



Channel catfish

Ictalurus punctatus

By Tom Dickson

After easing the powerful fish into the river shallows following a 15-minute tussle, I stopped for a moment to admire its elegant shape and delicate coloring. Fly rod tucked under one arm, I gently lifted the sleek channel catfish, my palm against its belly to avoid the fish's three sharp spines. After plucking the black Woolly Buzzer from its mouth, I released the fish back into the Musselshell River for another angler to catch.

Channel catfish are not what comes to mind when most people think of Montana fly-fishing, but these native game fish will take a wet fly if presented properly. Otherwise, try some fermented cow liver.

Identification

Montana is home to four members of the catfish family, but only the channel cat and tiny stonecat are native. Black and yellow bullheads are introduced species. Though all four have barbels, adipose fins (like on trout), and flat heads, the channel catfish

Scientific name

Ictalurus is Greek for "fish cat," and *punctatus* is Latin for "spotted," in reference to the many dark spots on the body of younger fish.

is usually much larger. It can easily be distinguished from bullheads by its deeply forked tail. That appendage, along with the fish's torpedo-like shape, account for its power when hooked.

The channel catfish has a smooth, scale-less skin that runs gray to light olive on the back and sides, which are speckled with small dark spots.

Like all members of the catfish family, channel cats have two pairs of "whiskers," or barbels. The barbels are covered with tiny taste buds that the fish uses to find food. Contrary to popular belief, barbels don't sting. But catfish can inflict pain. When alarmed, they erect their sharp dorsal and pectoral spines perpendicular to their body, and anglers occasionally stab themselves when mishandling the fish. The spines don't contain venom, but they are covered in mucus that can quickly infect a wound. The spine tips dull with age, so the bigger the catfish, the less careful you need to be when handling it.

Stay-at-home dads

The male channel catfish creates a nest by

cleaning debris and silt from an undercut bank, hollow log, or other underwater cavity. After the female lays her eggs there, the male takes over and guards the eggs and newly hatched fry, attacking any intruders.

Range

Channel catfish are found in the lower Musselshell, Milk, lower Missouri, and lower Yellowstone Rivers and their tributaries, as well as Nelson, Tongue River, and Fort Peck Reservoirs. They thrive in warmer waters and tolerate turbid conditions.

Size

The species can reach nearly 35 pounds in Montana, though the average caught by anglers is closer to 2 to 5 pounds. Montana's state record, a 34.8-pound, 41¾-inch-long behemoth, was caught in 2013 by an angler fishing Fort Peck Reservoir.

Diet

Channel catfish are opportunistic feeders that consume minnows, insects, crayfish, mollusks, and vegetation such as seeds.

Angling

Channel catfish behave like a warmwater version of brown trout. They spend midday in deep riffles and at the head and tail of pools. At dusk and into the night they move to shallow, rocky flats and riffles to feed. Winter sends them to deep holes.

Anglers catch channel catfish on lures and streamers but mainly with bait. The fish feed in dark, muddy waters by smelling food with their whiskers. Anglers use chunks of cheese; fermented cow livers; fresh-cut goldeye, suckers, or chubs; or live minnows, frogs, or waterdogs. Anglers should check the Montana fishing regulations for restrictions on live bait, which, when released illegally, can harm fisheries.

Recognition

The biggest fans of this species are members of the Montana Catfish Association, which was established in 2006. The organization sponsors several fishing tournaments, including the Milk River Catfish Classic, which attracts roughly 80 two-person teams who vie for a \$1,000 first-place award. 🐟