

HOOK N' COOK

Brown & Black Bullheads



Although they have not been under the spotlight in the angler's world, the brown and black Bullheads are members of an illustrious fish family that is well-known the world over: The Catfish family. The other cats which prowl in Manitoba's waters are: The Channel Catfish, the Stone Cat, and the Tadpole Madtom. The Bullhead is not as gamey a fish as the Channel Cat but provides good fishing and exceptionally good eating. The flesh of the Bullhead is firm and pink with a flavour reminiscent of Trout. Its size - they average under one pound in weight - make it a nice fish to pan-fry.

The Bullhead has been aptly named for they are somewhat bull-headed when it comes to survival. Bullheads are stubborn and tenaciously cling to life under conditions which would be a serious stress to other fish. Oxygen depletion in winter and steamy water temperatures in summer are no great hindrances to them. Introduced into a lake where these conditions prevail, the Bullhead will soon take the upper hand and

become very numerous. When this occurs the angler is likely to place the blame on the Bullhead, saying they had crowded out the other fish. Actually it is not so much a matter of crowding out the other fish as it is a matter of favourable ecological niches. This type of environment is a satisfactory niche for the Bullhead so they naturally take first place. Where such habitat conditions prevail, the Bullhead provides a chance for good angling that might not otherwise be available.

This is particularly true in reference to fishing spots near and in the City of Winnipeg. The Bullhead thrives in the turbid warm waters of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. Bullhead fishing thus can give you the opportunity for a few hours fishing and you won't have to go miles from the city to find it.

The black and brown Bullheads are close relatives in the Catfish family. They both have a square tail while the Channel Cat has a deeply forked tail. The black Bullhead has a light vertical bar on the base of the tail which identifies it from the brown Bullhead.

Bullheads are typically considered a small fish. A brown Bullhead which reaches the weight of three or four pounds is considered large. The black Bullhead is even smaller: their top size is two pounds and the average is under one pound. These are a nice size for the kitchen even if you are not breaking any records in fish weights.

Bullheads have quite an interesting personal biology. The male is quite the family man. Raising of the young fry is a job undertaken by both the male and the female.





If nature does not provide them with ready-made nest in the form of the submerged, hollow log, a depression in the river bottom, or an undercut along the bank; the male and female work together to fashion a tailor-made nest. Two features of their anatomy come in handy for this task. The sharp pectoral spine is used to dig out the hole; the shovel-shaped mouth is used to cart away the dirt.

Once the nest is constructed, the eggs are deposited in it. They are carefully guarded and maintained until they hatch in about a week's time. This supervision does not cease after the eggs hatch for the Bullhead is one of the few fishes which actively cares for its young. The young fry are kept rounded up into a "school" and are literally grounded to the home front until parental supervision is no longer deemed necessary. Wanderers from the fold are severely disciplined.

Even after they leave the family fold, Bullheads do not become solitary critters. They tend to be gregarious. They do not congregate in actual schools, but where one is found, there is likely to be another. If you've caught one Bullhead, there's likely to be more of the same around.

Bullheads are definitely sun-shy. Day-time is a time to keep to the cover of darkness. They remain concealed under covered bank overhangs, near submerged logs, in weed beds, and in pools beneath rocky rapids or waterfalls. Night time is the time for action. After dusk Bullheads will move from their hiding places to the shallows to forage for food. Under certain conditions, such as rising turbid waters or stormy inclement weather, will rouse them from their usual daytime lethargy. When these conditions prevail, Bullhead fishing will be terrific!!

Fishin for Bullheads

Dusk is still the prime time to go fishing for Bullheads because they begin their foraging runs. Therefore, your chances are better that they will take your bait at this time. Bullheads are omnivorous so you can choose just about any bait to catch them.

As in the Channel Catfish, stink baits are a particularly good bait for Bullheads because they rely mainly on their sense of taste and smell. Their vision is very, very limited. Stink baits are exactly what they imply: baits with a decided stench. In fact, one apt assessment of stink baits is that if it makes your eyes burn and your stomach turn, it's ideal. Stink baits are such things as clams or minnows left to rot in the sun until dry. Decidedly revolting, but very effective.

