

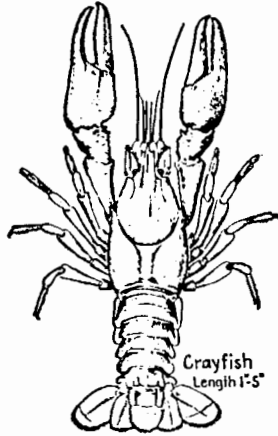
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Natural History Notes

MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area, graduated from Hayward High School, and attended the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and the University of Minnesota. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology and Zoology. Mike has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Park Falls, Wisconsin.

CRAYFISH



Crayfish, crawdad and crab are all common names of a small crustacean found over most of the United States. The crayfish looks very much like a small lobster. Its length at maturity is about 4-5 inches long. Colors of crayfish range from black to brown to beige and various shades of yellow, orange, red, green and, occasionally, blue. The compound eyes are located at the ends of stalks. Crayfish have 19 pairs of appendages used variously for walking, feeding, breathing, cleaning, fighting, and as sense organs. Each of the walking legs has a special joint which allows the leg to be easily broken off if necessary. The leg later grows back.

Crayfish are found in ponds, lakes, streams, swamps, and even in wet meadows. Their home range is about 30 miles. A crayfish's usual method of locomotion is a slow walk — forward, backward or sideways. When in a hurry to escape, the crayfish flicks its fan-shaped tail forward, resulting in the animal quickly moving backwards.

The crayfish feeds on aquatic plants and animals. Rarely is this animal predaceous and will most often scavenge for its food. In parts of the southern United States crayfish will feed extensively on cultivated rice crops at night and are

considered pests. In turn, the crayfish is eaten most often by fish but also by frogs, raccoons, otter and some wading birds. Large crayfish are eaten by man. The crayfish acts as a host to a lung fluke which infects humans. This parasite is passed on to man when raw or poorly cooked crayfish are eaten.

The time of mating is variable, occurring any time between spring and autumn. However, in the more northern states mating occurs most frequently in the fall. Males have no powers of sex discrimination and will attempt to mate with any crayfish he happens to come across. If it happens to be another male, the first crayfish is in for a fight. Females will generally be agreeable. The female lays her eggs several weeks to months after mating, depending on the season. The eggs are deposited on her body and at this time she is said to be "in berry." She may carry anywhere from ten to five hundred eggs or more. The incubation period is up to twenty weeks, depending on temperature. The crayfish have no larval stage which is unusual for a crustacean. The newly-hatched young are miniature versions of the adult. Crayfish become sexually mature the first autumn after hatching. On the average, they live less than two years.

As the crayfish grows it becomes too big for its shell, so it must shed the old and produce a new exoskeleton. This complex process, known as molting, is a stressful time for the crayfish. During the six hours necessary to complete this process the crayfish is without the protection of its shell and is extremely vulnerable to predators. The crayfish hides and does not eat during this time. Molting involves four stages: absorption of calcium from the old shell, the actual shedding of the shell, absorption of water by the body, and forming and hardening of the new shell.

The newly molted crayfish are brighter colored than before, due to the old shell being generally dirty. Once the molting process is complete, the crayfish is ready to continue its usual routine.