

Lakes provide a fascinating world that house many diverse creatures
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Did you ever stop to wonder about the creatures that live deep within the waters of our earth? Living in Highlands County, one has many opportunities to learn about some of the various fish that dwell within our 113 different lakes. It is amazing that within a small or large body of water the many varieties of creatures that can be discovered. The aquatic world is quite fascinating and foreign to us since fish live in a completely different environment than we do.

The Bluegill, also known as bream, brim or copper nose, is actually a member of the sunfish family. Some Bluegill have been found in the Chesapeake Bay showing that they can live in waters that have about 18 percent salinity. These fish can be identified by the dark spot near the back of the dorsal fin. The sides of the head and chin are a dark shade of blue and they sport vertical bars on the sides of the body, which may be difficult to see. They can range in size from four to sixteen inches and prefer shallow water with plenty of vegetation. They stay near the surface of the water in the morning to stay warm and will travel to the deeper parts of the water in daylight hours. They generally travel in schools with 10 to 20 other fish.

Bluegill feed on aquatic insect larvae, crayfish, leeches, snails and small fish. If food is not abundant, they will eat aquatic vegetation and in some cases their own eggs. Spawning starts in May and extends into August. The male arrives to begin the mating process which starts with building spawning beds, which they will viciously protect. Once the female arrives, the male will circle and make grunting noises. Females generally choose males with large bodies and once she enters the nest, the pair rests in the middle. The duo will then touch bellies, quiver and spawn. Once this ritual is over, the male sends the female on her way and fertilizes the eggs, which he protects and guards. The male continues to watch over the eggs until they hatch and swim away.

Bluegills are sometimes used as bait to catch Largemouth Bass, which is also a member of the sunfish family. This fish is an olive green color marked by a series of dark blotches forming a jagged horizontal stripe along each flank. It is the largest of the black basses, reaching a maximum recorded length of 29.5 inches and a weight of 25 pounds 1 oz.

Adult largemouths enjoy deeper water than the juveniles and as they mature, they begin to feed on shad, trout, shiners and sunfish. Their prey can be up to 25 – 35 percent of their length. They are fierce hunters and use their senses of hearing, sight, vibration and smell to attack and kill their prey. They eat more often in warmer weather. Their metabolism increases in the warmer months and they seldom eat when water temperatures are below 50 degrees F.

Largemouths are ready to spawn in the spring when the inshore water temperature reaches about 60 degrees F. Generally they spawn in shallow bays, backwaters, channels and other areas protected from the prevailing winds. They usually look for areas with firm bottoms of sand, gravel, mud or rock and usually in water from one to four feet deep. If the water is extremely clear, they may travel to deeper waters. The female lays from 2,000 to 7,000 eggs per pound of her body weight. As with the Bluegill, the male guards the nest. He will not eat until the eggs hatch and will attack anything that approaches the area.

Catfish is another species that inhabit our lakes. They are named for the barbels which resemble cat whiskers. Catfish are bottom feeders and are usually not buoyant. They generally sink rather than float because of a reduced gas bladder and a heavy, bony head. The flattened head also allows them to dig through the substrate and feed through suction or gulping rather than biting or cutting. They have no scales and possess a strong, hollow spine-like ray on their dorsal and pectoral fins. These are used for defense and have been known to inflict wounds on those who grab them.

Catfish spawn during spring or summer when the water is warm. They are cavity nesters and will generally find hollow logs, caves, root masses, downed trees or some man made structure such as old tires or metal drums that provide dark, secluded spots and crevices. Males will select and clean a nest site and lure a female in. Once the female lays her eggs, which are yellow and sticky, the male will fertilize and guard them. He, like the other species, will protect the eggs from predators. In addition, he fans the eggs with his fins to keep them aerated and free from sediments. Once the eggs hatch, the juveniles will stay near the nest for a few days and then leave.

Perhaps one of the most unusual fish that inhabit our lakes is the Gar. These fish are thought to be a remnant of a group of primitive fish that lived in the Mesozoic era. These strange looking creatures are elongated and scaly. They have elongated jaws filled with long, sharp teeth. The upper lobe of the tail is larger than the lower lobe and the dorsal fin is close to the tail.

Gars will generally surface occasionally to take a gulp of air. Their swim bladders often function as lungs which make them very hardy. They can tolerate conditions that would kill most fish. They don't move very fast unless they are going after prey. They like heavily vegetated areas where the water is shallow.

Gars spawn during the months of April and May and may continue into October. Unlike the other fish, neither the male nor female construct a nest. The female spawns by depositing her sticky eggs in shallow pools or backwater areas. Once deposited, two or more males will come by and fertilize them. Once the eggs hatch, the larva attaches itself to a nearby plant or rock with an adhesive disc that is located on the front of its snout, where it will remain until it reaches about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch long.

Many different sizes, shapes and types of creatures live in this watery world. It is a fascinating place and these are only a few of the many diverse species that dwell there.