

NATURALLY: Mudpuppies maintain presence in Pennsylvania lakes

- By ED PATTERSON Special to the Gazette
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Where are Indiana County mudpuppies hiding out?

The mudpuppy is a salamander that is aquatic its entire life with a slender brown-to-gray body and irregular spots and feathery gills protruding behind its neck. Larva and juvenile mudpuppies have stripes,

which gradually disappear. Although they are large for a salamander, reaching up to 14 inches in Pennsylvania, their secretive nature and aquatic habitat have limited our knowledge of them.

Indiana County Parks & Trails staff members are assisting with the Mid-Atlantic Center for Herpetology and Conservation study by surveying various streams in the county to determine if populations of mudpuppies might be in places that have been overlooked or have not been surveyed for many years.

This study, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation Natural Resource's Wild Resource Conservation Program and the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission, is conducting the mudpuppy distribution study in Pennsylvania.

The common mudpuppy is regularly found by anglers, often caught accidentally on fishing hooks or in minnow traps. Ice fishermen sometimes catch mudpuppies that live in lakes. In Pennsylvania, the mudpuppy is found in the Allegheny, Shenango, Monongahela and Ohio drainage basins, and Lake Erie. They have been sporadically found in 24 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties in recent years.

Mudpuppies remain hidden under rocks and logs until night when they hunt for food. They will eat just about anything that they can swallow, including crayfish, small fish, insects, worms and even snails. They are long-lived salamanders and may reach 30 years of age. Although they feed on small fish, they do not, as some anglers believe, impact fish populations much.

Mudpuppies are surprisingly active in the winter months. The survey consists of placing modified minnow traps in streams and creeks. For bait, cat food, smelt, shrimp or worms are used to attract mudpuppies to the traps. The traps are checked every 24 hours, and if mudpuppies are found, their location and size are recorded and then they are released.

To learn more about mudpuppies in winter, visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwZ98sJVdzc.

Mudpuppies require clean water. Those that live in fast-moving streams and creeks have small gills while those that live in lakes and slow-moving streams with less dissolved oxygen have larger gills.

The mudpuppy is unique, and one that we are fortunate to have in Indiana County. We hope the survey will allow us to document some new locations and help us better understand their status here. If you encounter a mudpuppy, you can assist in the survey by taking a photo of the mudpuppy, recording its location and emailing your findings to indparks@gmail.com.

Ed Patterson is director of Indiana County Parks & Trails. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.