

RIVER MONSTERS

Getting the drift of catching big river catfish

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Facing into the current, the boat drifted slowly backward as the whirling trolling motor prop pushed against the flow, but not quite equal to its speed. As the boat glided past a hump on the bottom, the rod tip twitched. About 70 feet below, a powerful river monster engulfed the bait and rushed downstream, bending the stout stick nearly to the breaking point.

Drifting a major river can put big catfish in the boat, but anglers can't just launch into a stream, drop a line and start catching giants. Study the electronics to locate holes drop-offs, sunken trees and other structure that might attract big cats and plan to drift over these areas. Catfish frequently hide behind objects that break the current. Sometimes, a river bottom resembles a washboard as currents carve rolling humps and valleys. Big catfish drop into the valleys, looking upstream for anything irresistible to wash over them.

"I look for drop-offs, holes and changes in depth," explained Phil King, a national champion catfish angler. "It doesn't have to be more than a foot in depth change to hold a big fish. I like to fish right along the drop-off edge where the current rides over the top, creating a little boil. Sometimes, little mounds on the bottom hold pieces of debris on the front end, making the spot that much better."

For baits, go big. Giant catfish typically want bigger meals. Large blue cats prefer live, whole or chunked fish. A monster blue can easily gulp down a 5-pound fish. When fishing with cut bait, use the heads or body cavity parts because these pieces exude enticing fluids. Catfish can track the scent.

Strip baits made of mullet, skipjack or gizzard shad fillets also make excellent baits. Filet off a strip about five to nine inches long and stick a hook through the ribcage for better support. In current, the strip undulates like a live fish while oozing tempting juices. Anglers can also use U-shaped fish steaks cut from



Phil King and Tim Haynie, professional catfish anglers, show off a big blue catfish they caught.

Photo by John N. Felsher

the gut section. Run the hook under the spine so the two dangling belly pieces flap in the flow.

Although big flatheads might grab a cut or strip bait, the voracious predators normally prefer to catch their own meals. Hunting mainly at night, big flatheads devour gizzard or threadfin shad, bluegills or other sunfish, bullheads and other fish. Rick Conner set the state record with an 80-pounder he pulled from the Alabama River near Selma.

Many anglers rig several rods, each baited with a different temptation to see what big cats want that day. Walk the bait downstream just off the bottom. Occasionally, lift it a few inches to give it some action and to keep it from snagging bottom debris. When fishing along channel

edges, keep some baits on the shallow side of the drop and others on the deep side.

"Many people think they should put the bait on the bottom, but a catfish's eyeballs are on the top of its head," detailed Joey Pounders, a professional catfish angler. "We like to keep the bait about two feet off the bottom. The current holds the bait off the bottom, making it look more alive. Keeping the bait off the bottom also helps disperse the scent so catfish can find it better."

Alabama anglers can enjoy drifting many miles of prime catfish rivers. The many streams crisscrossing the Mobile-Tensaw Delta hold abundant catfish including some giants. The Chattahoochee River along the Alabama-Georgia line also holds big

fish.

"The lower Mobile-Tensaw Delta covers a lot of water and it's full of fish," advised Glenn Flowers with Flathead Catfish Hunters Guide Service (850-208-4667, catsfishing.com) who often fishes the delta. "We catch many 40- to 50-pound blues in the delta. The system also produces many 60- to 70-pounders. The Alabama River has a lot of big flatheads."

Anglers can catch a catfish for the dinner table in just about any freshwater system in Alabama, but tempting giants requires more planning. Not many fish reach or exceed the 50-pound mark and it will take a long time to grow another one to replace it. Since smaller cats generally taste better anyway, release the giants to live to fight again another day.