

# Swamp predators!

## Primitive fish get little respect but offer exciting action

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

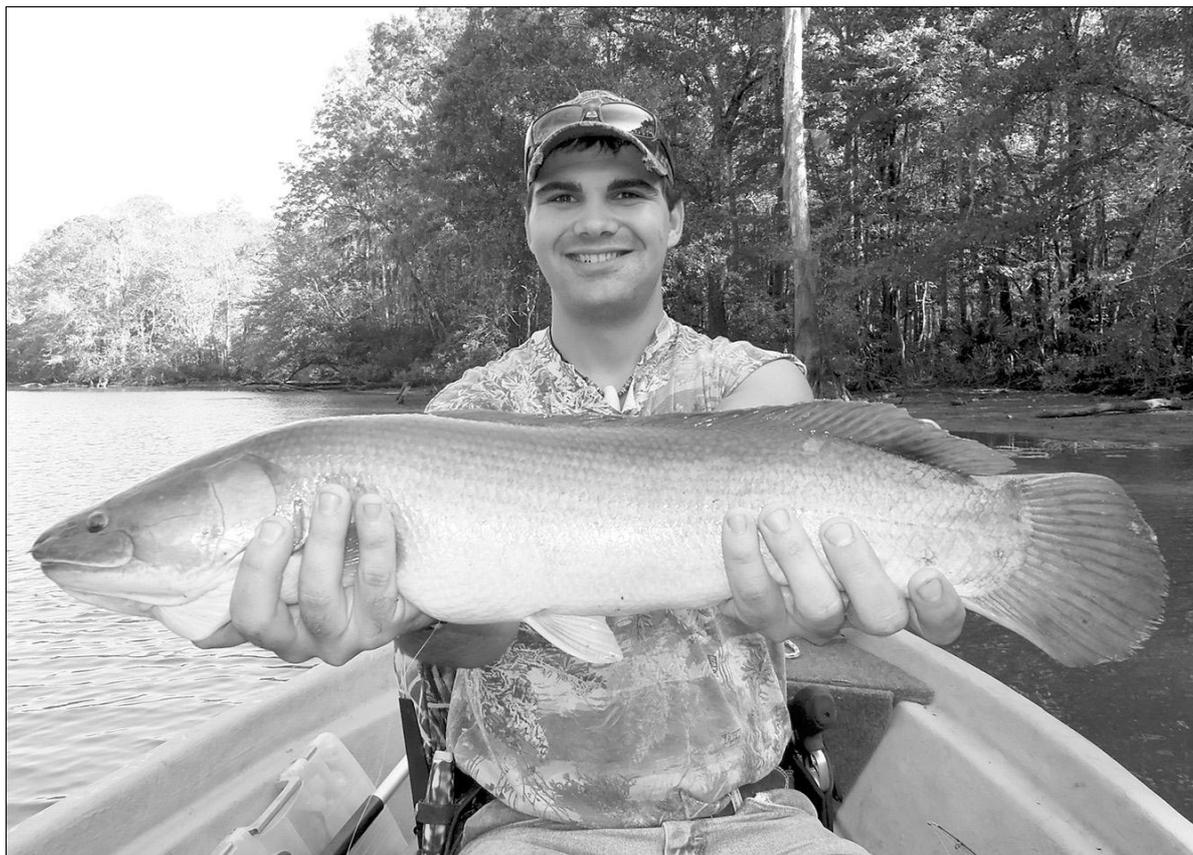
Along the swampy shoreline, a cloud of silt suddenly erupted as a huge green head snatched the spinnerbait, throwing spray into the air as if someone threw a brick into the murky delta water.

"I think we got this tournament won," the bass angler shouted enthusiastically to his partner. "Get the net. This one's a monster. It must be ... nuts — another mudfish! Never mind the net."

