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# Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is currently a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

## THE BROWN BULLHEAD

The brown bullhead is a member of a very common family of fishes called the catfishes. Some of the other members of this group are the channel catfish, black bullhead, yellow bullhead, stonecat and mudtom. Larger species of this group are all important food fishes. It's been reported that they can be shipped alive for great distances when packed on ice. After being kept in a wet burlap bag all day bullheads will swim away. These fishes may not be considered gamefishes, but there are probably as many bullhead anglers as there are all other fishermen.

Of the three species of bullheads the brown bullhead is probably the most common. It inhabits both large and small lakes as well as quiet streams. The brown bullhead, also called the horned pout or speckled bullhead, is found from the Dakotas to New England. The brown bullhead can be distinguished from the black bullhead by the sharp teeth on its pectoral spines which the black bullhead lacks. It can be differentiated from the yellow bullhead by its dark chin barbels or whiskers.

Tests have shown that members of the catfish family learn much faster and retain this learning much longer than most other species of fish. If they are hooked by an angler and escape, the bullhead may avoid baited hook and line the rest of its life. They also have a sensitive sense of smell and can detect food over long distances. Anise oil is often added to catfish bait to help attract a big one. Their barbels contain thousands of taste buds which are also very sensitive to touch. All things considered, this fish is not nearly as dumb as it looks.

The brown bullhead is also a very conscientious parent. The male makes a nest in shallow water in a depression or old muskrat burrow where spawning occurs in May and June. About 2,000 eggs 1/8 inch in diameter are laid and hatch in about five days. The coal-black young stay in a school protected by the male during the early part of the summer. These schools appear as conspicuous dark patches in the water until the young disperse. The young reach four inches by the end of their first year and may reach a maximum length of 20 inches.



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 fish can easily escape the jaws of a bullhead. They are able to digest some plant material but prefer animal food when available.

The brown bullhead is probably our most important bullhead. 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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