

## **While gross, leeches aren't actually dangerous**

**Recipe for Leech and Okra Gumbo**

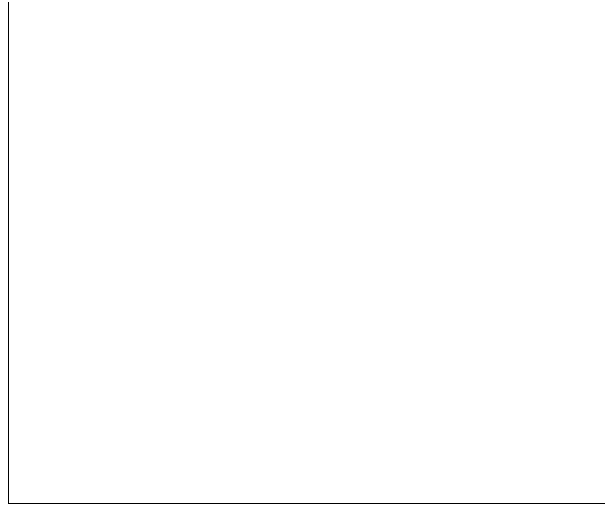


A medicinal leech is attached to the skin. (Wikipedia photo)

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SARANAC LAKE — Perhaps the best way not to find leeches is to go looking for them.

There are some 700 species of leeches in the world, and about 500 of them live in freshwater. Not all of them have been catalogued, but as far as we know, *Macrobdella decora* is the only hematophagic, or blood-sucking, freshwater leech found in the Adirondacks.



And even though the gross-out factor is high, leeches don't pose much danger.

*“There is no reason, really, to ‘freak out’ over leeches, even if they are kind of freaky,”* said Craig Milewski, professor of fisheries and aquatic sciences at Paul Smith's College.

*“They are fascinating organisms that add to the diversity and richness of aquatic environments. As with any organism, they have a story to tell — and usually a very interesting story.”*



Rumors of leeches in Jones Pond could not be confirmed by the Enterprise. (Enterprise photo — Glynis Hart)

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Milewski pointed out that not all leeches are parasitic bloodsuckers. *“Many are predators that feed on other invertebrates. Those that are parasitic latch onto a variety of vertebrates: amphibians, reptiles [turtles], birds and mammals.”*

So while leeches may occasionally stick to an unsuspecting swimmer’s foot, they prefer to suck on frogs and turtles. *Macrobdella decora* resembles an

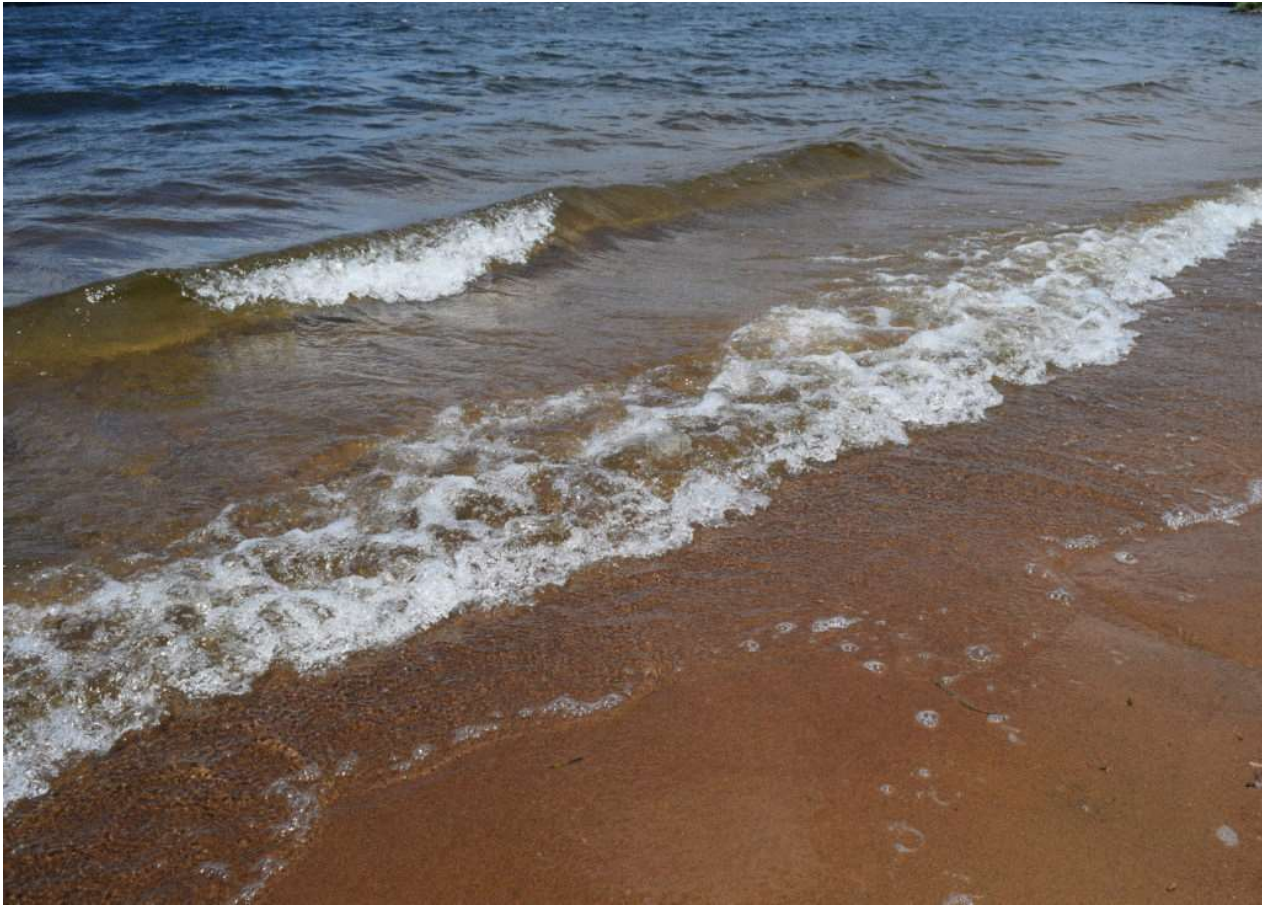
earthworm, in that it has two “*mouths*”, one at each end. The narrow end is the one with the tiny rows of teeth, which cut into the skin with such precision you won’t feel it. And although Katharine Hepburn famously poured salt on the leeches attacking Humphrey Bogart in “*The African Queen*,” experts recommend removing leeches by flicking them off with your fingernail. If you pry the leech off by scraping your nail between your skin and its mouth, it’s more likely to come away clean, whereas if you shock the leech by salting it or spraying DEET on it, the leech may vomit its stomach contents back into the wound. And while there haven’t been any studies proving leeches transmit disease, that’s not an enticing prospect.

