# COLLECTING THE YELLOW BULLHEAD *AMEIURUS NATALIS*

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Bullheads (*Ameiurus* spp.) are usually not one of the targets for the average fisherman trying to catch a trophy catfish. Bullheads do not attain the size of the Channel Catfish *Ictalurus punctatus*, Blue Catfish *I. furcatus*, or Flathead Catfish *Pylodictis olivaris*. According to the International Game Fish Association, the world record for the Yellow Bullhead *Ameiurus natalis* (Figure 1) is a 6 lb, 6 oz fish caught in Drexel, Missouri, by John Irvin in 2006. Most anglers consider the Yellow Bullhead a nuisance when trying for the bigger species. In their defense, they are a lot of fun not only for the fight they put up when hooked, but also for the enjoyment of keeping and watching them.

The Yellow Bullhead is in the North American catfish family (Ictaluridae). All catfishes have four pairs of barbels, no scales, an adipose fin, and stout spines at the origins of the dorsal and pectoral fins. The caudal fin of the Yellow Bullhead is rounded or nearly straight. It is a medium-sized member of the catfish family. It is typically yellow-olive to slate-black on the back and sometimes mottled depending on habitat. The sides are lighter and more yellowish, while the underside of the head and body are bright yellow, yellow white, or bright white. Chin barbels are white, yellow, and rarely pale pink. Its native distribution is from southern Canada to Florida and westward to the Great Plains. It has been introduced into states farther west as well as overseas (Figure 2).

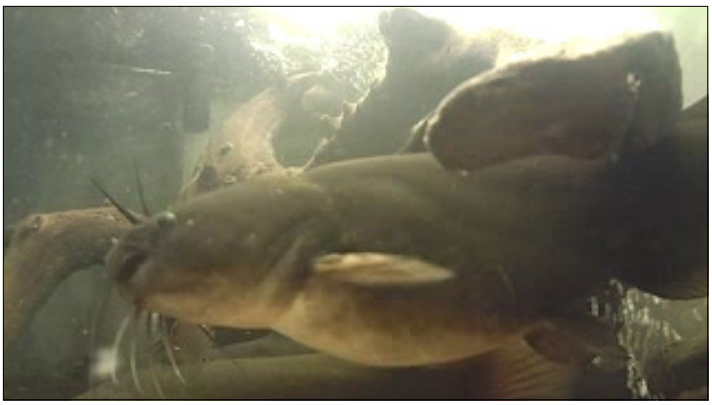

**Figure 1. Yellow Bullhead in aquarium.**

Photos by the author.

James Burgess has always loved fishing and keeping the fish he caught. He became extremely interested in the diversity of catfishes as a high school student. Even while serving in the Army, James continued his catfish studies. After he retired from the Army, he started writing articles and research papers and posting them on ResearchGate. He is a member of PlanetCatfish, Catfish Study Group, and the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetolologists. His grandchildren help him collect specimens in the local creeks. He continues to keep and be amazed by *Ameiurus natalis*.

To find Yellow Bullheads, one does not have to look very far. They are found just about everywhere within their native range, but they seem to thrive better in waterways without much current such as farm ponds or slow-moving creeks. They prefer to hang out around the weeds and areas littered with sunken debris. The most successful places to find them are usually at the base of dams or other hiding spaces during the daytime. My favorite place is the Drakes Creek boat ramp just on the outskirts of Franklin, Kentucky (36.718760, -86.547413). The area has abundant aquatic vegetation but is clear enough of obstacles to be effectively fished with lines or traps.

The tackle for catching bullheads can range from using a string tied to a stick to the most expensive rod and reel combo. The standard line that comes from the factory on a new reel is adequate. I usually use line with strengths of 10 to 15 pounds. This strength is ample for the Yellow Bullhead and is strong enough for most other fishes that you will encounter. The size of the Yellow Bullhead mouth makes the size of the hook a hard choice as these fish are known for swallowing the hook when taking bait. Everyone seems to have a different opinion. The hooks that I utilize are the #2 barbed hooks which have good bait retention. The weight is usually less than a quarter of an ounce for a double-hook configu-

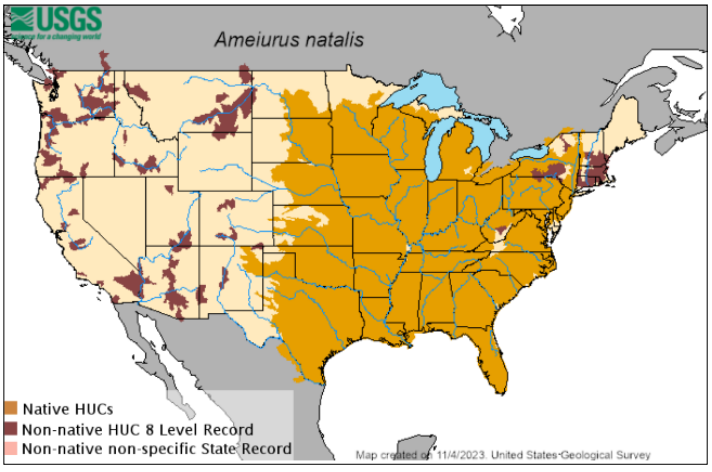


**Figure 2. Yellow Bullhead distribution.**

**Figure 3. Rod and reel configuration.**

ration. A trio of fishing poles is equipped as in Figure 3, but the poles are set out in a fan formation to cover a larger area.[1] The bait is cast out around thirty feet.

