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Catching and Handling Bullheads and Catfish

by Michelle Kelly, Aquatic Education Specialist

When I'm with a group of kids teaching about fish and fishing, I find no other fishes capture the rapt, wide-eyed attention that the freshwater family of catfish engenders. Even Mark Twain knew the attention catching value of a good cat tale when he wrote about Huck Finn and his companion Jim catching a catfish in the Mississippi River "that was as big as a man, being six foot, two inches long, and weighed over 200 pounds. We couldn't handle him of course…"

With their dark, scale-less and slimy skin; soft, flat-bottomed bellies; six mysteriously long trailing whiskers or "feelers" (barbels); sharp, menacing, venom-tipped dorsal and pectoral spines; gaping soft- but tough-lipped mouths and iron-grip jaws; the ability to survive in oxygen-poor conditions where more handsome fishes cannot; and the heightened sensory perception a body covered in taste buds from nose to the tip of their tail provides – and that enable them to successfully ferret out food where they lurk in the murky depths that render their smallish eyes rather useless… I mean, how cool can fish get?!

Yellow Bullhead

Their fascinating, relatively freakish features are the makings for incredibly fun fish stories where separating facts from fiction can be quite a challenge – and are a sure bet to keep a group of kids engaged!

In addition to being inspirational fodder for fish tales, both bullheads and catfish can be counted on to bite on just about any bait you offer, just about any time of day or night, always give you a good fight, and despite their somewhat nefarious reputations – they make quite a tasty meal!

Here are some tips that can help your bullhead and catfish fishing forays be successful:

Habitat and Equipment

Bullheads are gregarious, travel in large schools, and live along the bottoms of warm lakes, slow-moving streams, quiet backwaters, and vegetated shallows.

Being bottom feeders, bobbers are often unnecessary for bullheads – especially on a windy day when moving bobbers can lift bait off the bottom and away from the fish. And you usually won't need a bobber to tell you when a determined bullhead hits your line!

For bullheads, use about a 6 lb. test line, and smaller hooks (sized 2 to 1/0) with long shanks. Bullheads often swallow hooks and longer shanked hooks are easier to remove.

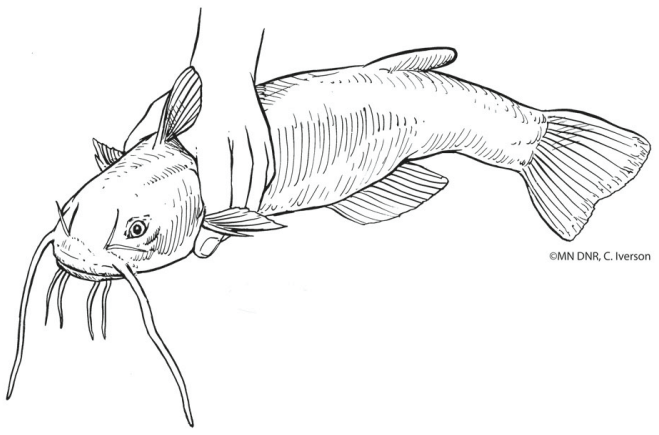
Catfish prefer cooler deeper water than bullheads, with sandy or gravel bottoms. In daylight hours, look for catfish to be hiding in deep pools, among rocks or logs. Catfish are mostly bottom feeders, too, but channel cats will also grab a meal from the surface. Some of the biggest catfish ever caught have come from the Mississippi River. For Channel Catfish, the Red River of the North is famous.

For catfish do use bobbers, heavier test line (8 – 10lb.), a heavy slip weight to keep your bait still in river currents, and leaders about 12 – 24 inches long.

Bring along assorted hook sizes (6 – 1/0.)

Bait

For bullheads, angle worms and nightcrawlers are standard baits but these fish –will eat just about anything they can swallow. Use up your leeches, live and dead minnows, pieces of chicken, beef, hotdogs, marshmallows left over from last night's dinner, dough balls, stink bait…



For catfish, just about anything dead or alive and smelly will do: chicken livers, night crawlers, minnows, crayfish, aquatic insects stink bait, dough balls… Every catfish angler will espouse a favorite bait, including secret homemade recipes - and all will be different!

For both bullheads and catfish avoid using artificial lures as these fishes forage by smell and taste.

