

Dedicated to the Memory of Commissioner Enoch S. "Inky" Moore Jr.

# PLAY



Pennsylvania • League • of • Angling • Youth

Fall  
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by Kim Mumper

## The Catfish Family

Almost everyone knows a catfish when they see one. Those barbels or whiskers are a giveaway! Our Pennsylvania catfish belong to the *Ictaluridae* family—the bullhead catfish. Thirteen species of this family inhabit our waters—there's at least one species of catfish in every watershed in the state. The Ohio River watershed is home to all catfish species except for one, the margined madtom.

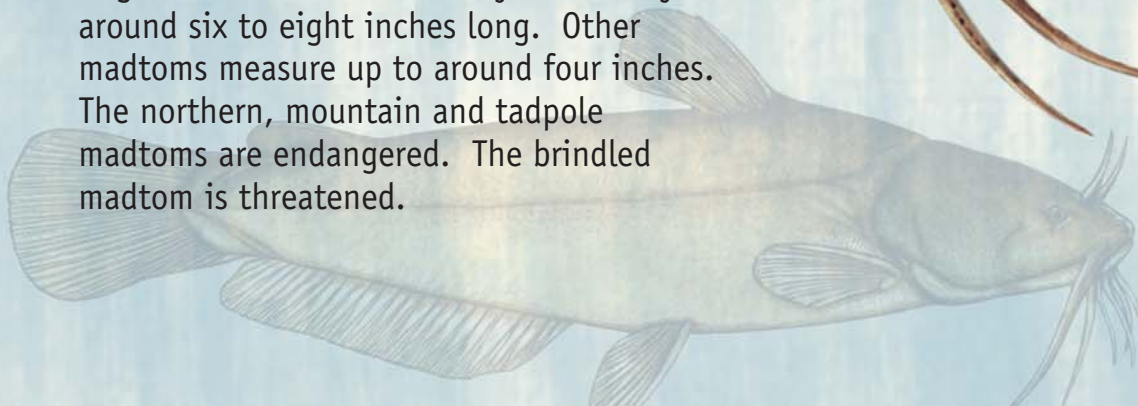
Pennsylvania's catfish come in small, medium and large. The largest are the flathead and channel catfish, with the flathead tipping the state record scales at 48 pounds, 6 ounces! That's one big fish! Fifteen pound channel cats, and twenty to thirty pound flatheads are not uncommon. Medium-sized catfish include three bullheads (yellow, brown and black) and the white catfish. Black bullheads are endangered in Pennsylvania. Adult bullheads measure between 15 to 20 inches in length. The smallest catfish are madtoms, and are often mistaken for minnows. Stonecats are the largest of the madtoms. They are usually around six to eight inches long. Other madtoms measure up to around four inches. The northern, mountain and tadpole madtoms are endangered. The brindled madtom is threatened.

This issue of PLAY focuses on these bottom-dwelling, warmwater, easily recognized fish. You can read about their life cycle, check out the different species and learn new ways to catch them. So, read on about Pennsylvania's catfish!

For more information about Pennsylvania's catfish and other fish, check out the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's website at [www.fish.state.pa.us/mpag1.htm](http://www.fish.state.pa.us/mpag1.htm).



