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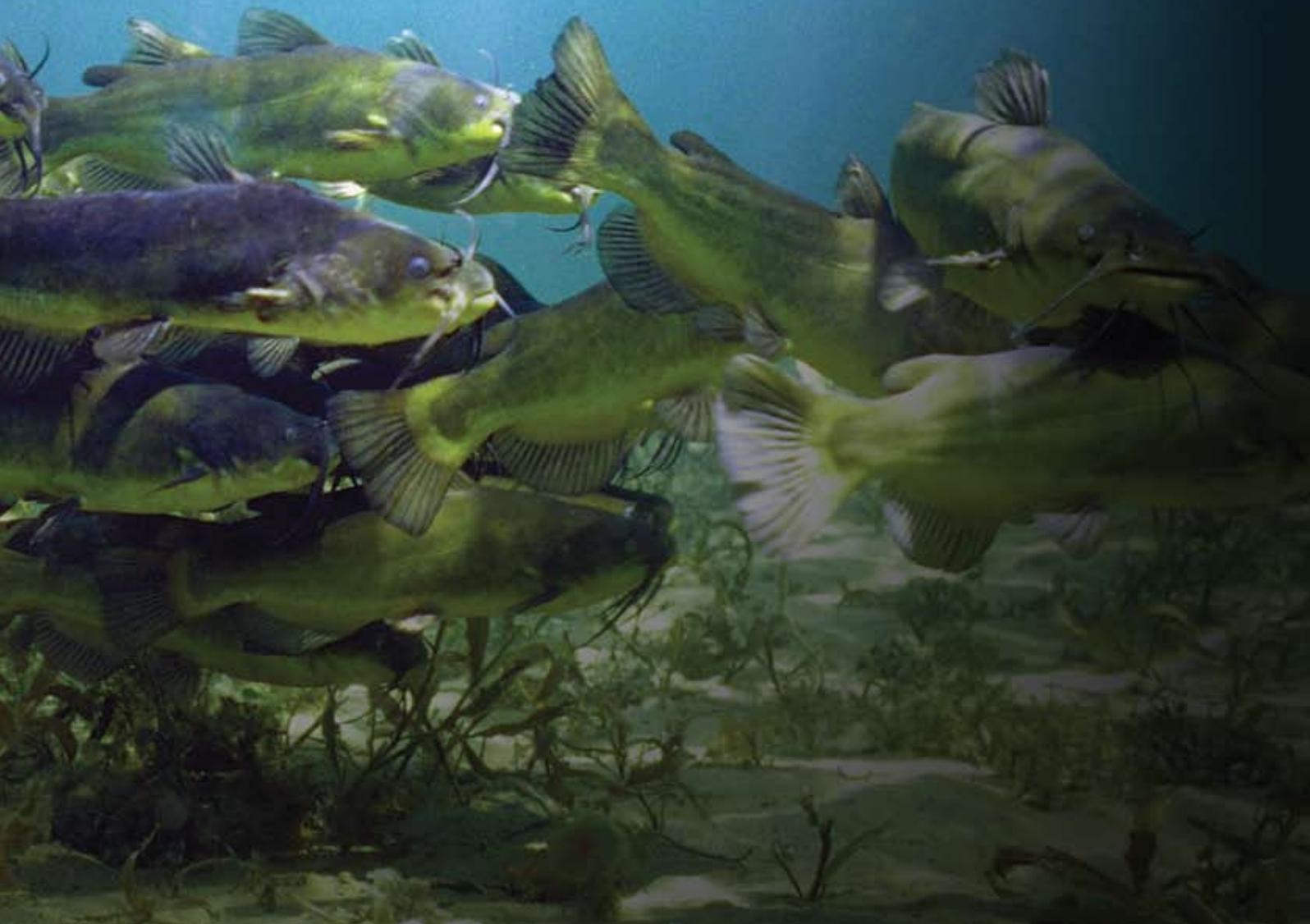
Bountiful



Bullhead

**Nighttime is the right time
to catch these hardy fish**

by Sarah Piecuch



April means spring in New York State; sunny days alternating with warm rains encourage man and critter alike to celebrate winter's departure. Creatures emerge from all quarters, eager to be active again. Birds migrate north, fish prepare to spawn, and outdoor enthusiasts are right behind, taking it all in.

For me, April means bullhead fishing. While other anglers are off chasing the more popular trout, I look forward to the unique experience that bullhead fishing entails. Just like trout anglers who anxiously await opening day, bullhead anglers anticipate the arrival of spring, when they can enjoy the camaraderie and fun that goes along with catching and eating these tasty fish. In fact, for many northern and central New York anglers, like me, bullhead fishing and bullhead feeds are a "not-to-be-missed" annual celebration.

