



Crayfish

Crayfish belong to an animal group called Crustaceans, which means the skeletons are on the outside of their bodies. Crayfish resemble small lobsters (to which they are related) but they average only 3 inches in length. They live in fresh water and breathe through feather-like gills. Species of crayfish live near and in running water, and in lakes, swamps, ditches, and paddy fields. There are 8 species in Wisconsin. At the Conservancy lands they are found along the river, pond and wetland areas. They are active at night and rest in shallow water during the day. Crayfish dig a burrow for safety, and the mound of mud at the entry hole is called a mud chimney. Crayfish mud chimneys have been spotted at Short Road Trailhead, Trout Ponds Prairie, and King's Corner, in the wetlands and pond areas.

Crayfish have a head and thorax that is joined, and a segmented body. Their color may be sandy yellow, green, red, or dark brown. Their compound eyes are on movable stalks on their heads. The first of their five pairs of legs have pincers (claws). The other legs, and tail, are used for swimming.

Crayfish mate in the autumn and lay eggs in spring. The eggs, attached to the female's abdomen, hatch in 5-8 weeks and the larvae remain on the mother for protection for several more weeks. Crayfish live from 1 to 20 years, depending on the species.

Crayfish are an important part of the aquatic food chain. They feed on snails, insect larvae, worms, amphibian tadpoles, and vegetation. Their bodies break down living and decaying plants in digestion, providing microscopic food necessary for other animals in the ecosystem. In turn they are a source of food for other animals including amphibians, birds, reptiles, and fish. They are a remarkable creation, in balance with nature and so many other creatures.

Crayfish are well-loved as food by some humans, as well. Crayfish "boils" and crayfish barbecues are quite popular for picnics, especially in the southern states.

April 2021 BH / DL