Fall is when many people enjoy celebrating Halloween. We decorate our homes with all things creepy, freaky and spooky. Often, when we think of creepy creatures, we picture spiders, bats and black cats. But, have you thought about freaky fish?

In this issue of PLAY, we’ll take a look at some freaky fish that live in Pennsylvania. What’s your favorite freaky fish feature? Try saying that five times fast.

**Freaky Fish of Pennsylvania**

**VOCABULARY** *(Watch for these words!)*

- **Barbel** - long, thin, fleshy strands near the mouth or nostrils on some fish
- **Host** - the plant or animal on which a parasite lives and feeds and is often injured by the parasite
- **Larval** - the immature stage of an organism that does not resemble the adult. They differ by shape or coloration.
- **Metamorphosis** - the process of changing from an immature form to an adult form
- **Parasitic** - living as a parasite, a plant or animal that feeds in or on another plant or animal called a host
- **Spawn** - fish reproduction; eggs or sperm are released directly into the water
- **Swim or air bladder** - a gas-filled sac that some species use in breathing and helps many fish float and adjust position in the water
- **Zooplankton** - very small animal life in the water
**Paddlefish**

**Check Out Their Snouts**

Paddlefish have a unique snout, called a rostrum. It looks like a canoe paddle—long and flat.

Scientists are still studying why Paddlefish have this feature. The rostrum is covered with small pores. Scientists believe these pores can sense the electrical fields created by the tiny animals the Paddlefish eat.

**Feeding Time**

Paddlefish are large fish that can grow to be 5 feet long. Due to their large size, you may think Paddlefish eat larger meals. However, Paddlefish eat small insects and zooplankton.

Paddlefish have many long gill rakers that act like a strainer. They swim with their mouth open wide, swinging it from side to side. The gill rakers catch the tiny prey while the water filters through.

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**Gars**

**Teeth, Teeth and More Teeth**

Gars have a long jaw full of sharp teeth. Gars are voracious predators that mostly eat other fish. These hunters will slowly stalk their prey or wait for prey to get close. Then, they rush in and slash their mouths from side to side, killing or injuring their prey. The gar will then grab prey crosswise in its mouth and turn the fish around to swallow it head first.

**Air Breathers**

Most fish can only use their gills to breathe underwater, but gars can use their swim bladders to breathe air. They swim to the surface and take a gulp of air into their swim bladders, which act like lungs.

**Poison Eggs**

Female gars lay eggs that are poisonous to humans and other mammals. What a great tactic for survival.
**Air breathers**

**Poison Eggs**

Catfish get their name because of the long barbels around their mouths that resemble cat whiskers. Many people think these whiskers are harmful, but they are not. Catfish use their fleshy whiskers to find food. They can feel and taste with their whiskers.

**Creatures of the Night**

Another feature that catfish share with cats is that they are most active at night. Those whisker-like barbels are great for finding food in the dark.

**Naked Fish?**

Catfish lack scales, so you might say that they are naked. They are missing the scales that help protect most other fish. But, their lack of scales help some catfish species do something that most other fish cannot do—breathe through their skin. This allows them to survive in muddy or low water conditions.

**Beware of the Spines**

Catfish have three sharp spines on their body that they use to protect themselves. One spine is on the dorsal fin. The other two spines are on each of the pectoral fins. When they feel threatened, catfish can stick their spines straight up and lock them. Some catfish species have a mild venom that they can eject from their spines.
Lampreys may not look like fish, but they are fish. They have long snake-like bodies and don’t have as many fins as most fish. Their mouths are different too. Lampreys do not have jaws to open and close their mouths. They have round, sucking mouths with teeth.

I Want to Suck Your Blood!

There are two types of lampreys found in Pennsylvania: parasitic and nonparasitic. Parasitic lampreys feed on the blood and body fluids of other fish. Parasitic lampreys use their sucker mouths and many sharp teeth to attach to their host fish while feeding.

Growing Up Lampreys

Lampreys have an unusual life cycle for fish. After hatching from eggs, lampreys have a larval stage. They grow for several years before they go through metamorphosis and transform into adults. While lampreys are a larvae, they burrow into the river bottom and eat decaying plants, animals and bacteria.

Alien Invaders

In Pennsylvania, Sea Lampreys are parasitic lampreys that naturally live in the Lower Susquehanna and Delaware rivers. They swim up from the Atlantic Ocean to spawn. However, Sea Lampreys have also been introduced into Lake Erie and the streams flowing into Lake Erie.

The Sea Lamprey’s invasion into Lake Erie has been a big problem. It has caused great declines in Lake Trout, Rainbow Trout, Whitefish and Walleyes.

Sea Lampreys are not harmful to Pennsylvania fish in their native range. Once they are adults, they migrate to ocean waters. Parasitic lampreys native to Pennsylvania, such as the Ohio Lamprey, are smaller than Sea Lampreys. They do not have a big impact on their host fish.
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