Many anglers give a similar reaction when a mudfish or bowfin strikes. Anglers also call them grinnel, dogfish, cypress trout and several derogatory names unfit to print. Louisiana Cajuns call them "choupique," an Anglicized version of a French translation of the Choctaw Indian word "shupik" meaning mudfish.

Most anglers hold these primitive fish in low regard because of their notoriously unsavory reputation on the table and their tendency to mangle bass and crappie tackle. Some people describe the flavor of a bowfin as something akin to eating cotton balls soaked in swamp mud. However, these large prehistoric predators can provide incredible tackle-busting action almost anywhere in the state.

"Bowfin is a native fish found throughout Alabama," explained Chris Greene of the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. "Bowfins hit hard and can put up a good fight, but are not normally targeted. They can grow pretty big. It's not uncommon to catch bowfins in the 5- to 10-pound range all across Alabama. Anglers mostly catch them by accident while fishing for bass or something else. Some



Photos by John N. Felsher

**Daniel Felsher** shows off a bowfin that he caught while fishing the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta near Mobile. Often held in low regard by many anglers, these prehistoric predators can provide exciting action on light tackle.

archers target them in backwater areas."

Long and cylindrical with a rounded tail and an exceptionally long dorsal fin, a bowfin looks similar to an eel, but thicker with greenish-brown scales, a huge head and a mouth full of small, but sharp teeth. A bowfin may grow about 12 inches in its first year and live more than 30 years. Some specimens exceed three feet in length. The world record topped 21 pounds. The Alabama state record weighed 18 pounds, 6 ounces, caught by Nelson Ray Sansing while fishing at Lake Tuscaloosa.

These amazing fish date back to the Jurassic Period about 150 million years ago. The only surviving representative of a primitive order,

bowfins witnessed the extinction of the dinosaurs and the giant Ice Age mammals, yet they remain unchanged. They survive because they can live practically anywhere and often inhabit the most stagnant waters.

"Bowfins can live in muddy backwater areas without much oxygen much better than most other species," Greene advised. "They are more common in swampy backwater areas with a lot of shallow vegetation."

Their swim bladders can serve as primitive lungs, allowing bowfins to breathe air and live in foul water. Bowfins can remain alive for long periods out of the water as long as they remain moist. People sometimes find them alive in semi-dry ponds resembling little more than

mud puddles after a drought or when a falling river drains backwaters. Farmers even reported plowing them up alive in wet fields after floods.

Vicious predators, bowfins eat almost anything and frequently devour other fish, crawfish, frogs, salamanders, snakes and small animals. Big bowfin might hit practically anything that could tempt a largemouth bass, crappie or catfish, but few people intentionally fish for them.

Bass anglers fishing swampy rivers and sluggish bayous frequently catch them by accident when throwing spinnerbaits, swimbaits, crankbaits and Texas-rigged worms. Bowfins also hit jigs dropped into thick cover, particularly around



**A bowfin** that hit a crankbait comes to the boat. Called mudfish, grinnel, cypress trout or other names, these fish make excellent sport throughout Alabama.

weeds or wood. Crappie anglers regularly catch them on live shiners. Bowfins even hit worms, crickets, night-crawlers, shrimp and other temptations, anything that resembles prey.

"Most bowfins are caught by bass fishermen throwing lures in backwater areas," Greene stated. "They'll hit a lot of different bass lures and live baits. Sometimes, crappie anglers catch bowfins on live baits. They'll eat about anything they can find including tadpoles, snakes, other fish and lizards. The Mobile-Tensaw Delta has a lot of them, as do many oxbow lakes off the major rivers."

Anglers might catch bowfins in any freshwater system in Alabama. Flowing with rivers, dotted by quiet swampy backwaters and crisscrossed by numerous bayous, creeks and sloughs, the Mobile-Tensaw Delta creates the perfect bowfin habitat and probably holds the largest population in the state. Anglers might also catch these fierce living fossils anywhere on the Alabama or Tombigbee river systems.