The last ingredient to this configuration is the selection of a tempting bait. Traditional baits work just as well as any specially designed attractants. The old adage for catfish bait of "the stinkier the better" is appropriate. Treats such as liver, chicken gizzards, rotten cheese have been used. What works in one area may not work in another area. An example of bait versus location from my experience was while living in San Angelo, Texas, and fishing in the Red Arroyo where pieces of shrimp was the best bait. However, here in Kentucky, shrimp is ignored, and nightcrawlers work best in Drakes Creek. My technique is very simple in the bait used. The old standard of pieces of nightcrawlers is what I normally use. By only using the pieces that can fit on the hook, the juices and the odors tantalize the taste buds of bullheads. No fishing method or bait can guarantee success, but a trial-and-error approach can be used to discover what works in your area.

The feeding behavior of Yellow Bullheads is best described as one-and-done. When they bite the baited hook, it is usually strong and hard, and the hook is very often swallowed. To cause as little damage as possible, I cut the leader and the hook stays in. Most of the time; the hook is expelled once I place the fish in the quarantine tank. A small percentage of fish continue swallowing, and the hook does irreparable damage.

How you handle a caught bullhead (or any catfish) is very

**Figure 4. Handling catfish specimens.**

important. It is one thing to catch this "aquatic warrior," but due to its evolutionary weaponry, it can be quite hazardous. The most prominent of these weapons are the spines in the pectoral and dorsal fins. These bones in these fins can be locked into a "triangle of pain." In addition, these fins are equipped with a mild venom. When the fisherman is "finned," the venom causes a pain something like a bee sting. In conjunction with the sharp serrated spine piercing the hand, the pain can become quite intense. There is a remedy, but not an immediate one. Try to immerse the affected area in warm water as soon as possible. The warmth neutralizes the venom, and the pain lessens rapidly. To avoid being finned while removing the specimen from the line, grasp the bullhead from underneath (Figure 4). By snugly holding this catfish with the locked fins between the fingers, one can

[1]**Editor's Note:** Please check local angling regulations regarding the number of poles and hooks allowed.

**Figure 5. Some types of fish traps.**

**Figure 6. Livewell systems.**

successfully remove the hook from the mouth or cut the leader if the hook was swallowed.

An alternative method for collecting is fish traps. Overall, this method is much better for the bullhead as they are baited into the trap without harming the fish from swallowing a hook. The baits used in these various traps usually include canned dog or cat food along with bread. The trap is set and left overnight (with high hopes the trap will still be there in the morning).

I have used three styles of traps (Figure 5). The first is shaped like an umbrella. There are six entry points around the perimeter. It has a single removal point that consists of a zippered opening. The next trap I tried was an improvement. The trap itself is hexagon shaped with an entry point on each side. The trap is collapsible by unzipping it from top to bottom; opening it up completely makes it easier to remove the fish. The newest collapsible trap I have used is round and resembles the old-style minnow trap. All of these traps operate in the same way, but it is the bait that makes the difference.

I have also used a cast net to catch bullheads. It is most effective in small areas. My preference is a net with a four-foot span. I used one at a fish farm when the water was being drained and the bullheads were concentrated in a small area. The drawbacks to employing this method is that it is labor intensive, and removal of the fish entangled in the net with fins locked in the mesh is very difficult.

Transportation of your collected fish is made easier since bullheads can survive in low oxygen levels. I use a homemade livewell system that is composed of two totes (Figure 6). The inside tote has multiple holes drilled into the sides and bottom. Pieces of pool noodles are zip-tied to the tote's inside rim along with a rock placed on the bottom middle. The lid is secured with zip ties through the handles and slits on the sides after the fish are put into the tote. A small length of rope is attached to the tote. The livewell is then ready for whatever fish are collected, and it can be floated in the waterway. This way the specimens stay in oxygenated surroundings. The second tote houses the floating tote.

Once the collecting is over, the bottom tote is filled with the same water. The floating tote is immersed into the bottom tote, and then an air stone is put into the floating tote. The air pump is run by a power inverter, thus keeping the fish alive on their way back to my lab.

Keeping your bullheads alive for further study was covered in an earlier article (Burgess 2019). The 250-gallon tanks that house most of my research specimens are made from field water tanks that have been converted. The filtration/aeration unit consists of a pool pump apparatus that pumps the water from the drain valve (the bottom) to the top going through activated charcoal and terry cloth filter media contained in plastic strainers. This configuration allows for quick filter changes and the ability to recycle the filter by washing. Multiple artificial plants are attached to a grate to provide cover for the fish. They feed on minnows from a nearby bait shop. It keeps their predatory instincts active and food is available when wanted.

Collecting catfish in general and Yellow Bullheads in particular is very rewarding. Whether it is being done for pleasure or investigative purposes, finding the fish and using the proper methodology for capture makes the trip more successful and rewarding. Being able to effectively transport, house, and feed your fish allows the researcher to continue investigations without having to postpone a project to collect more specimens.

**Literature Cited**

Burgess, J.E. 2019. Keeping *Ameiurus natalis*. American Currents 44(1):4–8.