



Flatheads are Illinois' Big Game Fish

by Lee Keck

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Among many of Illinois varied angling fans, fishing for catfish is considered something of a lazy-man's sport. These poor misguided anglers think catching these fish merely means loafing along some stretch of shoreline and waiting for a hungry catfish to swallow some sort of very smelly bait.

They say this particular species lacks excitement. Their argument typically includes mentions of the fight of a largemouth bass or the fast action from a marauding school of hungry white bass.

These very same critics have obviously never tangled with a huge tackle-busting flathead catfish. We're talking about huge fish that regularly snap 10- to 20-pound-test monofilament fishing line like it was sewing thread. I suspect there are few Illinois largemouths capable of this feat.

There is no doubt that flatheads of amazing proportions exist in certain downstate waters. This fact was proven in August 1995 when a 78-pound then state-record flathead was caught from the waters of Carlyle Lake. The unsuspecting angler tangled with the huge cat while fishing the open waters of the lake for white bass.

And, numerous bragging-size catfish in the 30- to 50-pound class are caught from this lake each year. However, most are likely captured by anglers using trotlines.

But, Carlyle Lake is not the only downstate location offering potential for landing a trophy-size flathead. Surprisingly enough, good populations of very large catfish can be found in many Illinois lakes and rivers.

During the spring, summer and fall months, reports of flathead catfish catches weighing 30 to 40 pounds are quite common around baitshops and coffee shops throughout the southern reaches of the state. And, fish in excess of 50 pounds are actually not all that rare. While not all of these fish stories can be believed, many of the storytellers do carry proof in the form of photos.

When it comes to big catfish in the state's southern reaches, it is often the flathead that takes top honors. This particular species has the potential of attaining massive proportions. One previous world record flathead, taken from a Kansas reservoir, tipped the scales at 123 pounds. It was caught in 1998.

According to Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) biologists, populations of flatheads can be found in certain smaller lakes and ponds across the state. But, they most commonly occur in major rivers, their tributaries, or reservoirs fed by these streams. In southern Illinois, this would include the Mississippi, Kaskaskia, Sangamon and Ohio rivers.

This legendary Mississippi River is renowned for producing huge flatheads catfish. Good numbers of these fish can be found in the entire length of the Mississippi as it flows along Illinois western border. However, it is that portion of the Mississippi River from Quincy to the state's southern tip that offers the greatest potential for hooking up with one of these big fish.

The deep holes many of the navigational dams are typically among the top spots to search for hungry flatheads. In addition, they can also be found in the deep water just upstream from major wing dams or other navigational structures.

The dedicated few who actually pursue the huge Mississippi River flatheads on a regular basis often concentrate their fishing efforts to those waters below these locks and dams.

Those areas containing large rocks and boulders seem to yield the best catches. These large chunks of rock offer the big flatheads a retreat from the swift current. Here, they lie waiting for baitfish, disoriented or injured after passing through the dam, to pass within striking distance.

When fishing this type of cover, heavy equipment is needed to haul these big fish to the surface. Veteran river anglers use a long rods (up to ten feet in length) equipped with heavy duty reels. Few anglers use anything lighter than 25-pound-test line and most prefer to use 30-pound line.

On the business end of the line, they attach a number six or larger hook. A three-ounce weight (preferred by most anglers) is attached approximately 30 inches above the hook.

Due to their regular diet of fresh fish, flatheads seem to prefer live bait. Many anglers find a five- to six-inch shad the top bait for river fishing.

The summer months are a favorite time to go after the big flatheads. Many anglers experience their best fishing from early July to early September.

Fishing at night can also be very productive. Oftentimes, the action begins to heat up about 7:30 p.m. and continues until about 11 p.m.

The relatively untapped fishing of the Ohio River may likely be the state's most overlooked flathead water.

Huge flatheads, some weighing in excess of 50 pounds, are pulled from this river each year. The hotspot, according to biologists, is the deep waters below the Smithland Dam near Golconda.

Anglers pursuing these huge cats often drift the stretch of river just below the dam, dragging large whole live shad just off the bottom. Another popular method is to anchor in the swift waters and tightline large whole or cut shad downstream from the boat.

"Most of the better action occurs during the warmer summer months," said Ohio River fishing guide Darrell Van Vactor. "July and August are particularly productive times to fish this river for big flatheads."

The Kaskaskia River may certainly rate among the best producers of huge flathead catfish. Streams biologists have said for years the Kaskaskia is a haven for flathead enthusiasts.

Flathead catfish can be found throughout the entire length of this river but it is probably that section below the Carlyle Dam that holds the greatest concentrations of these fish.

In fact, the Carlyle tailwaters have produced a few of our state-record flatheads through the years. This particular area is probably one of the best spots in the state to look for big flathead catfish.