

The Bowfin



Family:

Amiidae (bowfins) in the order Amiiformes (bowfins)

Description:

Stout-bodied, nearly cylindrical fish. Dorsal fin extends more than half the length of the back and has more than 45 rays. Tail fin rounded, with hind part of backbone curving into upper part of fin. Head lacks scales. Each nostril has a barbel-like flap. Fins lack spines. Upperparts mottled olive-green, shading to pale green on belly. Dorsal and tail fins dark green with darker bands or bars. Young have a black spot near the upper part of the tail base. This spot can persist in adults.



Size:

Adult length: 15-27 inches; weight: 1-5 pounds.

Habitat and conservation:

Occurs in a variety of habitats but tends to avoid those with swift current or excessively turbid waters. In the Mississippi Lowlands, it is found in a variety of habitats ranging from swamps to ditches to pools of sluggish streams. Along the Mississippi River it is more often found in backwaters and oxbows than in the main channel.

Foods:

Young feed primarily on microcrustaceans and aquatic insects. Adults eat fish, crayfish, insects, worms and frogs. Gizzard shad are a favorite item, followed by golden shiner, bullheads and sunfish.

**Distribution in Missouri:**

Most abundant in the Mississippi Lowlands, though it occurs along the entire length of the Mississippi River. Also stocked in private lakes.

Status:

In our state, this fish prefers the swampy, sluggish waters of the Bootheel, so the health of their populations depends on our maintenance of those swampy habitats.

Life cycle:

Hiding by day in deeper water, bowfin venture into shallow water to feed at night. They surface occasionally to renew the supply of air in the swim bladder, which functions something like a lung. Spawning lasts from April into early June. Males build nests in shallow, weedy sites, and they guard the eggs and fry. When the fry are ready to leave the nest, they travel in a swarm with the male. This schooling behavior lasts until the young are about 4 inches long, and they go their separate ways.

Human connections:

Generally classed as a poor food fish, and often held in contempt by many anglers, the bowfin still has a place in sport fishing. Though it is not the most spectacular fighter, it has strength and endurance.

Ecosystem connections:

Like many fish, the bowfin begins life as an egg and small fry, vulnerable to predation. As it grows, however, it becomes a predator of fish and crayfish smaller than itself.

Last updated on _____ by _____