

MSU Extension Publication Archive

Archive copy of publication, do not use for current recommendations. Up-to-date information about many topics can be obtained from your local Extension office.

Great Lakes 4H Fact Sheet – Channel Catfish

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

4-H Club Bulletin

Michael F. Masterson, Donald L. Garling, Shari L. McCarty, Fisheries and Wildlife

Issued April 1986

3 pages

The PDF file was provided courtesy of the Michigan State University Library

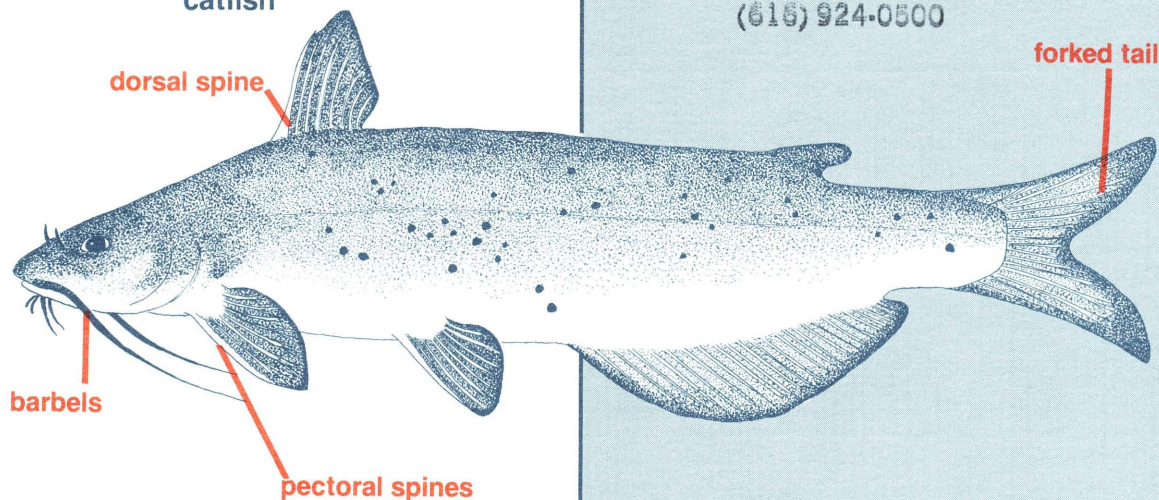
Scroll down to view the publication.



Channel Catfish

Scientific name: *Ictalurus punctatus*
Common names: Great Lakes catfish,
channel cat, spotted
catfish

M.S.U. EXTENSION
NEWAYGO COUNTY
817 S. Stewart
Fremont, MI 49412
(616) 924-0500



Description

Channel catfish are common to most waters in the Great Lakes region. Adult channel catfish may be 11 to 30 inches long and weigh between 12 ounces and 15 pounds. Some channel cats have reached 33 to 46 inches in length and 25 to 30 pounds in weight.

The body of the channel catfish is slender and gradually becomes smaller toward the tail. The head is small, and the mouth is short and wide. The eyes of the channel catfish are larger than those of most other catfishes. This allows them to see better at night when they feed. The channel catfish has short, thin **barbels** (whiskers) on the snout. On each side of the mouth, starting at the corners, is a long barbel. This barbel is longer than the fish's head. There are also four short barbels on the fish's lower chin. The barbels are dark black or brown and without spots, except the chin barbels, which are lighter colored. Many areas on the skin, especially the barbels, can be used to taste and explore for food items. The channel catfish has many very small, sharp teeth, which feel like sandpaper, on both the upper and lower jaws.

The fins and upper half of the body of small channel catfish are pale blue to pale olive and often have a silvery sheen. The fish's sides have many dark spots that are usually smaller than the pupil of its eye. Adults are typically gray to black with a bluish sheen. The lower half of the fish is silverwhite to milkwhite. The **dorsal fin** (fin on the back) is square-shaped and has one stiff spine. The **pectoral** (side) **fins** each have one sharp spine. The **adipose fin** (a small, fleshy fin between the dorsal fin and tail) points upward. The **caudal fin** (tail) is very wide and deeply forked.

The channel catfish is most similar to the bullhead and flathead catfish. All of these fishes have barbels and similar body shapes. The channel catfish's tail is forked, while the tails of bullheads and flatheads are distinctly square or only moderately forked. Small flathead catfish can be distinguished from other catfish species by two features. Their lower jaw extends forward beyond the upper jaw. The pectoral fin of a flathead has a spine which is almost like a saw, with teeth on both the front and back of the spine.

