

The Purrrfect Choice

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While many anglers throughout Wisconsin will be fishing for “trendy” species like trout, walleye, salmon, bass, or musky there are a select few anglers that will search out one of Wisconsin’s best kept secrets.....catfish. That’s right, catfish. If you are one of those anglers that scoff when you hear that word you may want to read on. Wisconsin supports great catfish fisheries that can provide many fish, large fish, and good eating fish all in the same day.

Wisconsin is home to 8 species of catfish, although two of these species are the primary focus of catfish anglers — the channel and flathead catfish. Like many anglers throughout the United States, the majority of Wisconsin catfish anglers prefer the channel catfish. Why? For the most part, channel catfish are widespread, obtain a large size and are easily caught. Flathead catfish are more elusive, take more effort to locate, are more difficult to catch, and are usually caught in smaller numbers.

Channel and flathead catfish are considered riverine species, but are found in a variety of waters. The channel catfish is most wide spread, found in all sizes of rivers and flowages throughout the state. Flathead catfish are associated with large riverine systems, but can also be found in flowages and small rivers which are associated with large rivers.



Channel catfish, *Ictalurus punctatus*
State record: 44 pounds 0 ounces, Wisconsin River, 1962

Channel catfish are considered to be opportunistic feeders eating just about anything. This is a quality that makes fishing for them successful. Flathead catfish are predators in the true sense. Early in life, a flathead’s diet will consist of a variety of prey such as insects, crayfish and other fish. Adult flathead catfish are almost 100% piscivorous, which means they eat other fish.

Both species are migratory and it can vary by season or even weeks where anglers may find them. Usually, a catfish population will overwinter in deep pools associated with slower current. In the spring when the water temperature rises near the mid 50’s, the catfish will move in search of spawning areas, where they will stay for most of the summer. As fall approaches, they will move back to the overwintering areas. Catfish do move, and learning where they are during any given season or time period will help increase your odds of having a successful trip.

GEAR TO USE

With the variety of rigs, techniques, baits, and specific on-the-water locations, studying the basics of catfishing can be overwhelming. Keeping it simple is the way to go. All you will need in your tackle box are hooks, inline weights, and swivels. The inline weights can be egg shaped or flat. Slide the weight up the line then tie the swivel on preventing the weight from sliding off. Regular barrel swivels are preferred as large catfish can sometimes pull out snap swivels. Next, tie a 6- to 12-inch monofilament leader to your hook, then tie it to the swivel. Depending on the type of knots used, anglers may need to tie the leader and hook to the swivel then tie swivel, leader, and hook to the main line. You can make the leader by cutting off 6 to 12 inches of line from your reel or make up leaders ready to go from a spool at home. Hook size should be matched to the size of catfish you are after. You may want to consider circle hooks. Circle hooks are fish friendly and after hook up rarely come out. When using circle hooks, you don’t need to set the hook. Let the catfish swim and hook itself. Leave the rod in the rod holder or hold the rod steady until the fish is hooked.

HOW TO USE IT

There are many different baits anglers can use to catch channel catfish: chicken livers, night crawlers, dip baits, minnows, cut bait, crayfish, catalpa worms, grasshoppers, and shrimp just to name a few. Dip baits and cut bait are the baits of choice for most channel catfish anglers. Cut bait is just bite size pieces of fish cut from smaller fish. The best source of cut bait is panfish caught from the same waterbody in which you are fishing. If panfish are not readily available then large suckers purchased from your local bait store will work well also. Dip baits usually have the consistency of peanut butter and come in a variety of flavors and smells. They come in small plastic tubs or jars and can be purchased at most bait shops and retailers where fishing tackle is sold. To fish dip baits you will have to purchase dip bait worms or sponges to apply the dip bait to. Dip bait worms typically come in a package of two or three. They can be found near the dip baits and normally come with hooks and monofilament leaders. Apply the dip bait on the dip worm by submersing the worm in the tub of bait using a small stick or paint stirrer. Reapply as needed.

