

# Bullhead

*Cottus gobio*



## Description

The Bullhead is the only freshwater member of the family *Cottidae* that is native to the UK. It is a small fish with a large mouth, large pectoral fins, prominent eyes and a wide, flattened head – hence the common names ‘Bullhead’ and ‘Miller’s thumb’. Males are commonly 10cm in length, but can be up to 18cm. It has a brownish colour with mottling or barring and pale undersides. During the spawning period males become blacker in colour with a white-tipped dorsal fin, and females become plump.

It is a bottom-living animal that inhabits a variety of rivers, streams and stony lakes. It favours fast-flowing, clear, shallow water with a hard substrate and is frequently found in the headwaters of upland streams. The Bullhead spends a large amount of its life under flat stones and rocks – often in competition with the White-clawed Crayfish. However, it also occurs in lowland situations on softer substrates, so long as the water is well-oxygenated and there is sufficient cover. It is not found in badly polluted rivers.

It emerges at dusk to feed on small, bottom-living insects and other animals, occasionally being cannibalistic. It is a visual, ambush predator, being a good swimmer, moving in short, sharp darts along the river bed. Bullheads often behave aggressively towards one another and competition for shelter and foraging space can be intense. In turn, they are vulnerable to a wide range of predators, particularly Brown Trout and Heron.

## National Status

The species is widespread and often common in rivers across Europe; however its stronghold is across the majority of England and Wales.

## Local Status

Bullheads are found in many of the feeder streams of the main rivers in the west of the borough, such as the Upper Don. In particular, dense populations are present in the Cawthorne Dike and Silkstone Beck catchments. But, as with the White-clawed Crayfish, these populations are thought to be at risk of predation by the invasive Signal Crayfish which is extending its range in this area. It is expected that the Signal Crayfish will densely populate all open watercourses in the borough in years to come and become a threat to Bullheads.

## Legal Status

The species is listed in Annex II of the EC Habitats Directive, ie. a species of EC interest from a conservation point of view, requiring the setting up of Special Areas of Conservation.

## Links with other Action Plans

HAPI6 Rivers

### **Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline**

- The reasons for the poor status of this species in Europe are unclear.
- Pollution.
- Competition and predation from invasive species such as the Signal Crayfish.
- Changes to watercourses.
- Sediment run-off from farmland.

### **Proposed Local Action**

- Bring together all existing data sets from all sources relating to the borough's population of Bullheads – primarily held by the Environment Agency (EA).
- If additional survey work is required, implement this as appropriate.
- Liaise with the national species champion authority to ascertain whether conservation measures are needed and, if so, what would be appropriate.
- Identify key river and stream sections for Bullhead populations and develop a conservation and enhancement strategy for the species in the borough.

### **BMBC Development Control Actions**

- Ensure all planning applications are adequately assessed in relation to their impact on Bullhead populations and habitat, and that loss or damage is avoided.