



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Wildlife Diversity News

Conservation and Recreation

Species Spotlight: Pirate Perch



Pirate Perch



Pirate Perch backwater habitat

Quite a strange fish is the Pirate Perch (*Aphredoderus sayanus*). A small, chunky, dark-colored fish, Pirate Perch live in quiet, swampy backwaters of the Mississippi River and the lower Cedar River. Why are they strange? Because Pirate Perch were thought to be one of a few fishes that brood their young in gill chambers! They are well-adapted for this method by having their cloaca, which is a combined opening for reproduction and excretion, adjacent to their gills instead of far to the rear of their bodies like most fishes. Recent lab

evidence shows that they actually move their eggs into their gill chambers then shoot them out of their mouths into plant roots or other thick vegetation. Males then fertilize the eggs. A strange adaptation that likely protects their eggs and larvae from predation by placing them in thick cover versus scattered about or placed into an exposed nest. Pirate Perch are normally solitary, predaceous, and

likely nocturnal. They eat a variety of aquatic invertebrates and small fishes and are in turn eaten by larger fishes, aquatic reptiles, mammals, and birds. Fortunately their dark coloration assists in their camouflage, allowing them to blend into thick shadowy habitat consisting of aquatic vegetation, roots, and woody debris.

Iowa's Pirate Perch are considered a Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and a special concern species because they are very rare being found only in a few locations in eastern Iowa.

Fortunately, wetland conservation through

USDA programs has provided some opportunities for the conservation of oxbows and river backwaters, which provide valuable habitat for many fish and wildlife species in Iowa.



For more information about fishes in Iowa, please check out this link:

Fishes of Iowa