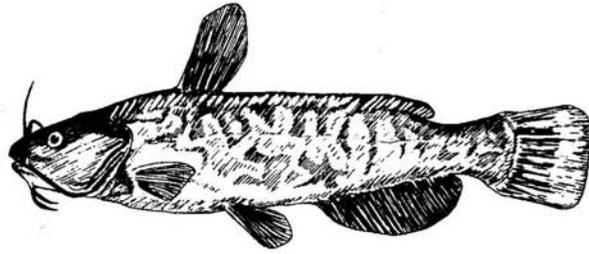


BULLHEAD CATFISH



In the State of Oregon

Three species of the catfish family are known as "bullheads" (*Ictalurus* spp.). They were not native, but naturalized easily after they were stocked in Oregon waters.

The three bullhead species are: black bullhead, *I. melas*; brown bullhead (also called "red cat"), *I. nebulosus*; and yellow bullhead, *I. natalis*. Brown and yellow bullheads often exceed one pound in size but catchables usually weigh one-fourth pound (eight inch length), one-half pound (ten inch length), to one-pound (13 inch length). They tolerate lower oxygen conditions (less than one ppm) than most warm water fish in Oregon.

The three bullheads may be distinguished separately. If the chin barbels are light colored and the tail is rounded, it is a yellow bullhead. If the chin barbels are gray or black and the tail is squarish, it is either a black or brown bullhead. The black bullhead has a whitish bar at the base of the tail, and the pectoral fin spines are not strongly barbed. The brown bullhead has no whitish bar at the tail base, but the pectoral fin spines have obvious barbs or spines that you can feel.

These three bullheads may hybridize occasionally, in which case the foregoing differences may be mixed and confusing.

Fishpond owners, soil conservationists, and fishermen can easily distinguish the three bullheads that have square or rounded tails from the three larger and better catfishes which have forked tails (blue, channel, and white catfish). The two groups have significantly different values, spawning habits, size, and growth rates in farm and ranch ponds. All six, however, provide table food of good taste.

All catfish have a similar appearance--scaleless skin, a wide mouth with four pairs of whisker-like barbels about the mouth, and one stiff, very sharp spine in the forward fin on the back (dorsal fin) and in both side fins just back of the head (pectoral fins).

Their foods include larvaè, worms, crawfish, insects, and some algae and other plant foods.

Common baits used are earthworms or small chunks of meat.

Spawning. The three bullheads sweep out beds on the pond bottom and lay their eggs at water temperatures from 70°F to 80°F (usually June to August). The eggs usually hatch in five to ten days. At hatching time the fry are about one-fourth inch long. The "school" of young stays with a parent bullhead a few weeks before they disperse throughout the pond.

The brown bullhead can be managed alone in farm ponds to produce 750 to 900 pounds per surface acre in 12 or 13 months (mid-June to July of the next year) by fertilizing the water and feeding on pelleted feeds. The stocking rate is 3,000 per surface acre (using one to two inch fingerlings). It takes about 2,000 pounds of pelleted feed to produce the 750 to 900 pounds per acre. This system avoids spawning until the next June. This is an important factor because the bullhead offspring are such efficient feeders that they compete severely with their parents after about 30 days from hatching.

Fertilization. Fertilize with 100 pounds per acre of 8-8-2 in early July, August, September, and October. Use four applications.

Feeding. Feed five pounds per acre per day in September, ten pounds per acre per day in October, none through November to mid-March, ten pounds per acre per day from March 15 to April 1, 20 pounds per acre per day in April, and 25 pounds in May and June. Cease feeding about one week before draining the pond and harvesting the fish.

The cost of fertilizing and feeding is about 15 cents per pound of the brown bullheads produced.

These fish will be about four or five ounces in size, which is desirable for restaurant or home use. If six or eight ounce size is desired, reduce the stocking rate to 2,000 per surface acre. In either case, the market value of brown bullheads is less than channel, blue, or white catfish. The meat of the brown bullhead is red, and the commercial name is, therefore, usually "red cats".

Black and yellow bullhead species have not been produced commercially in farm ponds, but perhaps could be because their habits are so similar to the brown bullhead.

In bass and bluegill ponds, one of the bullhead species often occurs when a few spawners are in the pond at the time when bass or bluegills are stocked. As a result, a good population of bullheads will be present and suitable for fishing for the following year. Their competition will also reduce the growth of the bluegills. The bullhead population, however, will be short-lived in well fertilized ponds. This surprising fact results because:

1. The absence of submersed waterweeds in fertile water, and control of cattails and other emergent weeds in shallow water, provides no cover in which fingerling bullheads can escape bass which are two inches and larger. The newly hatched bullheads stay in a mass several days, tailing the parent in a comet-like group. Since bullheads move slowly, the little bass easily pick them off one by one.
2. Bullheads are numerous and, when one and two years old, are easily caught on hook and line. A few are taken the third year. Only rarely does one survive the fourth year.
3. Meanwhile, the bluegills consume the foods which the dwindling population of bullheads release for them. Thus, the bass and bluegill combination becomes fully established.

Conversely, the bullheads will continue to populate the pond wherever submersed waterweeds and shallow water emergents are allowed to provide heavy escape cover.