



Angling for summer catfish

From big rivers to small streams, shallows, lakes and even the occasional farm pond, catfish can be found in just about any waters of Wisconsin, though rivers are usually the best bet for fishing.

IN THE DOG DAYS OF AUGUST, WHEN OTHER FISH SKE-DADDLE, CONSIDER FISHING FOR MUCH-MALIGNED CATS.

Nicholas Saiia

I was brought up in a walleye-fearing, bluegill-respecting household. My brothers and I believed what other anglers told us about catfish: “They’ll sting ya, and they are poisonous! And even if you survive layin’ a finger on ‘em, don’t even think about eating ‘em!”

I don’t pretend to be an expert on catching catfish and have to admit that although I’m a lifelong fisherman, last summer and fall were the first I spent targeting catfish. But quite honestly, what I found out surprised me and made me want to share with others what I recently learned about one of Wisconsin’s most abundant, delicious — yet wrongfully scorned — resources.

Debunking catfish myths

Wisconsin is home to two species of catfish: channel catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*) and flathead catfish (*Pylodictis olivaris*). Looking at them, you can see why they inspire so much negativity. They don’t

have scales, have big whiskers and make odd croaking noises — a big departure from what most anglers are used to finding on the end of their lines. But let's take a look at some of the features that inspire those myths.

“Stinging” whiskers: In fact, a catfish's whiskers are completely harmless. They do have tiny spines on the ends of their three front fins — the two side, or pectoral fins, and the top dorsal fin — and can impart a nasty little stab if the fish is handled improperly or thrashes unexpectedly.

These spines secrete very mild “venom” that can cause the wound to swell a bit and make the wound bleed a bit more than normal. Typically, however, it is the smaller catfish — especially channel cats — that have these barbels. With age, the barbels become duller, as this defense serves the younger catfish well to help them avoid being prey.

Avoiding these “stings” is actually quite easy. Simply form your thumb and pointer finger into a U-shape by placing your thumb behind one pectoral fin and your pointer finger behind the other, allowing the dorsal fin to rest harmlessly above the top of your hand.

These precautions are no different than with other fish that can stab you with a fin or bite you with needle-sharp teeth. Handling a catfish is easy, so don't let it keep you from enjoying catfishing. I now handle a cat and remove a hook as second nature as if it were a bluegill.

“Foul” flavor: As a youth, I was told that catfish are bottom feeders, taste bad and are full of pollutants. So it took me a while to work up the courage to fillet and eat some catfish I caught from a muddy river, during the middle of summer, when they are supposedly at their worst.

As I started filleting, I was surprised how white the meat was. I pan-fried them in butter with a little flour and lemon pepper. I hesitated with the first bite when something unexpected happened — it tasted great! Not quite walleye, but a very tasty fish with no muddy flavor.

Catfish don't actually eat the mud on the bottom of the river, as some people think and the label “bottom feeder” conjures up. Granted, they do feed along the bottom where they eat fish, clams, insect larvae, worms, invertebrates, tadpoles and dead fish. But this behavior of feeding along the bottom is no different than walleye, white bass or any other river



NICHOLAS SAIIA PHOTOS

Summertime is the right time for catching catfish, which tend to increase their activity then, and cut bait or stink bait works best. As for eating, younger and smaller cats — like Mitch Steldt holds at right — will have whiter, milder meat than author Nicholas Saiia's older, larger fish.

fish, even trout.

The flathead cat is even more exclusive and rarely eats anything but live, fresh fish. So the diet of catfish is not very different than that of our other favorite eating fish such as bluegill and walleye.

Younger, smaller catfish in the 12- to 20-inch range, of course, will have whiter, milder meat than an old 30-inch catfish, and their flesh will have lower levels of pollutants than older fish. As with all fish, check out DNR's website (dnr.wi.gov, and search “eating your catch”) for recommendations on how many fish you should eat from specific waters.

A tip for cleaning catfish is to fillet them just like you would a bass or walleye. The old method of stripping the skin and breaking off the head is messy business. Once filleted, simply slice off any red meat on the top or bottom of the fillets. Take these few practical steps, and you'll be pleasantly surprised by how good a catfish can taste.

Where and how to catch catfish

Think “Huckleberry Finn” when it comes to summer catfish fishing. You don't need a huge boat full of livewells and electronics to do well. While most other species are done spawning and becoming harder to catch, catfish are amping up their activity and might well be the easiest fish to catch during the summer. Here are some pointers to get you started.

The where: Pull out a map of Wisconsin, point to where you live and I guarantee that within a half-hour's drive you'll find catfish water. Cats can be found in small streams, large rivers, large natural

lakes or small farm ponds.

In general, though, they love rivers and the rule of thumb for fishing rivers is to look for holes and eddies. Catfish will hold up in holes and feed in front of the holes in the area called the “riffle,” where the water runs faster and quicker before gouging out the hole behind it. A common place to find holes is at the outside bend of a river, where the current slams into the bank going around the corner, creating a hole.

Catfish love to rest and wait for food in eddies, which are areas of slack water created by an obstruction such as a pile of rocks or a log jam. If you can find a log jam next to or in deep water, you're likely to find catfish.

The how: Catfish have a legendary sense of smell and taste. They can smell certain proteins in concentrations of as little as 1 part per 100 million. Anglers can use this sense of smell to their advantage.

For channel cats, baits such as chicken livers, dough balls laced with limburger cheese, hot dogs soaked in garlic and beer or other home concoctions have caught countless catfish. If that's your idea of fun, the internet is full of videos on making your own catfish bait. Night crawlers, raw shrimp and canned clams are other traditional favorites.

Two baits stand alone at the top of the channel cat list: dip bait, also called stink bait, and cut bait. The reality of stink bait is this: Although stink bait does smell a little bit, it can be among the cleanest baits to use for cats, and if you do it correctly you shouldn't even have to touch it. Simply take a wooden paint stick or some other long piece of wood, drop your dip

tube — a perforated hollow plastic tube with a hook in it — and mash it into the tub of bait, coating it. You never have to touch the bait yourself.

Cut bait for channel cats is just that — cut up fish. Fish that make great cut bait are carp, sucker, bluegill, shad and others. For larger fish such as carp, you may find it easier to fillet the fish before cutting the fillets into smaller pieces.

For smaller cut bait like bluegills, don't bother with filleting. Simply chunk the fish into appropriate-sized pieces. Finally, one thing is key with cut bait: Don't wash it off. The slimier and stinkier it is, the more it will attract cats.

Flatheads tend to be different cats. Occasionally, one will be taken on cut bait, even minnow-mimicking lures. However, to take flatheads consistently, a live minnow — especially a small bluegill after dark — is the true key.

Flatheads love brush piles in deep water. So after dark, slip your tail-hooked bluegill down close to a wood pile, making sure the bluegill is properly anchored in one spot with a weight, and then hold on!

My catfish conversion

I started catfishing because I wanted to do something I had never experienced. I had always heard about catfish being caught near my home in southern Wisconsin, but I was hesitant because of their reputation.

It's interesting how viewpoints can be so different depending on where you live. In the South, the catfish could probably make its way onto many state flags it is so popular. Here in the North, however, we focus more on game species like the revered walleye and the ever-popular bluegills, crappies and perch.

So promise yourself that when fishing slows down in the lazy month of August — when the bluegills and walleyes run deep and the bass get soft and fishy-tasting — to take a day to go catfishing. To make your adventure even more special, take a kid fishing with you, or the friendly older man up the street.

When you sit in the sunshine, listening to the red-winged blackbirds calling, and the first cat makes your rod tip bounce, it will be hard to tell which of the three of you is the kid. 🎣

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