

Creatures of Candlewood

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So far, the Creatures of Candlewood column has focused on creatures that spend a lot of their time out of the water, but what about the creatures that call the actual water of Candlewood Lake and Squantz Pond home? We couldn't talk about the creatures of Candlewood without highlighting some of the amazing fish species that also enjoy swimming in the lake, although our first feature might be somewhat unorthodox: The Brown Bullhead! Though bullheads are members of the catfish family, they are not catfish themselves. However, they can easily be mistaken for a catfish species due to the whisker-like barbs near their mouth, however they're smaller and flatter than their catfish cousins, and their fins have small saw-tooth spines that they can use for defense. They might not be the cuddliest "Creature of Candlewood", but they're still an important part of Candlewood Lake's ecosystem!

Bullheads are tenacious fish that can survive in a lot of conditions. Tolerant of low dissolved oxygen levels and lower water quality than Candlewood Lake's -- brown bullheads can be found in lakes, rivers, and ponds across the country, and have even been introduced to waterbodies around the world. The bullheads that call Candlewood home are enjoying a much higher quality of life than many of their friends who live in more impaired waterbodies. Bullheads are native to Eastern North America, stretching from Canada down to the Gulf of Mexico, however they can pose problems for lakes and ponds in which they're introduced and non-native. Largely ignored by anglers (not totally ignored however!), and only preyed upon in large numbers when young, these implacable fish can wipe out native mollusks, crustaceans, insects, plants, and more in ecosystems that are not used to their presence. Candlewood Lake, on the other hand, is part of their native range and every other native candlewood creature has evolved alongside the bullheads, so that they have been incorporated into the ecosystem in a healthy and sustainable way.

Bullheads love to do one thing more than anything else – eat (not unlike this author). However, they are bottom feeders and like to stick to the low murky waters where they can feed on things resting on the lake bed, so you won't see them on the surface as often as some other fish species. They also don't discriminate much when it comes to their food. In fact, as the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources describes their diet: "They will eat almost anything that can fit into their mouths." Though that might sound a little off-putting, bullheads actually act as one of the Lake's sort of "cleanup crews" and work to control nuisance insect, fish, and plant species that would otherwise be able to reproduce uncontrolled. Bullheads' eyesight isn't very good, so they use their "whiskers" to feel around in the sediment and locate food, often larvae and eggs that go unnoticed by other fish.

Brown bullheads live for roughly 6-8 years normally in the wild and usually remain around 2lbs in weight. However, the largest brown bullhead caught by a fisherman on record was actually very nearby to Candlewood Lake: 7lb 6oz in Lake Mahopac, NY in 2009! The bullhead breeding season is in the late spring/early summer, and fish are monogamous during each given season. Nests are small clearings in the sediment made by the fish, normally the female, who

moves sediment and small stones out of the way by sucking them into their mouths and spitting them out elsewhere. After laying the eggs, it takes roughly 6 days for them to hatch. Although both parents guard the nests, after hatching the male is normally the primary caregiver, protecting the young fish which swim and feed in a school. If any of the offspring leave the school, the adult fish will return them by scooping them up with their mouth or chasing them back in. When they're young, brown bullheads are most susceptible to predation by other creatures of Candlewood like herons, sunfish, and turtles – so this schooling phase is very important for them!

Though it was created by humans, Candlewood Lake now both serves and relies on the natural services provided by the organisms that live on and in its waters. It's important for us as residents and users of the lake to recognize that we're not the only ones who have come to depend on it. The helpful and hungry Brown Bullhead is just one of the many Creatures of Candlewood we will continue to highlight in our "Creatures of Candlewood" column. To learn more about how to protect both the lake and the creatures who we call our neighbors, please visit our website at: candlewoodlakeauthority.org. If you're able to catch a glimpse of these fascinating fish swimming near Candlewood's lake bed, we hope you'll take a good look at their whiskers with a newfound appreciation of the part they play in the symphony that is our lake's ecosystem.