

THE BROWN BULLHEAD

Ictalurus nebulosus

By Martin Zybura

The purpose of this article is to explain my experiences and results with the Brown Bullhead. You may recall its name from the article by John Bondhus, "Catfish and Bullheads" which appeared in the Spring 1973 issue of "The American Currents" (Vol. 1, No. 1). It was also listed in the same issue in the list of rare or status undetermined fishes of Missouri.

It is found chiefly in the eastern region of the country. The average fish is about 10 inches long and weighs about a pound. One somewhat smaller would be suitable for an aquarium. The fish's back and fins are brown. The sides are a mixture of brown and white and it's underside is white. It has a tadpole-like body (common to many bullheads and native catfishes), being largest in the head regions. It has small eyes and eight black barbels.

I've found the fish to be very hardy under many different conditions, so water chemistry isn't too important when keeping them. In nature it is found in the most polluted bodies of water. Temperature also isn't too important, but the fish seems to be most comfortable when the temperature is between 60°F and 70°F.

Many types of food can be used with the Brown Bullhead. I've had success with earthworms, tubifex worms, frozen and dried fishfoods, and pieces of meat and fish. It feeds mainly on the bottom, using its taste organs and barbels to locate the food.

It likes a lot of room. Large rocks, arranged to form caves and crevices, provide ideal conditions. Plants and/or gravel can be used, but aren't necessary. It is mainly nocturnal, but is partially active during the daytime. With low lighting and plenty of rocks, activity can be viewed during the day.

Only fish that are of equal size or larger should be kept with it. I've found that smaller fish are usually killed or eaten. Occasionally, larger fish are killed. I think it is best when kept alone, that way no fish is in danger. These actions suggest this fish's territorial instincts. It can serve as a scavenger in ponds or tanks containing large fishes.

I don't know much about breeding the Brown Bullhead, but the Pictorial Encyclopedia of Fishes, by Dr. S. Frank (Hamlyn, London, Sydney, Toronto), says the eggs are laid in a depression and the male guards the eggs and the fry.

It is easily caught on a hook, but with this method you run the risk of internally injuring the fish if it swallows the hook. I suggest a net or a trap of some kind. It may take longer but the fish are relatively safe from injury.

Its interesting characteristics and relative ease of care, make it a favorable native to be kept in the aquarium.