



ART OF THE FISH

*GYOTAKU IS A FUN WAY TO LEARN
BASIC FISH ANATOMY*

BY DEBORAH ROBERTS





GEE-OH-TAK-OO

What started in the mid-1800s as a way to document an impressive catch is now a unique way to teach people about fish.

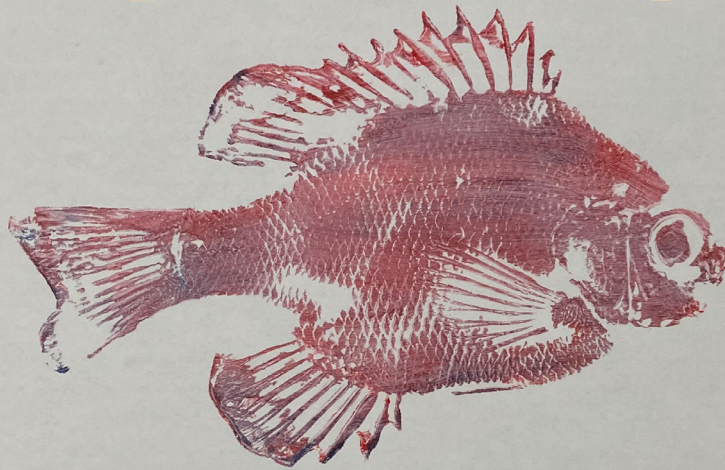
“Gyotaku is a traditional Japanese method of printing fish,” says Emily-Jo Wiggins, director of the Visitor Education

Center at the Bob Tyler Fish Hatchery in Enid. “It was a way for fishermen to record the fish they caught. Now that we have cell phones, we snap a picture of our fish. This is a flashback into the past.”

Gyotaku translates into “fish” (gyo) and “rubbing” (taku). Early on, fishermen would apply ink to one side of a fish, then cover the fish with rice paper and

rub it to create an imprint. The ink was non-toxic, so the fish was still edible, and the fisherman was left with an incredibly realistic record (size and species) of the daily catch.

For educators like Wiggins, gyotaku (pronounced Gee-oh-tak-oo) is a great way to teach children and adults about basic fish anatomy. “It’s very hands-on,



so people are learning not just by listening,” she says.

Gyotaku has been popular in the facility’s teacher workshops and since 2020, Bob Tyler Fish Hatchery has offered free gyotaku programs to the public. Appropriately done, gyotaku mimics even a fish’s subtle patterns and textures.

“You want to make a greasy film with the paint not cover the fish too thickly, so that you can still see details. When you lift the paper off the fish, you have a nice piece of artwork,” Wiggins says. “You can keep it simple or get very complex. People get very creative.”

The process can be done with a single-color ink or several. One child mixed paint colors to create a “camo” bluegill. Often, people paint a habitat background for their fish.

“After the print is done, we go to the aquarium and identify their fish,” Wig-

gins says. “We focus on native species in Mississippi—largemouth bass, green sunfish, bluegill, freshwater drum, and common carp. They find the fish that look like the ones they printed. We talk about the anatomy of fish and the different species.”

Until three years ago, Wiggins used real fish, which she attests “can be very messy.” Discovering rubber fish printing molds (or replicas) has been a game-changer. One side of the mold lies flat on the table, making it easier to keep still while creating the imprint.

And unlike their real-life counterparts, fish molds do not have to be kept cold, nor do they shed scales and reek over time. The molds come in many species and can be reused repeatedly after a thorough washing.

“I tell people not to get discouraged if their first attempt is not good,” Wiggins says. “We can try again.”

Programs are scheduled from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. on several Saturdays throughout the summer. While designed primarily for children; everyone is welcome. Children under 7 will create fish art from their handprints.

In addition to summer programs, the Visitor Education Center will offer Ghostly Gyotaku during Halloween at the Hatchery from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 26.

“We create fish ghosts by doing gyotaku prints with white ink on black paper,” Wiggins says. “It’s a very family-oriented, fun, and educational event. We had 160 participants last year. In addition to a fish skeleton scavenger hunt, face painting, and other activities, we will feed live fingerlings to the carnivores in the aquarium at 2:30 p.m.”

Deborah Roberts is a freelance writer for Mississippi Outdoors.

