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Hellbender

Cryptobranchus alleganiensis

The largest salamander in North America, hellbenders are also known as mud devils, ground-puppies and devil dogs. They live in rocky, cool, fast-flowing rivers and streams that provide plenty of underwater rocks and logs for cover.

- There are two subspecies of hellbender, the Ozark and the eastern hellbender. The Ozark hellbender is usually smaller, with more dark blotches on its back.
- Like other giant salamanders, the hellbender breathes by absorbing oxygen through its skin. They have deep wrinkles in their skin to increase the surface area in which to absorb oxygen.
- Hellbenders retain one pair of gill slits through an incomplete metamorphosis. They have small eyes and no eyelids, and their heads are flat horizontally while their tails are flat vertically.
- Hellbenders can swim, but seem to prefer walking on the bottom of the riverbed. Their toes have a rough surface that provides traction on algae-covered rocks and gravel.
- Hellbenders have protective mucus that helps repel parasites and prevent scratches, and makes them difficult for a predator to handle.
- Small and juvenile hellbenders have a number of predators including turtles, water snakes, pike, muskellunge and other hellbenders. Although they are not harmful to humans or the fishing industry, some people may hunt them under the erroneous belief they are a nuisance species and also alter their habitats with dams, pollution and recreational use.
- Hellbenders catch prey by creating a negative pressure in their mouths like a suction pump that pulls the prey in.
- Spawning occurs mostly in September and October. Females deposit 270 to 450 eggs into a small depression the male creates beneath a rock or debris. The male then fertilizes the eggs and aggressively protects the nests against predators until the eggs hatch. The male will attract multiple females to the nesting site so there may be more than 1,000 eggs at one site. Larvae hatch after an average of 72 days.
- Hellbenders are listed as endangered by the state governments of Illinois, Indiana, Maryland and Ohio, threatened in Georgia, imperiled in West Virginia, and of special or conservation concern in Kentucky, Missouri and North Carolina.

Quick Facts

Weight: Five pounds

Length: 11 to 20 inches (28 to 50 cm)

Appearance: Yellowish brown to black with faint light or dark spots and short, stout limbs

Life Expectancy: 29 years

Diet: Crayfish, insects and worms

Range: River drainages in southern New York State down through the Appalachians, west to southern Illinois and Arkansas

Behavior: A nocturnal animal, the hellbender hides under cover during the day unless it's mating season

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