

Alton resident catches 736-pound catfish in Mississippi River

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ALTON - Rumors of a monster catfish living in the Mississippi River have been told for generations by natives up and down the mighty waterway that divides the Western U. S. from the East.

Although most simply enjoy telling their version of the story, many claim to have actually seen it, yet some never believed it to be true.

It is said to have the eyes of a squid, a mouth as wide as a dumpster and the whiskers that lash like a whip.

Red Mudger of Meadowbrook first told the story of the day he discovered the biggest catfish ever known to man back in 1902.

The Mudger family comes from a long line of expert fisherman. Over the years, the secret bait remedies and special techniques and tools have been passed on and held sacred to the Mudger kinfolk.

One evening in March, Red was working on a log boat near Grafton when he casted his dinner line off the side of the boat after work. It wasn't long when his line tightened forcefully and his pole was ripped into the water. He jumped in after it, knowing that fishing pole was the only way to put food on the table for his family that night. Slightly frantic but determined to find what was on the other end of the line, Red found himself face to face with a catfish that could eat him whole. Luckily, Red could swim faster than a torpedo and made it to shore safely.

After Red got back to dry land, he raced into town to warn the residents. The people decided that for everyone's safety, the catfish must be captured before the he had human on the menu for supper.

So the search began, but no luck. Hours turned to days, days turned to months and soon, people began to question old Red and wondered if maybe he had too much whiskey on the river that day.

Although it was years before anyone got back into the water, things eventually went back to normal, yet the legend was never forgotten.

Carrying on the family tradition, Kato "Mudcat" Mudger of Alton spent every morning in the month of March out on the river in search for the monster catfish discovered by his great grandpa Red.

Yesterday, Kato set out to the riverside just before the sun rose on the last day of his yearly attempt.

Still slightly lethargic from having just rolled out of bed, Kato set up shop along the bank on the other side what many like to call "Small Pox Island," just past the Our Lady of the River Shrine in Portage de Sioux.

Sipping his coffee, Kato gazed out across the glassy surface before casting his line.

"Something just felt good about this particular morning," said Kato.

He got out his tackle box and began to prepare his hook as he thought about how many mornings were spent by his ancestors out on these very waters, searching for something that may actually not even exist. It was this very moment that Kato came to the realization that what he thought was always to be true, may just be another folklore, much like the loch ness monster or the Piasa Bird.

But, as him and those before him always have, Kato stayed to keep the tradition alive. The sun rose and the water grew warmer. A couple hours went by and Kato decided to throw one more cast before heading home empty handed. As he slowly wound the reel, winding in the line ever so gradually, he felt a tug. The tug turned to a pull and before he knew it, Kato was yanked right into the water.

“That’s when I just knew this was it, the moment I and many before me have waited for,” said Kato. “I had a harness on so I wasn’t going anywhere and with that hook, neither was he.”

Kato fought and fought and fought, determined to prove once and for all that his grandpa Red was not a delusional drunk. An hour went by and the game of tug of war was in full swing. By this time, Kato had been drug down the river nearly to the lock and dam in Alton. It was then that he was spotted by the Coast Guard who came to assist. They called for backup and before they knew it, fourteen men were on the scene combatting the oversized fighter fish.



“I just couldn’t believe it was actually happening,” said Kato. “This was my moment of glory and I was determined to keep it, knowing my family’s name would go down in history.”

After battling all day and through the night, the fish grew weaker and weaker. Due to old age and exhaustion, the men finally overcame the monster catfish and was able to pull him ashore with a crane.

“We all just stood there in disbelief,” said Capt. Joseph Bellringer of the USS Yeah Bouy. “I ain’t never seen such a thing, it was unbelievable.”

Despite the effort to keep the catfish alive, it later died.

“I had heard of those stories where them people find all sorts of things in the bellies of whales and stuff,” said Kato. “So after it died, we cut him open to see what we could find and wouldn’t you know it, we found a boot!”

The boot was a size 37 and there is only one man with a size 37 boot, Robert Wadlow.

The catfish weighed in at 736 lbs. Experts say the fish, a Mekong giant catfish, was around 170 years old and never seen in this part of the world.

The catfish broke the world record for heaviest fish and oldest fish ever caught.