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CATFISHES

Prepared in the Division of Fishery Biology

Important Species. - The catfishes are of such commercial value as food that there have arisen extensive and almost special fisheries for them in the South, the Mississippi Valley, and the Great Lakes region; that is, in the centers of their greatest abundance. There is, however, very little published information on the habits of any species of catfish, and it has been thought desirable to bring together the most important published and otherwise available facts on this subject.

The fresh-water catfishes of the United States of more or less commercial importance may be classified in a popular way as channel cats, Ictalurus; bullheads, or mud cats, Ameiurus; yellow cats, Leptops; and stone cats, Noturus. This arrangement is not wholly satisfactory, however, owing to the confusion of the common names, for a mud cat of one locality may be a yellow cat of another, and the yellow cat here may be the stone cat somewhere else, etc. Then, too, there is no distinct line between channel cats and mud cats. The technical nomenclature and synonymy of these fishes are not in much better condition than the popular classification.

The catfishes are a hardy race, very prolific, and in habits and structure comparatively safe from enemies. For these reasons wherever they occur they are usually very abundant. In late years, however, the demand for these fish has reached such dimensions that in some localities extensive inroads have been made upon their numbers and there has arisen the problem of how to repopulate the depleted waters. It has not, until recently at least, been considered necessary to resort to artificial propagation of bullheads, and there have been few attempts in that direction.

Of about a dozen species appearing in the markets, probably not more than one-half are very common or merit more than passing notice. The largest are the "great forked-tail cat" or the blue cat of the Mississippi, Ictalurus furcatus*, the Great Lakes cat, Ameiurus lacustris; black catfish, Ameiurus crebennus; and the yellow cat, Leptops olivaris.

* An effort has been made by recent authors to change some of the scientific names used herein to bring them in agreement with their ideas of generic classification, or to make them conform with rules of nomenclature as interpreted by them. However, the changes have not been generally accepted. Therefore, it seems advisable to retain the names long used in standard works, at least until the proposed changes become more definitely established.

The first attains a weight of 150 pounds, the second 100 pounds, the third perhaps 50 pounds, and the fourth 100 pounds. Of the other cats the more important are the spotted cat, Ictalurus punctatus; eel cat, Ictalurus anguilla; Potomac channel cat or white catfish, Ameiurus catus; bullhead, Ameiurus nebulosus; and the marbled cat, Ameiurus marmoratus. Of less importance are the black bullhead, Ameiurus melas; yellow catfish or yellow bullhead, Ameiurus natalis; and the brown catfish Ameiurus platycephalus.

Habitat. -Almost any one of the species of catfishes seems to be adapted to a wide range of climatic conditions, although somewhat restricted to certain immediate surroundings. Ameiurus lacustris is supposed to be distributed from the Great Lakes Basin to the Saskatchewan River and northward.

Ameiurus nebulosus, locally known as bullhead, horned pout, Schuylkill cat, small yellow cat, is the only member of the catfish family that is adapted for rearing in private ponds. It is abundant in all ponds, lakes, and sluggish streams of the eastern United States and the Mississippi Valley region. It adapts itself to widely varying conditions and demands less expensive preparation for its cultivation than the larger catfishes of the genus Ictalurus, which do not seem adapted for rearing in still water.

The black bullhead, Ameiurus melas, in the main features of its distribution agrees with the yellow bullhead, being like that species, decidedly most abundant in creeks and least so in the larger rivers, and also showing a notable preference for the more quiet and muddier parts of the streams it inhabits.

The channel cats are so called because of their apparent preference for channels of streams and clearer, cleaner water than that affected by the majority of the so-called mud cats; although, according to our present classification, the native channel cat of the Potomac River is generally mud cat, Ameiurus. In some southern rivers, the St. Johns particularly, several genera of catfish occur together with precisely the same kind of surroundings, whether muddy or sandy.

The spotted cat, Ictalurus punctatus, one of the most highly esteemed channel cats, thrives best in streams. It abounds in all flowing streams from western New York westward to Montana and southward to Florida and Texas, and in the Great Lakes. It is perhaps most common in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Missouri, though scarce in Mississippi.

In Louisiana the blue cat, Ictalurus furcatus, also known as channel cat, and goujon, Leptops olivaris, also called the yellow cat and tabby cat, are influenced in their movements by the temperature of the water. During the winter they move farther down the river, where the water is warmest, and in the summer they run farther upstream or retire into deeper waters. The goujon is said to be most abundant in the Atchafalaya River from September to November, and it and the blue cat are the most important species of the Atchafalaya River, La. The two are numerous in Mississippi and commercially about equally important.

The eel cat, Ictalurus anguilla, was first discovered in Louisiana by Evermann but it was later found in the Ohio River at Louisville, Ky. It is stated that it rarely weighs over five pounds, and attains a weight of 15 pounds. It is a common commercial species in Mississippi.

The yellow bullhead or yellow catfish, Ameiurus natalis, ranges from the Great Lakes region to Virginia and Texas.

The brown bullhead or brown catfish, Ameiurus platycephalus, has a restricted range, embracing only the streams from the Cape Fear River to the Cháttahoochee. Its maximum length is somewhat over a foot.

The black catfish, Ameiurus erebennus, inhabits coastwise waters from New Jersey to Florida, having a recorded weight of about 40 pounds. In Florida, especially in the St. Johns River, it is one of the important catfishes.

The white catfish, Ameiurus catus, whose form and color vary with age and environment, inhabits coastwise fresh waters from New Jersey to North Carolina. Its maximum length is perhaps two feet. As food, this is one of the best catfishes, although its commercial importance in North Carolina is comparatively slight, partly because of the abundance of other more desirable fishes and partly because most of the catfish are caught where shad, alewives, and striped bass are receiving special attention. This is perhaps also the case in other states.

From: "American Catfishes: Habits, culture, and commercial importance" by W. C. Kendall. Bureau of Fisheries Document 733, special paper in Report of U. S. Commissioner of Fisheries for 1908. Out of print.