

# Area rivers prime for big catfish catch

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Most of our lakes, ponds and rivers are now returning to normal levels after seemingly months of heavy rains. And though action for most species is slow in getting started, one species, the catfish, are hungry and willing to take almost any offering.

Throughout the next couple of summer months, anglers of all types can be found fishing our many major rivers, lakes and ponds in pursuit of the catfish.

And, they seem to be finding plenty of luck. Best of all, catfish can be found in abundance at most waters throughout the southern Illinois Mississippi River drainage.

Few can argue that the Mississippi, Ohio and Illinois rivers yield plenty of catfish each year. In fact, the Ohio River as it flows along the state's eastern border has always been a location worthy of considering.

Results from annual surveys conducted by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) show this river contains a healthy population of blue, flathead and channel catfish. Most common are channel cats in the one- to five-pound class. Biologists regularly sample flatheads weighing up to 30 pounds.

And, Mississippi and Illinois river anglers will find most any area with structure filled with hungry catfish. Here, too, surveys have revealed good numbers of channel, blue and flathead cats. In recent years, nearly half the catfish collected by IDNR biologists measured 16 inches or more in length.

Interestingly, however, most local fishermen overlook our state's smaller rivers and streams when seeking for a catfishing hotspot.

Best of all, a fancy boat or expensive gear is not needed to pursue forktails from these smaller rivers and streams. All that's really required is a bit of patience, a supply of bait and a good recipe for hush puppies.

Though not nearly as large in size as the Mississippi or Illinois rivers, catfish populations in the Sangamon, Kaskaskia and Big Muddy rivers are every bit as comparable.

Many local catfishermen hold the Sangamon River in high esteem. Each year, it yields large numbers of quality channel catfish. But, the best kept secret is the excellent opportunities this river offers for bragging size flathead cats. Numerous flatheads up to 50 pounds are hauled from these waters each year.

The Kaskaskia River feeds Lake Shelbyville, Carlyle Lake, and then continues another 70-or-so miles southwest until reaching the Mississippi River near Ellis Grove.

Channel catfish are widely distributed throughout the southern reaches of this river, primarily due to an abundance of habitat. The habitat here includes log jams, brush piles, undercut tree roots, and deep pools.

The area below the Carlyle Dam holds good numbers of catfish. IDNR downstream samplings actually show fewer numbers of catfish as the river continues south. However, the average size of the fish increases, with numerous channel cats over four pounds in weight in the population.

The unchannelized portion of the river between Carlyle Lake and Fayetteville, regularly yields fish in the one to two and one-half pound range. Fish in this portion of the river tend to relate to traditional woody debris habitat. Below Evansville where the river is channeled for navigation, the fish averaged just over a half pound.

The most popular baits among Kaskaskia River anglers include dip baits, worms, leeches, minnows and chicken livers.

Though similar in some ways the Big Muddy River also has a character of its own. A meandering stream that flows through Rend Lake in Franklin county, it winds southwest and meets the Mississippi just south of Grand Tower.

Catfishing is good in the upper end of Rend Lake where the Big Muddy enters the lake. Local anglers regularly use nightcrawlers and fish along the rip rap and in the flooded brush of the subimpoundments. In the waters below Rend, the river flows gently through the Shawnee National Forest where anglers will find plenty of public access areas.

Al Nutty, local angler from Carterville, has fished these waters most of his life. He has plenty of praise for this river's catfish potential.

"I like the areas where the water flows under bridges," said Nutty. "The bridge pilings seems to attract and hold good numbers of fish."

Nutty also finds success fishing near the numerous lay downs or log jams.

This river is a deep channel but does offer some flats. In the rip rap areas, Nutty likes to use live baits, particularly during the summer.

"It is a more natural presentation," he explained. "I also like to use small green sunfish when available, as well as commercial baits and chicken or turkey livers."

With all these great fishing opportunities, it is no wonder that Illinois anglers have a certain love for catfish. The time is now to pull out the catfish gear and a supply of bait.

And, don't forget to purchase the necessary ingredients for preparing a batch of hush puppies.