Eastern Hellbender

Cryptobranchus alleganiensis

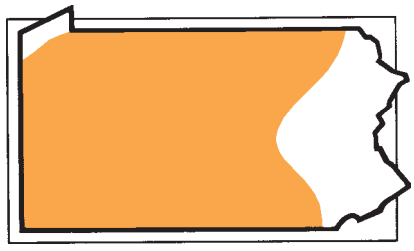
General characteristics. The eastern hellbender, a member of the Giant Salamander family, is one of two large salamanders inhabiting Pennsylvania. The other is the mudpuppy, although it belongs to a different family than the hellbender. Eastern hellbenders attain adult sizes of just over 11 inches to as much as 20 inches in length. The hellbender is a harmless amphibian; it does not inflict a poisonous bite as many people believe. In fact, this bizarre-looking creature is seldom seen except by anglers who might catch a hellbender while bottom fishing. It can easily and safely be removed from the hook. It is a completely aquatic animal, nocturnal in its habits and hides under rocks or submerged logs where, again, anglers searching for bait may encounter this large salamander.

Although something less than attractive in appearance-some would say downright ugly-Indians once used the hellbender for food. Even though it is no longer a food source for man, the eastern hellbender nonetheless continues to fill an important niche in the aquatic ecosystem.

Identification. The hellbender is more commonly gray, but some specimens could be an olive brown to almost black above. Some dark mottling over the back and upper sides also is possible. The belly is lighter. Though not always present, irregular, scattered black spots sometimes pepper the back and sides. The body and head of the hellbender are flattened. Several loose flaps of thick, wrinkled skin hang along the lower sides. Tiny eyes are almost missed in proportion to the large, broad head.

The hellbender loses its external gills by the time it reaches four or five inches in length, although gill openings may be seen on each side of the neck. The legs are short and stout with four toes on the hindlegs. The tail is flat and rudderlike, useful in navigating around the hellbender's aquatic environment.

Range. The eastern hellbender is found in Pennsylvania's Susquehanna and Ohio River watersheds; it does not reside in the Delaware River drainage. Outside of Pennsylvania, its range extends south-westward to southern Illinois, continuing to the northern edges of Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia.



Habitat. The eastern hellbender favors fast-moving, mid-sized streams and the channels of rivers with clear water. It prefers habitat with plenty of bottom shelter in the form of boulders, large stones, snags and other large, loose debris. The eastern hellbender takes refuge beneath this cover by day, coming out to forage for food at night.

Reproduction. The eastern hellbender breeds in August or September when the male prepares a saucer-shaped cavity on the stream bottom. Normally dug out under a rock or submerged log, most of the work preparing the nest is done at night. The female settles over the nest and deposits from 200 to 500 eggs. The eggs are fertilized by the male as they emerge from the female and settle into the nest. This external fertilization of the eggs by the eastern hellbender is rare and unique among Pennsylvania's salamanders. The eggs are yellowish and are contained in long strings. The male guards the nest and eggs until the larvae hatch in eight to 10 weeks.

Food. The eastern hellbender has a particular fondness for crayfish and snails. It also eats aquatic insects. Worms, when they can be found, add variety to the diet of this large carnivorous amphibian.