Bullhead fishing is distinctive because it's best done at night, affording you the opportunity to relax and observe the surrounding activity of a spring evening. Some of my best memories involve bullhead fishing at night, often in a light warm rain, with screech owls and spring peepers trilling in the background. And since it's often a group event, participants can be immersed in nature and still catch up with fellow anglers on the past winters' happenings.

Of the three species of bullhead that call New York home—yellow, black and brown—the brown bullhead is the species most commonly caught by anglers. They are one of the hardiest fishes and can be found in a wide variety of habitats, including cool Adirondack lakes, warm-water ponds, lakes, and larger, slow-moving streams.

Brown bullheads average 8-14 inches in length and can weigh up to two pounds. Members of the catfish family, they have smooth, scaleless skin and whiskers, called barbels, on their chin. They are bottom feeders, using their barbels to feel and locate food such as dragonfly larvae, worms, tadpoles, fish eggs, algae and other smaller bottom-feeding fish.



The author demonstrates how to properly handle a bullhead to avoid getting stuck by one of the fish's sharp spines—securely wrap your hand around the fish, directly behind the gills, making sure to compress the pectoral and dorsal fins against the fish's body.

While bullhead can be caught year round, day or night, from land or boat, April evenings are best for easily catching an abundance of fish from the shoreline. The rising water temperatures, warm rain, and seasonal runoff stimulate bullhead to gather in the shallows and begin feeding aggressively; a behavior that becomes more pronounced at night.

It is at this time that my fellow bullhead anglers and I grab our gear and head out for an evening of fun. Depending on the night, the shorelines of many popular bullhead waters can be dotted with the lanterns or campfires of anglers enjoying their sport.

Equipment is simple—some bait (I prefer night crawlers and leeches), a lantern, spincast rod and reel, the "bullhead rig" (a weight at the end of the line and an extra "drop line" with a hook and worm attached above the weight), a needle-nose pliers, and you are ready to go. I also like to bring a collapsing camp chair, a branch with a fork in it to rest my pole on, and a bucket to carry everything in.



Since bullhead fishing is often done at night, anglers will need a lantern or flashlight to help see. Other important equipment consists of a simple rod and reel, bait, needle-nose pliers, and a stand (can use a branch with a fork in it) to rest your pole on.

Once I've cast my bait and set my pole in the notch of the forked branch that I stuck in the ground, then it's time to sit back, relax and talk with friends. While we catch up on the latest news, we all keep a careful eye on the tip of our poles, watching for the telltale movement of the tip that indicates a fish is nibbling at the bait. Conversations are often interrupted as we take turns grabbing poles, jerking them up to set the hook, and then



The whiskers (or barbels) on a bullhead act as taste and touch sensors that help the fish locate food along the bottom.

reeling in the catch. Everyone gets into the rhythm, each celebrating the other's success.

On a good night, you can easily catch a bucketful of fish. Since bullhead are prolific and have a high tolerance for various environmental conditions, there are a lot to go around. In addition, bullhead can withstand reasonably high harvest levels and still provide good fishing and eating for years to come.

A note of caution—you must be careful when handling bullhead. They have sharp spines on their pectoral (front) and dorsal (top) fins. The spines are used for defense from predators,

and can easily puncture human skin. However, if you know how to properly grip a bullhead, you can avoid these spines. When removing a hook from a bullhead, securely wrap your hand around the fish, directly behind the gills, being sure to compress the pectoral and dorsal fins against the body. Then use your needle-nose pliers—it makes hook removal much easier.

To me, spring is also the best time for eating bullheads. The cold, clear, spring waters make the meat incredibly mild and sweet. But before you begin to cook bullhead, be sure to clip off the sharp spines, and remove the head and

entrails. Bullhead can be cooked with the skin on or off and are generally cooked with the bones left in. It is easier to carefully eat the fish off the bone, rather than try to remove all the bones prior to cooking. Some anglers prepare their bullhead in a smoke cooker; while others, like me, like them battered and deep-fried.

If cooking up your own catch isn't your cup of tea, you can still enjoy the tastiness of springtime bullhead. Any time from late April to the end of May, many fire departments and Veterans of Foreign War (VFW) posts host bullhead dinners as fundraising events. More common in central and northern New York, these events are a true celebration of the bullhead bounty and are guaranteed to draw a crowd.

So this April, when the snow has melted and the warm rains have arrived, I hope you can visit a water body near you, drop in a line or two and enjoy bullhead fishing in New York State.

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A Real Whopper

Popular sportfish, bullheads are plentiful, easy to catch, very tasty, and can be fished all year long in New York State. In early spring, they are among the few fish species available to anglers.

While most brown bullheads caught in New York waters average about one pound in weight, occasionally an angler catches a real

lunker. This huge fish was taken by Glenn Collacuro while fishing Lake Mahopac in Putnam County on August 1, 2009. Weighing in at a whopping 7 pounds 6 ounces, it is the new state record brown bullhead.