

Rusty Crayfish

Fact Sheet



Background

The rusty crayfish is native to parts of Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana and Michigan but has spread to other states or areas where it can cause problems for other animals and plants. Rusty crayfish have invaded portions of Massachusetts, Iowa, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, all New England states except Rhode Island, and many areas of Ontario, Canada (see U.S. distribution in Figure 1 below). Rusty crayfish were probably spread by anglers who transported them for use as fishing bait. As rusty crayfish populations increased, they were harvested in some states for the bait market or for biological supply companies which spread their populations even more. Invading rusty crayfish often displace native crayfish. This reduces or eliminates the amount and kinds of aquatic plants and invertebrates present, even reducing some fish populations. There is no practical means of controlling the rusty crayfish population once it is introduced to a lake or stream, so the best present method to limit them is to prevent or slow their spread into new waters. The Missouri Department of Conservation is asking for your help in restricting this aggressive species from access to Missouri streams.

Since the rusty crayfish is easily spread by dumping bait into the water, we need anglers to help pass the word that bait must be disposed of by humanely killing it. Crayfish can live a long time out of water and are capable of traveling long distances so merely dumping them on shore is no prevention at all.

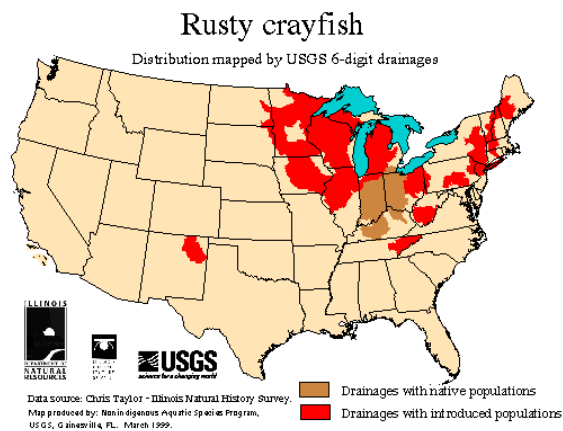


Figure 1. U.S. distribution of rusty crayfish

Rusty crayfish like both standing and running water. This means they can invade lakes, ponds, and streams. Once introduced into an ecosystem they cause great harm to the native animals and plants. They do this by outcompeting the native crayfish and other aquatic organisms for large numbers of invertebrates and other important food sources. Also, rusty crayfish destroy aquatic plant beds which serve as cover and food for other aquatic organisms and nursery habitat for sportfish. The large size of the rusty crayfish makes it less desirable than native crayfish as a food source for fish. Furthermore, rusty crayfish prey on fish eggs, further harming the fish population. Like many alien species, we are unable to predict the full extent of the effect these invaders will have until MDC biologists learn more about the many undesirable effects of rusty crayfish.

Identification:

Rusty crayfish are larger than most Missouri native crayfish and their claws are larger in comparison to their bodies than most native species. Key characteristics include: Rusty patches on the back of the carapace which look like someone picked the crayfish up with brown or reddish paint on their fingers (figure 2), and black-tipped claws which may have some red or orange on the very tips.

If a crayfish resembling the rusty crayfish is found, please save 1-4 specimens by freezing them in a zip-lock bag. Report this find to MDC biologist Al Buchanan by calling 573/882-9909. He will make arrangements to send them to an expert for positive identification.

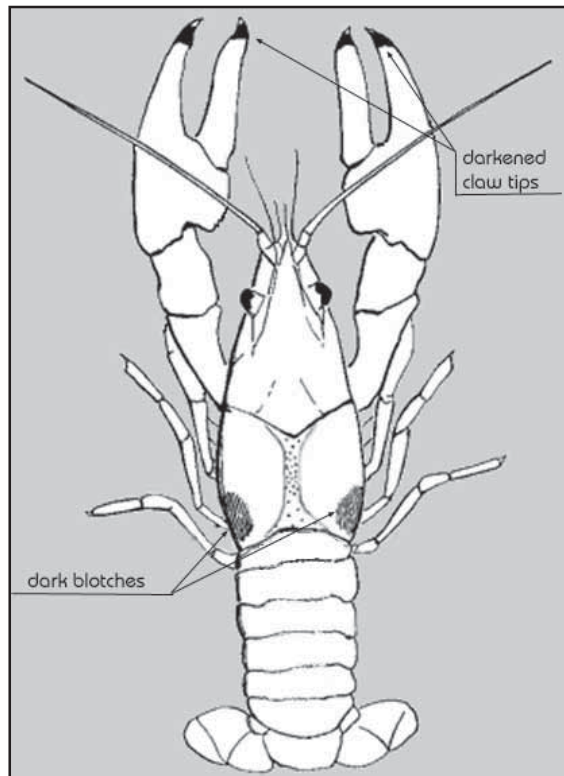


Figure 2. Identifying characteristics of the rusty crayfish.
Note brown or rusty patches on rear of carapace and black-tipped pincers.

Keep the rusty crayfish out of Missouri and keep our fisheries healthy!