Aromatic doughballs also do the trick in attracting Bullheads. Add oil of anise or oil of cloves to your doughball recipe. This should attract some Bullheads in a hurry.

The Bullhead's natural diet consists of these appetizing items: white garden grubs, small tree frogs, Crayfish, grasshoppers, crickets, salamanders, and beetles. Any of these will be good baits in the summer.

Fish for Bullheads near the bottom of the stream or lake. Since they never grow to a particularly large size they can be taken using medium-weight tackle. For example, you can use a pickerel rig set up with a bell sinker on the bottom and two number four short-shanked hooks. The smaller hooks are used because Bullheads have small mouths.

Bullheads have an unusual capacity for survival out of water. Their mouth and gills



Brown and Black Bullheads



continue to work for as long as four hours after they have been taken from their natural environment. However, don't let their long life out of water fool you. If you plan to keep some, make sure you ice them down immediately after you catch them to ensure the flavour is at its peak of freshness.

Preparing and Cooking Bullheads

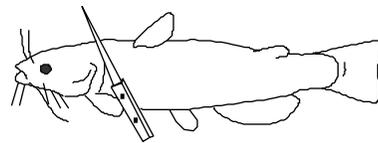
The Bullhead is one of the scaleless fishes and if you are an angler more familiar with filleting the scaled fishes, you may be at a loss as to preparation of the Bullhead for the table. Bullheads must be skinned before cooking. This is not a difficult process, particularly if you have been filleting fish for years. Grasp the Bullhead by the head and make a cut all around the head, following the contour of the gill covers (right). Once this is done, pull off the skin with a pair of pliers. It should come off like a snug-fitting glove. The skin will be removed from the fins as well, leaving their rays and veins exposed. Simply cut these out. If you skin a lot of Bullheads, you may find it handy to make a skinning board. Pound a large nail diagonally through a suitably-sized board - you can then hook the Bullhead by the head over the nail when you are skinning them.

Once the skin is removed you will notice a band of darker red flesh along both sides of the fish, running parallel to the backbone. This is a very rich-flavoured meat and some people may find this too rich for their tastes. It can be removed if you scrape it away with a sharp knife.

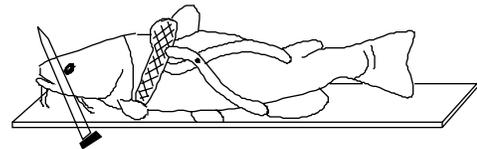
Only one other point must be mentioned in regard to handling Bullheads. Bullheads are equipped with three extremely sharp spines, one on the initial ray of the dorsal spine and one on the initial ray of each of the two pectoral fins. Be careful when handling these fish because you can inflict a nasty wound in your hand.

As mentioned before, the Bullhead has a flavour like that of Trout so simple methods of preparation are best. Don't mask their flavour under heavy batters and exotic spices. Bullheads can be pan-fried in clarified butter. Pan-dress your catch. Dip in a mixture of egg and milk, then coat with yellow corn meal, bread crumbs or crushed soda crackers. Pan-fry in butter in a smoking hot skillet.

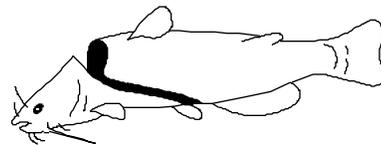
Cleaning Bullheads



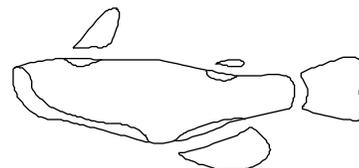
- 1** *With a sharp knife slit the skin around the neck.*



- 2** *Pull the skin off using a pair of pliers. To make it easier, angle a nail through the board and hook the head over it.*



- 3** *The head is then cut off the skinned Bullhead taking with it the front fins. The entrails are also removed.*



- 4** *The remaining fins are cut away and the meat is cleaned in cold water. Make sure the body cavity is clean particularly along the backbone*