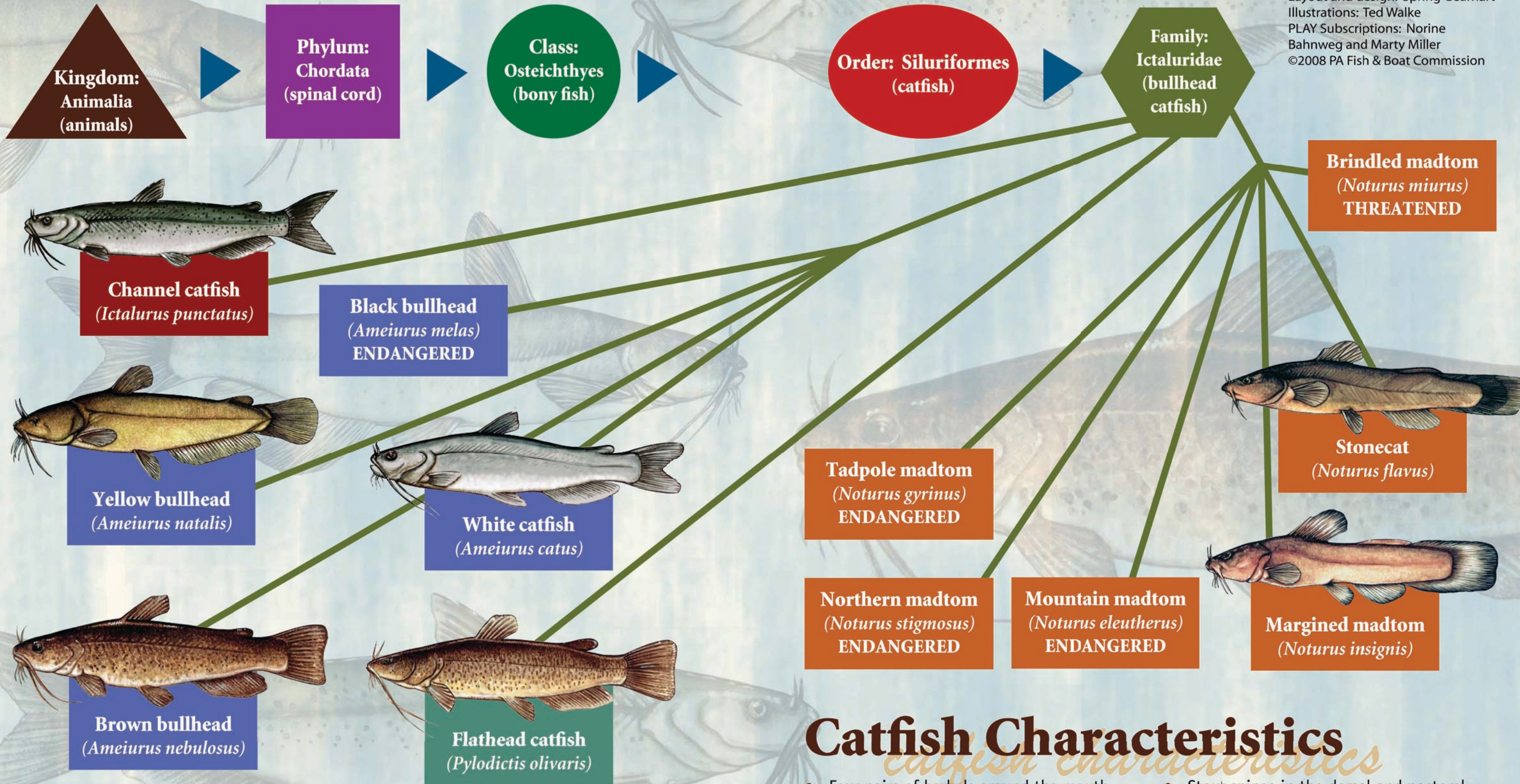
 BROWN BULLHEAD



# Catfish in Pennsylvania

**PLAY**

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Of the 40 species of the *Ictaluridae* catfish family found in the U.S. and Canada, 13 are found in the Keystone State. Four species are endangered, the black bullhead, mountain madtom, tadpole madtom and northern

madtom. One is threatened, the brindled madtom. Some species are native to all six major Pennsylvania watersheds. Others may only be native in one or two watersheds. Some of our largest fish are catfish!

## Catfish Characteristics

- Four pairs of barbels around the mouth.
- No scales.
- Possess an adipose fin between the dorsal and caudal (tail) fins; attached to caudal (tail) fin in madtoms, but separate in the other species.
- Stout spines in the dorsal and pectoral fins with poison glands at the base.
- Mainly active at night.

