

HOOK N' COOK

Channel Catfish



Catfish and Hush Puppies, the delicious duo which combines the Channel Cat dipped in corn meal and deep-fried, and a flavourful corn meal hot cake, has rapidly become a hallmark of the deep South. River rats along the Mississippi have long sworn by the cat for easy catchin' and their good eatin', but their popularity in the best restaurants is a recent phenomenon, no doubt due to the down-home philosophy which is arising across the country. Catfish are catching on so fast in North America that supply cannot keep up with the demand. Many Louisiana farmers have taken to sowing a new crop: Catfish by the acre has become a profitable enterprise.

With such a status south of the border, it is a point to ponder on why they are relatively unpopular north of the border. It cannot be because they are not well-remembered, their distinct looks are engraved in the memory of anglers who have caught them.

In Manitoba, the Catfish family is represented by several species: the Channel Cat; the Black and Brown Bullheads; the Stone Cat; and

the Tadpole Madtom. The Channel Cat stands out from the others because their tail fin is deeply forked; none of the other possess this feature. Personality-wise, they differ too: they are the gamiest of all the Manitoba cats and offer the still fishermen good sport and eating.

Another Catfish habitat preference makes them less than loved by anglers. Catfish choose to conceal themselves in nooks and crannies. When fishing for them, there is a good chance of snagging your line and losing your tackle. This risk of cat fishing can be lessened if a bobber is used.

With the risk to tackle and their reputation as a scavenger, it is no wonder that Catfish have been over-looked in the face of rivalry from Canada's gaudier gamefish. The virtues of Trout fishing in rushing streams in glorious country are often extolled, but the quiet peaceful pleasure of fishing at dusk for Catfish along the bank of a lazy-flowing river is not often commended. It's a musingly meditative way to end a hot hectic summer's day spent in the city. And cat fishing for an evening is entirely feasible for the cat makes his home in easily accessible waters of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. If you want to go farther afield, they can also be found in the Netley, Delta, and Libau marshes and the southern ends of the great lakes of the province.

Do not let the Catfish's appearance turn you off. True they are not a glamorous looking fish, with a shovel-shaped head and four pair of sensory barbless about the mouth, but after all, looks are not everything. Remember, beauty is only "skin deep" however, the Catfish's true beauty lies much deeper than the skin, - in their lean succulent flesh which ranges in colour from pink to white.





The Catfish has an interesting life history too. The male plays a big role in the propagation of the species. No male chauvinist is he, letting the wife stay at home while he gallivants about. The male builds the family nest, then grudgingly allows the female to lay her supply of eggs. After the female plays her minor role, the male pugnaciously chases her away so he can settle down to his role of a broody hen. The male hovers over the eggs, gently fanning them with his pelvic fins so they are kept clean and aerated. Catfish have been observed to gently take the eggs in their mouths to suck off dirt and debris and then gently expel them back into the nest.

This diligent care does not cease after the eggs hatch - which occurs in about a five to ten days. The Catfish family is one of the few fish families which show an active interest in their young. The fry are closely supervised. The male Catfish is a stern discipliner: the luckless fry who makes the mistake of wandering away from the group will never again repeat that errant action. The fry will promptly be swallowed by the irate male. This behaviour is not unique to the Channel Cat; their cousins, the Bullheads, also adhere to this disciplinary philosophy.

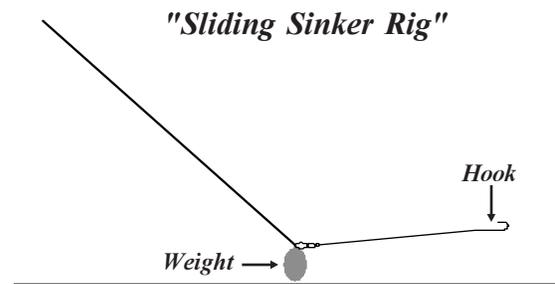
Spawning takes place in late June and early July because warm waters are an essential ingredient. Catfish will not spawn if temperatures dip below a 23.5°C. Another necessary requirement for the courtship rites is privacy. In the natural world Catfish seek out semi-dark areas in which to spawn: under the overhang of stream banks, in log jams, or near rocks.

Fishin for Cats

An understanding of the Catfish personality will help you when you fish for them. Normally Catfish are a sedentary critter: they "laze" around during the day and do most of their active

food foraging just before sunset and before sunrise. Their daytime hide-outs are a variety of covered areas: deep holes cut out by the current; caves undercut along the bank; hollow submerged lodges; and areas around windfalls. After dusk, the cat moves from these places to feed in the shallows and this is the optimum time to catch them. However they can be enticed from their daytime lair.

The Catfish is primarily a bottom feeder so fish your baits on the bottom. A light sinker is recommended as the cat does not like the feel of resistance along the line.



Number one or two hooks should be used as the Catfish have a fairly large mouth. They are voracious eaters so do not be skimpy with your bait offering. Fasten a big gob of worms or a large minnow or whatever to your hook. Just be sure it is large. Below are some other baits that can be used.

As previously mentioned, dusk is the prime time to catch the cat because they are on the prowl at this time. You will have a lot of leeway with baits as the cat will eat just about anything. Take advantage of their feeding habits when you choose a bait. The Catfish is not blessed with great vision but has a marvellous sense of taste and smell. With their sensitive barbels, they can sniff out the presence of any delectable morsel that comes their way in the water.





