

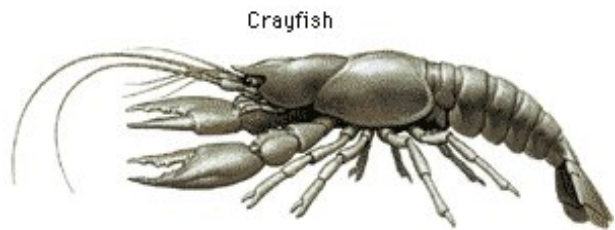
## **Creature Feature: Spring 2011**

By W. Scott Douglas

### **Crayfish**

Perhaps one of the fondest memories of my childhood in VT is of summer afternoons wading and swimming in mountain streams to catch crayfish. One time my friends and I brought back several dozen and let them loose in the bathtub. When I brought my Mom in to show off our prizes, I was surprised to find

that one of the females had let her young loose and there were several dozen tiny baby crayfish in among the larger ones walking around in the tub. Apparently the stress of our transfer caused her to let the youngsters run free. All of them were returned to the stream as best as we could, even though the little ones were pretty hard to catch. Today, I still smile when the students at our Mini Monster Mayhem squeal and yell every time they catch a crayfish. They remain, for kids, the most charismatic creatures in the stream.



Crayfish are nearly ubiquitous throughout our region, although there is considerable variation in the types that are found depending on the watershed and elevation within the watershed. All crayfish are Decapods, related to lobster and crabs. Crayfish in Pennsylvania are members of one of three genera: *Cambarus*, *Orconectes* or *Procambarus*. For eastern PA, there are two species that are typical for small cold creeks like Cooks, *Cambarus bartonii* and *Cambarus robustus*; but there may be others in the Watershed – especially if one looks in ponds and wetlands or in the lower reaches near the Delaware River. Regardless of the species, all crayfish are omnivorous and scavengers, feeding on just about anything they can get their pinchers on while they walk about on the stream bottom. They are in turn eaten by a large variety of animals including birds, fish, reptiles and mammals – including humans. Because of this they are often an important member of any stream ecosystem and for some, a keystone species.

Crayfish are very territorial, but they may live in great density in some streams. To avoid their many predators, they live under rocks and logs in the stream, or create extensive burrow systems on the river banks and most are active only at night. They are common in Cooks Creek, but not very abundant. I am not sure why this is exactly, but I do know that

crayfish are not sensitive to water quality, but rather more sensitive to habitat type, predation and availability of food. To catch some crayfish, simply turn over rocks carefully in calmer parts of the stream and catch them with your hand, or place a seine in a riffle and jostle the rocks and sticks upstream for a minute or two. If you are tempted to collect them for bait or to eat (crawfish etouffé anyone?), keep in mind that anyone over the age of 16 must have a PA fishing license. There is a daily limit of 50 crayfish per person.

Not all crayfish are good residents; we do have two invasive species in Pennsylvania. Because of its voracious appetite and rapid reproduction rate, the European Rusty crayfish (easily recognized by its relatively large size and rusty spots on each side of the carapace) is *persona non grata* in our Watershed. They are a common crayfish sold in bait stores. If you spot any of these guys, please let me or the PA Fish and Boat Commission know about it right away.