# Life of a Catfish

Bullheads, catfish and madtoms share similar life cycles. They make nests in or under stream or lake banks, sunken logs, rocks or even pebbles. Some find holes in banks, while others make the holes themselves. Catfish spawn in the spring or early summer from May to July. They lay from 2,000 to 100,000 eggs depending on the species, age and size. The male is usually the main caretaker and protector of the eggs.

As the young grow and mature, they travel in schools. Plant material and aquatic insect larva are their prey. As the catfish fry grow, they may add crustaceans, clams and small fish to their diet.

Most adult catfish are active and feed at night. They also feed in cloudy, muddy waters during the day. Catfish depend on their senses of smell and taste for hunting due to poor vision.

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sac fry

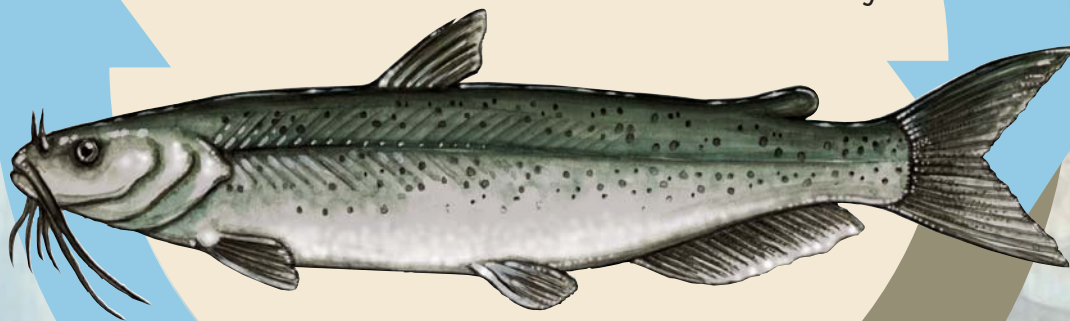
As the young grow and mature, they travel in schools. Plant material and aquatic larva are their prey.



eggs



fry



adult  
channel catfish

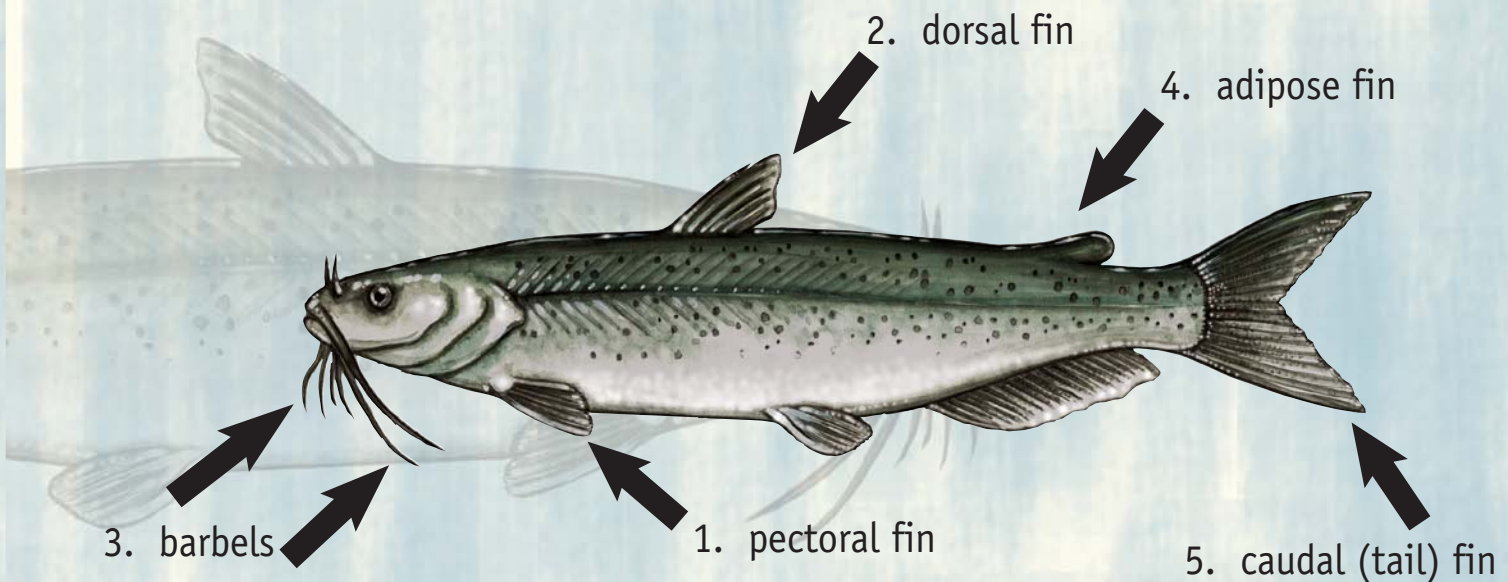
Answers to catfish angler questions: 1. madtoms, 2. adipose fn., 3. night, 4. pectoral and dorsal, 5. male, 6. flathead catfish, 7. bullheads, 8. taste buds, 9. indicator species, 10. barbels, 11. French Creek, 12. life cycles.  
Answer to catfish angler message: Use stinky bait, and fish at night.

