

# Big Catfish are the hot ticket in Tennessee

by Lee Keck  
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PICKWICK DAM, Tenn. - Phil King's fishing boat did not look much like the typical catfish angling watercraft.

The shiny oversized aluminum boat was spotless from bow to stern and was equipped with some of the latest electronic gear on the market. It lacked any of the eye-watering odors often found in similar catfishing vessels. In fact, it looked more like a low-profile yacht than the normal catfish angler's boat.

But, there was no need for concern. When it came to catching big catfish, King came with excellent credentials.

As a former champion of the National King Kat Tournament Series and several first-place finishes in other regional and national competitions, it was obvious this Mississippi angler definitely knows how to catch big catfish.

It was 4 p.m. and the intense heat from the summer sun was just beginning to fade slightly as the anglers climbed aboard. King, along his first mate and head bait cutter Tim Haynie, were diligently working with final preparations for the outing.

Also along for the evening ride was then Hardin County CVB director Rachel Baker. Everyone had high hopes of a successful trip. As with most things in this tourism business, Baker has moved on. It seems like everything in this world changes, but the good fishing remains the same.

"We have a good chance of boating a really big one this evening," King said. "The river level has been relatively stable the past few days and the current is almost ideal."

As King drove the boat towards his first angling location, Haynie busied himself scaling and cutting bait. The shiny boat was quickly beginning to lose some of its luster. And within the first hour, it took on the appearance of a true catfishing vessel.

Instead of fishing in the lake, the veteran catfish guide felt the best opportunity for landing a really big fish would come from the Tennessee River just below the Pickwick Dam. This stretch of river is almost legendary for producing big catfish.

"And, were only targeting big fish," he said. "As you can see from the size of our bait, it will take a really nice catfish to take our offerings."

The skipjack he was using for bait proved truly impressive to the guests aboard the boat. Many of these baitfish measured at least 14 inches in length. Even when cut in half, the bait was too large for any 10-pound-or-smaller catfish to swallow.

"We'll try baiting up several different ways," he explained. "Some of us will be using half or three-quarters of a skipjack and others will be using fillets from these baits."

The plan was to drift slowly downstream slowly jigging our baits off the bottom. Using his trolling motor to slow down the drift, all of the baits would travel just downstream from the boat.

With years of experience on these very waters, King had programmed all the high potential spots in his high-tech electronic gear.

"We'll only be fishing in areas where I've previously landed big cats," he explained. "Most of these spots are small variations in the river bottom where the catfish can avoid most of the current."

Then, the hunt for big catfish began. The first dozen-or-so locations failed to produce anything but an occasional snag. The anglers experienced about the same success while fishing the next dozen spots.

It wasn't until nearly 7:30 p.m. when Haynie hooked up with a catfish. Though the 8-pound fish was not what the anglers expected, it did cause a bit of momentary excitement in the boat.

By that point things were looking grim. King was constantly changing to fresh bait every 15 minutes and nothing was really happening.

"It's starting to get dark so let's bait up one more time and call it a day if nothing happens," he said. "There's always a chance something might happen."

Moments later, line began to scream from one of the reels and the fire drill began. It soon became evident that the braided fishing line was wrapped around something on the bottom. Still, the fish continued to hang on.

King quickly shoved the rod tip deep into the water and pulled with as much power as the line would handle. Finally, the fish untangled itself and began to grudgingly fight its way to the surface.

Minutes later, Haynie netted a huge 35-pound blue catfish. It finally seemed that all the effort had paid off with a bragging-size catch.

"It sometimes happens this way with a last-minute catch," King explained. "This is why an angler should never throw in the towel too early."

When not fishing tournaments, King devotes much of his time to guiding anglers seeking big catfish. Anyone interested in a similar fishing experience can contact King by calling (662) 286-8644.

As an almost humorous ending, King released the big fish and then almost instantly said he just released a \$100 fish.

"That's right and even I forgot about it," said Baker. "The area had a weekly fishing contest for the largest catfish and I'm sure it would have taken the top prize."