Thus stink baits are an excellent choice for the cat for they are exactly what they imply: baits with a decided stench. One cat fishing aficionado has said that if it makes your eyes burn and your stomach turn, it is ideal bait for Catfish. Two of the more nausea-inducing suggestions are stink clams and stink minnows. Stink minnows are chub minnows which are dried in the hot sun until they rattle when shaken and which are then buried for a few days to ripen. Stink clams are clams which are left in a quart jar in the hot sun until they "mellow".

These baits have been tested and appear to be very effective, so if you can stomach them, give them a try. Actually anything with a strong odour will be alluring to the cat. For example, chicken entrails, beef, pork or lamb livers are also good baits for the cat to sniff out. Since they rely so much on taste and smell during feeding, it is a wise idea to change your bait frequently when fishing because water washes away the attractive scent of the bait. Also, do not handle your baits any more than you have to: Catfish appear to shy away from baits that have a human odour.

Catfish are also affected by weather. Do not fish for them if it is too cold outside. The Catfish cannot abide cold water temperatures. Rising waters on the other hand are a thing to look for: after a storm is an excellent time to fish for Catfish.

After you have caught one of these fish a bit of care should be taken to keep the flavour at its peak. Do this by keeping it over the side of the boat or dock in a burlap bag or even better, put it on ice immediately after you catch it.

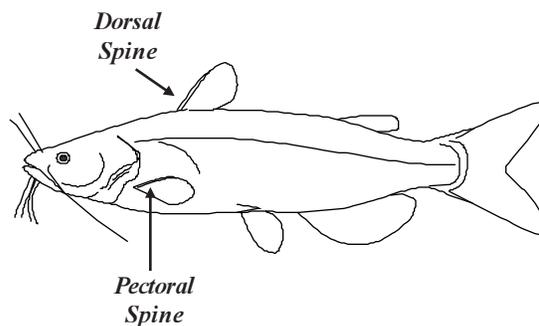
Preparing and Cooking Cats

Catfish are superbly palatable and here is the way to prepare them. Catfish should be

skinned. Follow this mode of preparation: make a cut all around the head, following the contours of the gill covers. Then, holding the fish firmly by the head pull the skin off with a pair of pliers. Cut out the portions of the fins that remain. Then remove the head, tail, and entrails. Fillet the fish to prepare it for cooking.

If you do skin the fish, you will notice a band of darker red flesh along each side. This is a particularly flavourful meat which may prove too strong for some people's tastes. If you prefer, you can cut off this flesh with a sharp knife before cooking the fish.

The Catfish deserves a word of caution. They possess sharp, stiff spines, one on the dorsal fin and one on each of the two pectoral fins. With their sharply serrated edges, they are capable of inflicting a painful, albeit harmful wound. A solution of diluted household ammonia will take the sting out of a spine wound should you be so unfortunate as to get one.



Once you have the fish dressed for the pan, there are many ways to cook it. Remember they have a delicate flavour; do not overwhelm them with heavy batters and exotic spices. A traditional method of cooking them is *à l'Anglaise*: the Catfish is gutted, skinned, then dipped in corn meal and pan-fried in butter.





Catfish can be cooked with moist heat, deboned, and then the flesh flaked and used in chowders, stews or salads. The flavour of the cat is said to be close to that of Trout so they would be excellent stuffed and baked.

In closing, here are some recipes you may want to try but remember, as in any other fish, it is important to make sure proper fish handling and food safety guidelines are followed.

Catfish and Hush Puppies

Fillet the Catfish. Dry each fillet and dip in lightly beaten egg. Roll each in yellow corn meal and deep-fry in peanut oil at 350°C until crisp.

Hush puppies are made by mixing:

- 2 cups of corn meal
- 2 tablespoons of flour
- 3 1/2 cups of boiling water

Cool and add:

- 1 1/2 teaspoons of salt
- 1 teaspoon of baking powder
- 2 tablespoons of melted butter
- 2 tablespoons of grated onion
- 1/2 teaspoon of ground pepper

Mix well. For each Hush Puppy drop 1 teaspoon of the mixture on a hot, greased griddle. Cook until brown on both sides. Serve with maple syrup as a side accompaniment to the Catfish fillets.

Bayou Catfish

Ingredients:

- 6 pan-dressed skinned catfish
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 1/2 melted butter or oil
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh mushrooms
- 1/4 cup chopped green onions
- 2 tbsp. lemon juice
- 2 tbsp. chopped parsley
- 2 tsp. salt
- 1/4 tsp. crushed bay leaf
- 1/4 tsp. pepper
- 1/4 tsp. dried thyme

Cut 6 squares of heavy-duty foil, 18 inches each. Grease lightly. Place a fish on half of each foil. Combine other ingredients to make the sauce. Pour sauce over fish, approx. 1/3 cup for each fish. Fold other half of foil over the fish and seal edges with double folds. Place packages on the grill 6 in. from moderately hot coals. Cook for 20 minutes or until fish flakes easily when tested with a toothpick. To serve, cut a big cross in top of each package and fold back the foil. This recipe makes 6 servings.

It is sheer cattiness to ignore the cat: despite their feline characteristics Catfish are a member of the piscatorial world that offers fine fishing and fine eating!!!!