# Know your Catfish

Catfish are easily recognized, even by non-anglers. The whiskers are the giveaway. They have other similar characteristics.

1. Pectoral fin: Spines have sharp points, so watch out!
2. Dorsal fin: Spines have sharp points, so watch out!

3. Barbels (whiskers): Four whiskers are located on the upper jaw of the catfish and two whiskers are located on the catfish's chin.
4. Adipose fin: This fin is unique to catfish and the trout
5. Caudal fin: Tail.



The hard part can be identifying the five species commonly caught. The differences are in the color of the chin barbels and the shape of the tail.

## White catfish

- Somewhat forked tail with round lobes
- Chin barbels whitish



## Channel catfish

- Forked tail with pointed lobes
- Chin barbels black



## Yellow bullhead

- Rounded tail
- Long anal fin
- Chin barbels white or yellow



## Brown bullhead

- Tail less rounded, almost square
- Chin barbels dark, gray-black. May have whitish color at the base.



## Flathead catfish

- Longer, flattened head
- Tail square
- Chin barbels yellow-white
- Mottled fins
- Lower jaw extends beyond upper jaw



## Strange . . . But True!

Catfish have taste buds on their skin, lips and barbels. They taste the water while looking for food. There are more taste buds on a catfish's body than in your mouth.

# To Catch a Cat

Flatheads, bullheads and channel catfish are considered panfish for the purposes of Pennsylvania fishing regulations. If you catch a 30-pound flathead, though, you'd better have a big pan! For most waters in the state, you can fish for catfish year round, with no minimum size and a creel limit of 50 (combined with other panfish) per day.

So, how do you catch a catfish? Fish at night. Be safe. Don't go alone. Fish clear, deep runs or muddy ponds and lakes. A good bait is a stinky bait. Catfish hunt by taste and smell. Chicken or beef livers, cut bait (inch-long pieces of any fish), minnows, crayfish or stinkbait work well. Channel catfish and flatheads will take lures or live minnows. Hook size varies from 4 for smaller bait to 1 for larger bait. Use line with a test weight of at least 10 lbs. or no heavier than 30 lbs.

There are several different ways to rig your equipment. No matter how you rig, your bait

needs to be on the bottom. Try using a slip sinker rig. You'll need a swivel, slip sinker (up to an ounce or more) and hook. Circle hooks can help with hook ups and keep the fish from swallowing the hook.

