

Fish Topic by Species

Catfish

Channel Catfish - by Fish Wagon Harrisburg AR

Physical Description - Channel catfish are the most common of the freshwater catfish and can be easily identified because of their distinctive forked tails and dark spots scattered around the body. These fish are generally more slender and have a smaller heads than other catfish. Of course, channel catfish have the characteristic long barbels, commonly called feelers or whiskers, around the mouth that help them to locate food. The anal fin consists of 24 to 29 rays, further distinguishing it from other catfish.

Channel catfish come in many color variations with color depending on location and environmental conditions. One common coloring is gray or grayish-brown on top with dark brown and/or dark green dorsal fins. Others include pale blue and pale olive with a slightly silver tint. Side colors range from yellows to greens to white and there are even albino channel catfish that are white or cream colored with pink eyes. During spawning season, the dorsal area of the male may become completely black, dark blue, light blue, or silver.

Channel catfish seem to have unlimited growth potential and have been known to grow to more than 50 pounds. Their size range is smaller than the blue or flathead catfish but their populations are greater.

Range - Channel catfish can be found in all types of fresh water throughout the United States, southern Canada, and northeastern Mexico. Their numbers are greatest in the region running from the Appalachian Mountains west to the central part of the United States. Thanks to introduction programs, their numbers are increasing along both the east and west coasts.

Habitat - Channel catfish will inhabit all bodies of fresh water -- streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, and reservoirs -- and will thrive in nearly any type of water that provides adequate food, spawning and temperature. They will usually seek areas with clean bottoms of sand, rubble or gravel. This leads them to congregate in warm, quiet areas away from strong currents. In these areas, they will be found near dark holes and deep pools, lakeshores, undercut banks, rock ledges, weedy areas, log jams, and beaver dams or muskrat burrows.

Spawning Habits - Channel catfish are particular about their breeding habits. Beginning in late spring, males develop muscle pads on their heads and their bodies change color. Both males and females will seek out well-hidden places such as rock ledges, undercut banks, and hollow logs in which to build nests. Male and female channel catfish engage in a period of courtship prior to spawning. Mating involves wrapping their tail around the head of the other. This stimulates the release of 5,000 to 20,000 eggs wrapped in a gold colored gelatin-like mass. Until they hatch in about six to 10 days, the male guards the nest against predators and cares for the eggs by fanning them with its tail to ensure adequate oxygen. The male may also eat a small number of the eggs during this time.

Food Usage/Selection - Channel catfish are omnivorous, which means they eat a wide variety of food items depending on what is available in their environment. They are most attracted to foods that have a strong odor and they have a strong sense of smell to guide them. The diet of the channel catfish is influenced by their size, their location, and the season.

Smaller catfish feed mostly on bottom-dwelling organisms such as insect larvae and invertebrates such as snails and clams. As they grow larger their diet changes to include a wider variety of food. Once a channel catfish is larger than 16 inches, live and dead fish become the main source of food. During winter months, especially where ice is present, they will eat mostly dead fish at the bottom of a lake or river.

Throughout spring and summer, channel catfish will feast on an abundance of worms, fish, frogs, crayfish, insects, algae, and any other plant or animals that they find tasty. During the fall, fish and frogs become a larger part of their diet.

Sporting Qualities - Whether in a river or lake, channel catfish will search out places with deep water and a diverse habitat, away from strong currents. In rivers and streams, they will be found on the outside edges of bends, especially those with cut-banks, snags, or underwater structures such as rock. They can also be found in riffle areas above pools. In lakes, they will likely be found at the upper end where a tributary enters. Lake areas with protected shoreline, drop-offs, or underwater structures like rock and logs, will also be inhabited by channel catfish.

A wide range of baits has proven to be successful in fishing for channel catfish. Worms, chicken liver, grasshoppers, minnows (live and dead), cut bait, and stink baits have all been used successfully by anglers. Prepared baits with cheese also seem to be quite effective when fishing for channel catfish. While many types of bait can be used to catch these fish, some thought is required to select the proper bait. The size of the fish sought and water temperature are two important considerations when choosing bait. During late winter and early spring, bait with a strong, rotten odor, such as cut bait and dead minnows, will bring the most success. During this season, channel catfish will most likely be found in deeper water. As shallow water warms, they will be attracted to the shore.

In spring, summer, and into fall, channel catfish are one of the few fish that can be caught during high stream flows. In fact, those that consider themselves “true” catfishermen prefer to fish during times of rising water. During this period, nearly all baits will lead to good catches of channel catfish. To further increase your odds, it is advisable to use baits that most resemble those available in the local environment.

During the summer (June-August) small streams can be efficiently fished by wading into the stream. Using a prepared bait is optimal for catching pan-sized catfish during this time. Those seeking larger fish during this period favor larger baits such as live chubs, goldfish, water dogs, and frogs.

Many anglers ignore channel catfish during the ice-fishing season. However, if an angler has patience and uses bait such as minnows or cut bait, channel cats can be caught during this time.

Selection of tackle for catfishing is as varied as the selection of bait. Those fishing in lakes tend to use shorter rods, while stream fishermen find more success using longer rods of 6 to 8 feet. Experts recommend using heavier weight line, 10-pound test or more, because channel catfish are often found in areas with underwater snags. In addition, they will put up a struggle when hooked. Some consideration should also be shown for the sinker and hook when fishing for channel catfish. An angler should use the lightest weight slip sinker necessary.

These fish will search out other food if there is resistance on the line. In addition, you should use a sharp hook, preferably one with a bait holder on the shank. Although channel catfish are most often caught using natural baits, they can be taken on artificial lures. Lures such as plastic worms, spinnerbaits and jigs will often tempt a channel cat, although natural baits will work better in most cases

Aside from their fighting ability and widespread availability, channel catfish are considered by most anglers to be excellent table fare – another reason for their immense popularity. Their meat is lean and easily cooked in many ways. Many cat fishermen say fish in the 1- to 5– lb. range taste better than older, heavier fish.