

Vive La Dolomieu

By: Loring Bullard

When we can find the time, my fishing buddy and I head to a place where water, rocks and fish intersect in a most satisfying way—an Ozark stream. We have several favorite float/fishing trips. Scenic wooded valleys and green pastures; cool, clear flowing water; deep blue holes; and exciting riffles attract us, year after year, to these wild and relatively unspoiled places.

In my mind's eye, I can see us on a stream now, drifting silently below a majestic bluff. My friend Jud, the more dedicated and skillful fisherman, continues to ply his sport, watching his line intently where it disappears beneath the reflecting plane of the water surface. His easily distracted paddling partner is laid back, gazing up at the rising face of the black-stained bluff towering over us.

I recognize the bluff as dolomite, a kind of gray rock forming a major component of the Ozark landform. In this porous, karst region, dolomitic bedrock hosts large and spectacular caves and gushing blue springs. At river level, the rock often resembles a ragged sponge, where the gently sloshing waterline glugs softly as we float by.

It is hard for me to imagine how long it took the river to cut this deep canyon into the dolomite. It is even harder to imagine the circumstances of the formation of the dolomite itself, at the bottom of a warm, shallow sea, where bits and pieces of marine animals and mud settled over the eons and through a process only partly understood, turned to rock.

Dolomite, I learned recently, is named for a French naturalist, Deodat de Dolomieu. This eighteenth century outdoorsman had piercing eyes and a long nose and was curious about rocks and how they formed. He was also easily distracted by the natural world around him. When he was supposed to be on military duty with the Order of the Knights of Malta, he was off instead on scientific expeditions, climbing the Alps, inspecting their upturned geology, and wondering how fossils of marine animals ended up in rocks high in the mountains. One kind of rock in particular—a dense stone used extensively by the Greeks and Romans for columns and statues—held his attention. Although similar to limestone, it would not effervesce in weak acid like limestone does. He described the rock in a scientific report and in 1792, a colleague in the Academy of Science named the mineral “dolomie,” in his honor.

“Hey Bull, I think this is a nice one.”

Jud's quiet voice brings me back to reality and up on my seat. I see his rod bending impressively and a broad smile on his face. Through the surgical tension of his line, he plays the muscular fish, which twists and tugs tenaciously. We see her bronze side flash in the sun as she turns, attempting to run deep, beneath a block of dolomite clearly visible in ten feet of water. She is a fine, healthy specimen of our favorite river fish—the smallmouth bass.

This fish, whose scientific name is *Micropterus dolomieu*, is also named for Dolomieu. It is perhaps fitting, since both man and fish were (are) scrappy and rebellious. When he was eighteen, Dolomieu killed another young man in a sword duel. This landed him in prison, until a Cardinal intervened on his behalf. Later, as a scientist, he sailed with Napoleon on a military expedition to Egypt. But his ship sank off the coast of Italy. He struggled to shore, only to be captured and imprisoned in Naples. His friends at the Academy of Science came to the rescue this time, securing his release.

It might seem odd that Dolomieu's name would become attached to both a rock and a fish. To some extent, this reflects the wide ranging interests of Dolomieu and other early naturalists. They were generalists, not specialists, dabbling freely in geology, zoology and botany. In those days, important discoveries could be made by one person in several fields.

Dolomieu never made it to the new country of America. He died in France at age fifty-one of a lung disease, most likely contracted during his two years spent in the dank prison in Naples. Were he alive today, and visiting the Ozarks, he would almost assuredly be pleased to see how his namesakes had converged to grace the landscape. Though rock and fish are largely opposites—one lifeless, the other zestful; one hard and immobile, the other a sleek study in motion—they share something in common. Both have been around for millions of years, forming a stable ecological context for the rivers we float and admire today. In many ways, they *define* the Ozark stream—it would not be complete without them. For this, at least, they deserve our respect.

Jud finally wrestles the fish to the side of the boat and holds her up. She curls her tail and stares at us with an expressionless red eye that reveals nothing about her history. After a moment of admiration and a picture, Jud releases her, gently, and she torpedoes away at lightning speed, back to the cover of her dolomite.