Around Saranac Lake, it seems while everyone knows someone who’s had an encounter with a leech, the leeches are few and far between. For one thing, leeches are a favorite food of bass and loons, so while they continue to grow while they live, they don’t often live long enough to become very big.

Steve Kulina, head lifeguard at Lake Colby Beach, said they haven’t seen any there. The sandy beach, moving water and wave action at Lake Colby don’t make for a good leech habitat. Since leeches hide at the bottom in the layers of decomposing vegetation until they’re enticed out by the scent of prey, Lake Colby has too much traffic to be a hangout for leeches.

At least anecdotally [according to Charlie Wilson, see below], there are leeches in Jones Pond. However, Jennifer Burgess, owner of the Packbasket Diner in Gabriels, said one of her friends camped there “*for a week, with her kids, and they were in the water all the time. They didn’t get any.*”





Lake Colby Beach officially opens the weekend of the 23rd. Head life guard Steve Kulina said the wave action and sandy bottom at Lake Colby help keep the beach leech-free. (Enterprise photo -- Glynis Hart)

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An informal experiment involving this reporter's bare feet, offered as bait, yielded no proof of leeches at Jones Pond.

However, a young man fishing from his kayak — and who, incidentally, caught six pike — said he'd used them to catch fish.

*"I bought them in Minnesota when I lived there," he said. "They make good bait."*

Unlike earthworms, leeches don't drown. They keep moving, which attracts the fish.

Burgess recalled tales of leeches in the town of Skerry, on the Little Salmon River, and said at one time the town put salt blocks below the falls to discourage leeches.

John Hoefler, a St. Lawrence University student who was packrafting on Church Pond — another reputed leech heaven — also had encountered

leeches in Skerry. *“My friend got them all over his back,”* he said.

Although Church Pond looked like ideal leech habitat, neither Hoefler — who was testing for mercury, having gotten a grant to collect samples in Adirondack waters — nor this reporter felt like offering the leeches a toe. Even if you don’t see them, they’re probably there.

*“First, leeches in ponds should be expected,”* said Milewski. *“Their numbers will likely vary over time, as is the case with most invertebrates.”*

Although some online sources suggested that leeches indicate good water quality, Milewski said judging the health of a pond from just one factor is too simplistic. *“Judging the health of a pond, or lake, or stream is typically based on a full assessment of the entire biological community, water quality, and physical conditions. Leeches can be found across a range of environmental conditions and some small ponds may simply and naturally be good leech habitat.”*

Private landowners who worry about leeches in their ponds can remove them by setting traps, according to the Schoharie County Soil and Water Conservation District News. To make a leech trap, take a coffee can with a plastic lid and poke it full of holes. Bait the trap with 1/4 cup of raw meat, submerge it in your pond, and weigh it down with a rock to keep it in place and discourage snapping turtles. Empty the trap a couple times a week until you get fewer leeches, or none.

Once you’ve trapped the leeches, you can use them as bait or dispose of them otherwise.

Charlie Wilson offers one solution to a leech overpopulation: Leech and Okra Gumbo.

*“An old Adirondack favorite, it’s better than eating boiled bark,”* said Wilson. His recipe is printed here with permission.

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## Leech and Okra Gumbo

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### Ingredients:

40 medium leeches

40 okra pods

2 red bell peppers, roasted, slip skin, stem and seed, chop

1 medium red onion, chopped

5 heads of garlic, minced

1/2 stalk celery, minced

chicken stock

dry sherry

chipotle peppers or hot sauce

salt and pepper to taste

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### Directions:

Sear the little devils in a Dutch oven in butter and olive oil, turning with tongs to brown on both sides. [This is tough, because they're already brown.] Remove and hold, returning any that try to crawl away to the pan.

Add more butter and olive oil. Sautez the onion and garlic until soft and carmelizing, then add celery 'til soft, then roasted red peppers. Return the leeches to the pot, add 1 cup chicken stock, 1/2 cup dry sherry, deglaze the pan, and reduce liquid by half. Add hot peppers or sauce to taste. Adjust salt carefully, because the leeches get as snotty as the okra if over-salted. Reduce heat and mount the sauce with 1/2 stick butter. Serve over brown

rice with a hearty red wine. [Maybe best to start on the wine before starting to cook.]

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