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Natural History Notes



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BLACK BULLHEAD

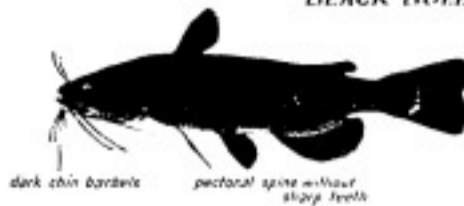
THE BULLHEAD

The black bullhead is a common inhabitant of many of our Wisconsin waters. The importance of this fish in our aquatic ecosystems should not be slighted. Although the black bullhead may not be as desirable to the sportsman as a walleye or perhaps a trout it is a highly esteemed and sought after species by many fishermen.

Being a member of the catfish family the black bullhead has several close relatives in the state. Among these are the yellow bullhead and the brown bullhead. The black bullhead can be distinguished from its closest relatives by a few simple characteristics. Its four chin barbels or whiskers are black and its pectoral spines lack sharp serrations or teeth. The yellow bullhead has light cream to yellow colored chin barbels and the brown bullhead has sharp serrations on its pectoral spines. The channel catfish is another close relative of the bullhead; however, the channel catfish has a deeply forked tail while the bullhead's tail is almost square.

Bullheads possess several adaptive features which enable them to survive where many other species of fish would not. They tolerate very low oxygen content; in fact, they can survive in water where oxygen is totally lacking. Bullheads can gulp and swallow air and the oxygen is absorbed by the lining of the digestive tract. This enables them to inhabit stagnant waters or, in some cases, freeze-out lakes. A fisherman may catch a bullhead and throw it in the bottom of the boat where no water is present. Many hours later the fisherman can throw the bullhead back into the lake and in a few minutes he swims away. Live bullheads are often shipped in ice and are easily revived when placed in water.

Tests have shown that bullheads and catfish learn much faster and retain this learning longer than most other species of fish. If they are hooked by an angler and escape, the bullhead may avoid bait on a hook and line the rest of its life. They also have a sensitive sense of smell and can detect food over long distances. Their barbels contain thousands of taste buds and are also very sensitive to touch. When we add all this up, the bullhead is not nearly as dumb as he looks.



The black bullhead ranges from Montana to New York and south to Missouri and Kentucky. The bullhead makes its nest in shallow water in a depression or old muskrat burrow where they spawn in May and June. After hatching, dense schools can often be seen swimming along the shoreline. The male remains with the school and guards them from predators until the young disperse. The bullhead's preferred habitat is shallow lakes, ponds and muddy streams. They feed on a large variety of food. Their diet is mainly composed of crayfish, frogs, insects, worms, detritus and to a lesser extent, small fish and minnows. The bullhead's sluggish swimming habits make him a poor predator. Most small fish can easily escape the jaws of the bullhead. They are able to digest some plant material but prefer animal food when available.

When taken from clean unpolluted waters, bullheads are excellent eating. Under the scaleless coat of spines and whiskers is a tasty, juicy, white flesh. Many people prefer eating bullheads over many other fish since they have fewer ribs and bones than most other fish. No gourmet would turn down a meal of golden fried bullheads, and if you happen to like smoked fish, bullheads are tops.

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