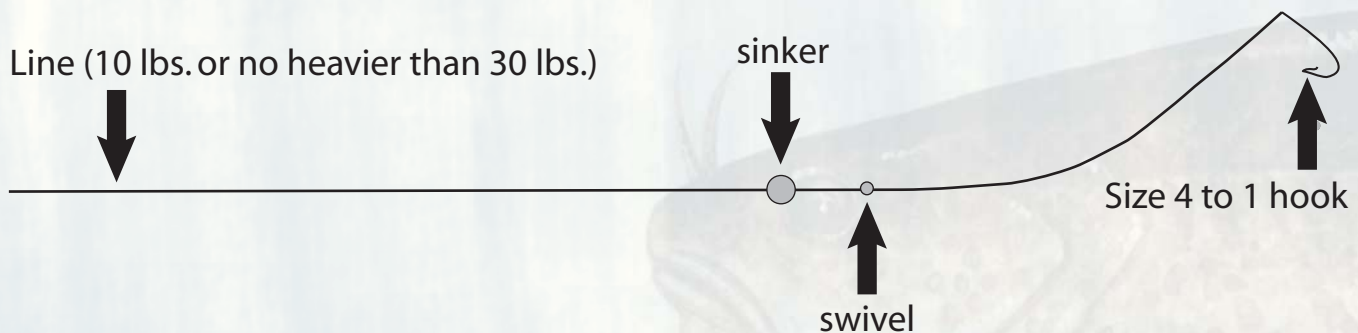
Attach a two foot section of line to the swivel. Slip the sinker on your line and tie the swivel. The swivel keeps the sinker from sliding up to the bait and helps reduce the twist in your line. Tie the hook to the end of the leader, and away you go. Big split shots can also be used, without the swivel.

Cast out and leave the bail open on your rod and prop it up. Attach a small bobber above the first line guide from the reel. Catfish will slowly take your bait, and the bobber shows that movement. You can also hold the rod and feel the line with your hand.

Give catfish fishing a try this year. You can find these great sportfish in almost any large waterway in the state!

## Rigging Diagram

Line (10 lbs. or no heavier than 30 lbs.)



## Did You Know?

- Bullhead catfish adults have been seen taking eggs into their mouths and blowing them out. Biologists believe they are cleaning them.
- One way flathead catfish feed at night is to lie still with their mouth open waiting for smaller fish to swim in.
- Flathead catfish fossils look the same as modern catfish.
- Flathead catfish grow heavier than any other catfish in Pennsylvania. The largest flathead catfish in the world weighed over 100 pounds! Large catfish in Pennsylvania are usually 40 plus lbs.

# Little Cats

Of the 13 species of catfish in Pennsylvania, six are called madtoms and may be mistaken for minnows. These little cats have a special niche in streams.

Stonecats are the largest of Pennsylvania's madtoms and are found in the Ohio River and Lake Erie watersheds.

Two of the three endangered madtoms of Pennsylvania, the northern madtom and the

mountain madtom, are found in the waterways of Pennsylvania's northwestern counties especially in French Creek. These madtoms are very sensitive to pollutants. So, they are considered indicator species—showing the health of the streams where they live.

The third endangered little cat, the tadpole madtom, is found across the state in the Ohio, Susquehanna and Delaware watersheds. Although endangered in Pennsylvania, it is not endangered elsewhere.

Fill in the question blanks with the correct answers. Then, match and fill in the message blanks below with the numbered letters from the questions. Enjoy a catfish angler message!

- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16  
 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 !

1. The group of the smallest catfish species are called

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 11 27

2. Only catfish and trout have an

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 14 4

3. The best time of day to fish for catfish is at

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 23 25 5

4. Catfish have two kinds of fins that have sharp points. They are the

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ fins.  
 22 16

5. Who guards the nest?

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 21 3

6. The largest catfish in Pennsylvania is the

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 17 13 6 26

7. \_\_\_\_\_, all three Pennsylvania species, are considered to be "rough" fish.

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 1 20

8. Catfish have \_\_\_\_\_ on their skin, lips and barbels.

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 2

9. The mountain and northern madtoms are \_\_\_\_\_—showing the health of the streams where they live.

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 7 12 19 24

10. Catfish whiskers are actually called

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 10

11. Which stream in northwestern Pennsylvania can you find two endangered madtoms?

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 15

12. All catfish species share similar \_\_\_\_\_ from egg to adulthood.

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
 8 18 9

Answers to catfish angler questions and message are on the fourth page of this *PLAY* issue.