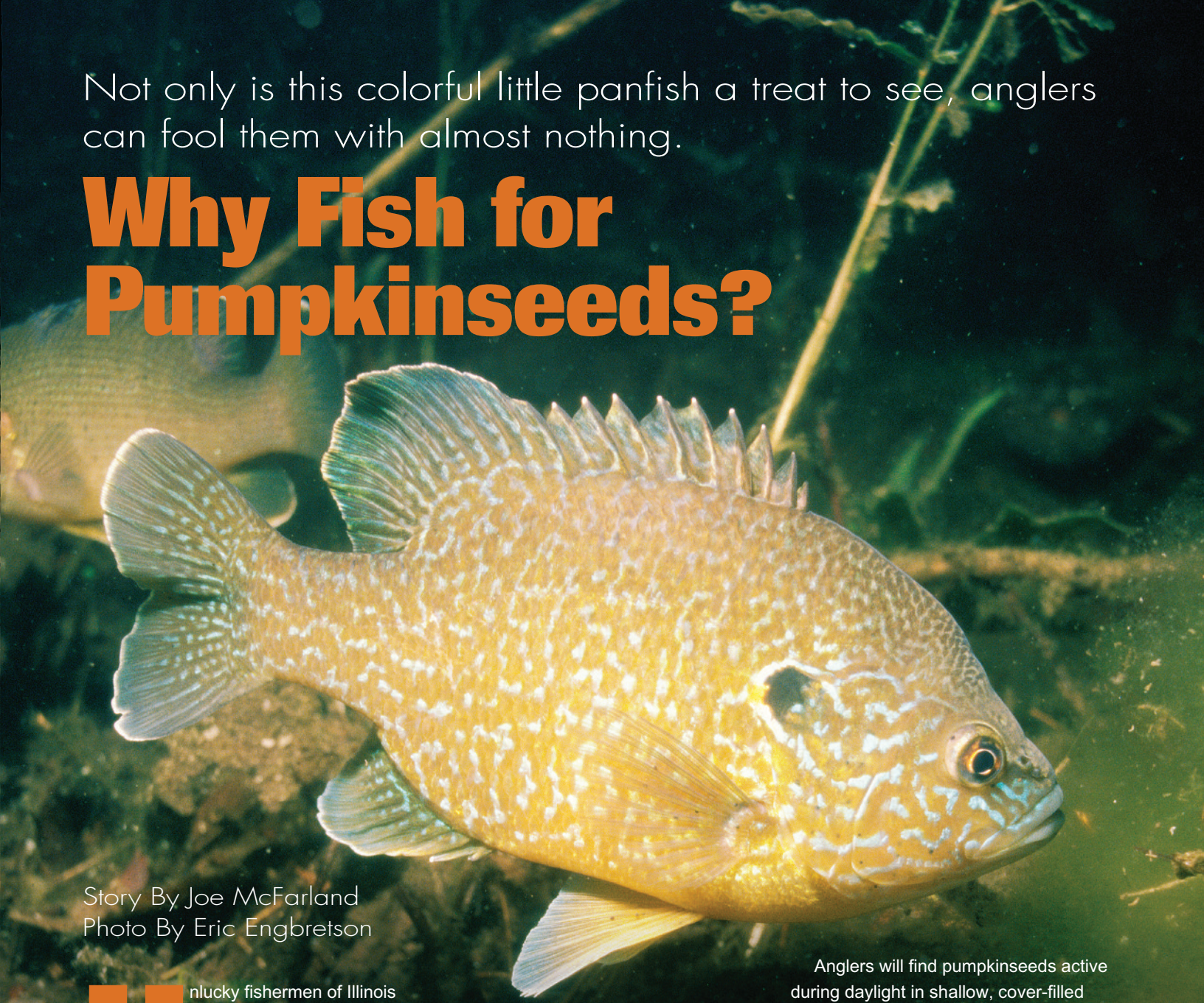
Not only is this colorful little panfish a treat to see, anglers can fool them with almost nothing.

Why Fish for Pumpkinseeds?



Story By Joe McFarland
Photo By Eric Engbretson

Unlucky fishermen of Illinois take heart: There is one species of Illinois sport fish so amazingly easy to catch, even a bare hook sometimes tricks them out of the water. Meet the ever-gullible pumpkinseed (*Lepomis gibbosus*), a small-to-medium-size, disc-shaped sunfish commonly found in northern Illinois lakes, occurring a bit less common farther south.

The pumpkinseed is noted for its rainbow-like waves of iridescent color in spawning males, which make the species nearly as popular to see as it is to catch. Among common sunfishes of Illinois, including the bluegill, longear sunfish and redear sunfish, the pumpkinseed can be identified by its rather compressed, round shape, its yellow-orange-to-red breast, bronze speckled back and sides and a pointed tip on its pectoral fin. Natural hybridization—a mixing of species—occurs among sunfishes, and Illinois anglers sometimes will catch a pumpkinseed which bears some of the traits of other sunfish, or vice versa.

Regardless of individual genetic lineage, the pumpkinseed—whose range extends throughout the Great Lakes—is a favorite among anglers due to its willingness to bite. Unlike the redear sunfish, which can grow to 10-12 inches in Illinois, the pumpkinseed often isn't large enough for anglers to consider taking home for a meal; the world record is 2.4 pounds, but most pumpkinseeds are a few ounces at best.

Anglers will find pumpkinseeds active during daylight in shallow, cover-filled shorelines where bluegill and other panfish congregate. Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Alan Brandenburg noted that pumpkinseeds tend to be indicators of good water quality, which is just fine. But the most alluring aspect of the pumpkinseed to Illinois anglers, Brandenburg said, is the pumpkinseed's interest in nearly any tiny object dropped into the water.

"Last summer while fishing for bluegill, I ran out of bait," the biologist-fisherman recalled. "After the last morsel of nightcrawler disappeared from my hook, I stopped fooling bluegill. But I was still able to catch pumpkinseeds.

"Sometimes you can catch fish on a bare hook."