Handling

Holding a Catfish Use caution when handling members of this feisty family of fish! Catfish and bullheads are armed with single thick, sharp spines at each of the leading edges of their pectoral (side) and dorsal (top) fins. When alarmed, the fish firmly extend these spines that easily pierce human flesh.

To avoid the sharp spines when removing hooks from these fish, securely wrap your hand around the fish – behind the dorsal spine on top, and with fingers behind the gills the pectoral spines and fins on the sides of the body.

Using a needle nose pliers or forceps makes removing hooks go much easier.

Cleaning

Catfish and bullheads are excellent table fare, especially if taken out of clean, fresh bodies of water. And contrary to popular belief, cleaning catfish and bullheads is actually easier than cleaning many other fish! There are many good resources on-line with illustrated instructions for cleaning bullheads and catfish. A simple word search, cleaning catfish or cleaning bullheads, will provide you with many sources to choose from.

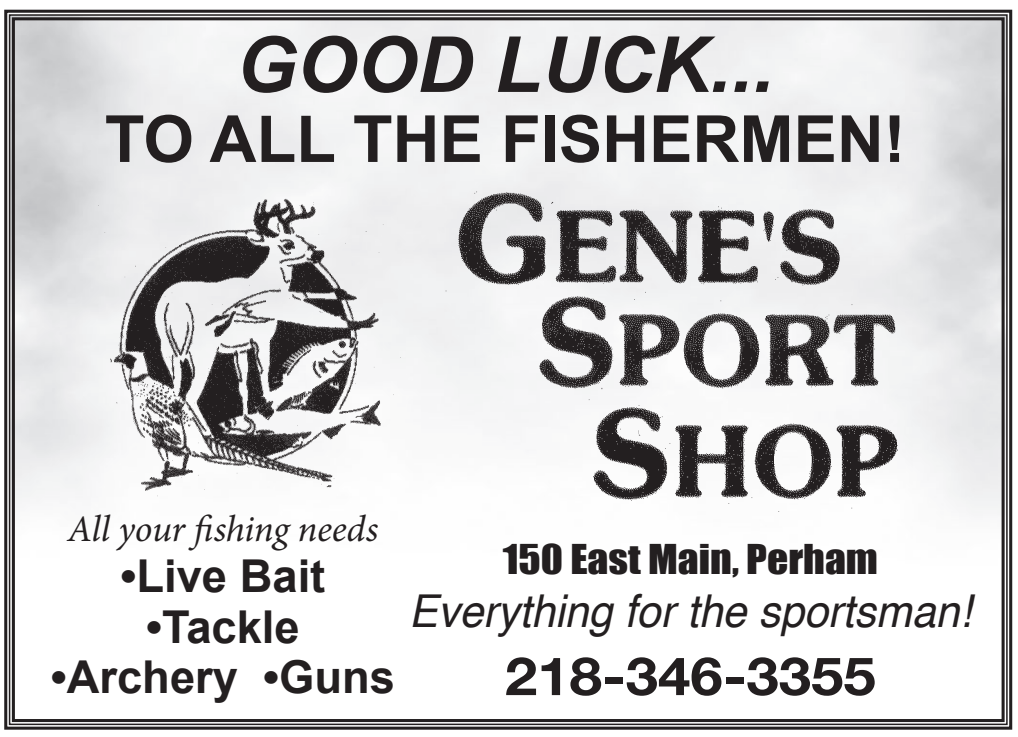
As soon as possible after catching, clean bullheads and catfish and place on ice to preserve freshness and flavor.

If taken from muddy or heavily vegetated waters, soak overnight in a bowl with one tablespoon of salt, two tablespoons of vinegar and enough clear, cold water to cover. Refrigerate overnight. Rinse the fish under cold, running water the next day before cooking.

Use a sharp knife, a board for a cleaning surface, and a pliers to pull off the slippery skin. For larger catfish, a nail or hook attached to the cleaning board will hold the head in place as you work.

Work gloves will protect you from the sharp spines.

Remove head, and fillet or cook whole. Smaller fish are best left whole and larger ones steaked or filleted.

Finally, Regarding Those Fish Stories

And after the fishing trip you can have the kids write down their fish stories – for remembering, and retelling (with a little embellishment, of course) on another day! Oh - and did I tell you the one about…