Due to the flatheads piscivorous nature, a live fish is the bait of choice when targeting flathead catfish. Panfish or bullheads are preferred, but flatheads are not picky when it comes to eating other fish. Drum, carp, and others work just as well. Fish used as live bait can be purchased from a bait dealer or caught with hook and line as part of your legal daily bag on the water in which you are fishing. Hook the live fish either through the tail or upper lip. Near the tail is preferred. When fishing for flatheads you can get away without a leader if your live bait is strong enough to create

a little distance from the weight. Eliminating the leader makes things simple and reduces the number of knots that could fail. Make sure your weight is large enough to keep your bait from taking your line into snags that may be near by. There are a few rules you will need to remember when pursuing flatheads. It is illegal to fish with a minnow 8 inches or longer unless you are using a quick-strike rig or a non-offset circle hook. Minnows include: suckers, mud minnow, madtoms, stonecat, killifish, stickleback, trout perch, darters, sculpins, and all species in the minnow family (except goldfish and carp). Goldfish are not legal to use. It is illegal to move live fish away from water, except minnows that were purchased from a bait dealer. It is illegal to release unused bait into Wisconsin’s lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams.

HOW TO FIND THEM

Both species relate well to woody debris. What’s woody debris? Woody debris is a natural collection of whole trees or tree parts that have accumulated in the water. In rivers or streams, start your search by fishing near woody debris located near deep runs or pools. Deep will be relative to the water you are fishing. Start by fishing directly above the woody debris and continue down the side ending just below. Try to maintain a quiet boat or walk softly if shore fishing as you ease downstream. More



Flathead catfish, *Pylodictis olivaris*
State record: 74 pounds 5 ounces, Mississippi River, 2001

woody debris will increase your opportunity for success. If you find yourself in a river without woody debris, focus on deep holes and current breaks. Catfish relate to structure similar to other fish species. Finding catfish in lakes and flowages is no different than when searching for other species. Shallow flats located near deep water and creek/river mouths are good areas to focus your efforts.

WHEN TO FIND THEM

Channel catfish can be caught in good numbers during the day while flathead anglers will find their best success from dusk through dawn. Channel catfish and flathead catfish anglers report having the best success during the pre-spawn (April – June) and post spawn (August – October) periods. Anglers often report slow fishing during the spawn. Catfish spawning activity can be from early July through mid August depending on location and water temperatures. If you can’t get enough channel catfishing during the summer months, try ice fishing for them. Anglers have found that channel catfish can be caught while ice fishing. Fishing tip ups or a jig and minnow under bait fish schools have been productive for catching winter channel catfish.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Wisconsin has numerous waters supporting channel catfish populations. Try the Fox River in Racine county, Silver Lake in Kenosha county, Lake Poygan in Winnebago county, Beaver Dam Lake and Beaver Dam River in Dodge county, Rock River in Jefferson and Rock counties, Chippewa River in Dunn, Pepin, Eau Claire and Chippewa counties, Lake Holcombe, Lake Wissota, and Dells Pond in Eau Claire and Chippewa counties, Wolf and Fox River systems associated with Lake Winnebago, Lake Mendota in Dane county, Lower Sugar River in Dane and Green counties, Yellowstone Lake in Lafayette county, Pecatonica River in Iowa, Lafayette, and Green counties, Lower Red Cedar River from the Lake Menomonic dam in Menomonic to the Chippewa River, Lower St Croix River from St. Croix downstream the Mississippi River, Wisconsin River from Merrill downstream to the Mississippi River and the Mississippi River.

Anglers looking for flatheads should find success on the Mississippi River, the Chippewa River and flowages, Lower St. Croix River, Lower Red Cedar River, Rock River between Lake Koshkonong and Fort Atkinson, Wolf and Fox River systems associated with Lake Winnebago, and the Lower Wisconsin River from the Dells to the Mississippi River.

Catfish can be filleted like most other species. The days of using the skinning pliers are long gone. If you like going old school and fry your catfish up whole, then skinning pliers will be needed. Catfish filets can be grilled with the skin left on. The skin peels off easily after cooking. For those who take pride in the culinary skill of smoking fish, catfish taste great smoked.

Like other outdoor activities Wisconsin has to offer, catfishing has something for everyone. Try something different this year and go catfishing. It’s the perfect choice. You might just catch the largest fish of your life.



What about the blue catfish? Blue catfish are another catfish species located in the United States but not here. Every year there are debates on web-based fishing forums on whether someone is catching blue cats in Wisconsin. Locally, some anglers may call channel catfish “blue” catfish because they may have a blue hue. The fact is there are no naturally reproducing populations of blue catfish in Wisconsin. There may be a stray that migrates up the Mississippi River every now and then, but there are no fishable populations. So if Uncle Ned talks about the blue catfish he caught on the Fox River, he is talking about channel catfish. The closest populations of blue cats are located on the Mississippi River below Keokuk, Iowa. Wisconsin catfish anglers looking to add blue cats to their species list will have to travel south.