Life History

The channel cat is mainly a river fish, but it can also be found in lakes, slow moving streams and **reservoirs** (large lakes for storing and filtering water). In rivers, adult channel catfish often spend the day under big rocks, in deep pools and under log jams. At night they move to shallow areas where they feed.

Adult channel catfish **spawn** (breed) from May to July when the water is between 75°F and 85°F. In streams, the male searches for a nest site near a hollow log or under a bank or rocky ledge in the channel. In lakes or reservoirs where the water is very **turbid** (cloudy), the male may make the nest in the mud on the bottom. Before the female arrives to start spawning, the male cleans the spawning area by fanning his body and fins over it. When the female begins laying eggs, the male fertilizes them. Spawning lasts 4 to 6 hours, and the female may lay eggs nine times each hour. Depending on her size, the typical female may lay 4,000 to 34,500 eggs. Afterwards the male drives the female away from the nest. The male continually fans the eggs with his body to increase the water flow and amount of oxygen over them.

The young channel catfish hatch in 5 to 10 days, depending on water temperature. The newly hatched fish, called **fry**, have large yolk sacs on their abdomens from which they get nutrients. They stay in the spawning area for 2 to 7 days before they start to move about in groups and feed. During this time the male channel catfish guards them against predators. After a period ranging from a few days to several weeks, the young catfish are able to go out on their own and feed. Channel catfish are mature (able to reproduce) when they are aged 2 to 5.

Channel catfish feed mainly on the bottoms of lakes and streams, but they also feed in open water. Adult channel catfish eat insects, frogs, crayfish, snails, clams, worms, elm seeds, wild grapes and many kinds of fishes. Such unusual items as snake skins, adult bobwhite quail and beef bones have been found in the stomachs of larger catfish. Young channel catfish feed mainly on aquatic insects and **zooplankton** (microscopic, free-floating animals).

Fishery

The channel catfish is common in many lakes and large rivers in southern Michigan. They are most abundant in Lake St. Clair, Lake Erie and Saginaw Bay. In Lake Michigan channel catfish are uncommon; they are not found in Lake Superior. Both commercial fishermen and sport **anglers** fish for channel cats. The flesh of this fish is firm and has an excellent flavor. Native Americans used the spines as needles or as awls (small, pointed tools used in leather craft).

The channel catfish is a challenging sport fish. Many anglers search them out because of their potential size. Anglers catch channel catfish from streams by still-fishing (letting the bait stand still in the water) in fast moving streams or rivers or near falls or dams. Large minnows; pieces of cheese, fish or meat; or hooks with big balls of worms are the best baits. Anglers also use casting rods with artificial baits such as bucktail spinners, silver spoons and small jigs with minnows. Dusk, night and early dawn are the best times to fish. Catfish are commonly found in deep pools, around large rocks and near undercut banks.

In lakes, anglers use tight lines with bobbers or casting or spinning rods to catch channel catfish. Minnows, crayfish, liver, cheese and hooks with big balls of worms on them are the favorite baits for catching channel cats in lakes.

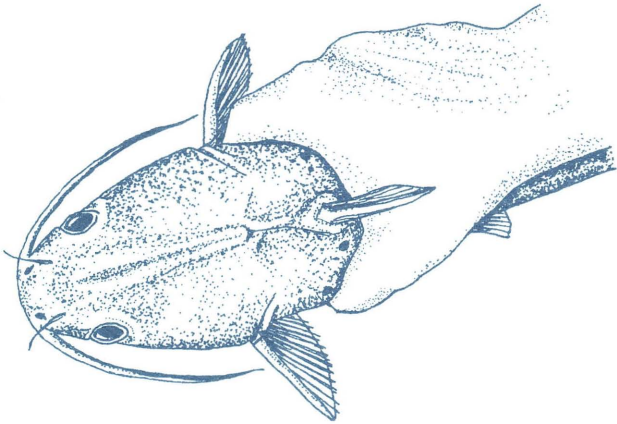
Commercial fishing for channel catfish is probably the most common way this fish is taken. The largest commercial catches of catfish come from Lakes Erie and St. Clair. Commercial fishermen use set lines (fishing lines stretched across an area where fish are likely to be found) with baited hooks attached along the lines. Only a limited number of hooks may be set on each line. Commercial fishermen also use other gear such as buffalo nets, seines, slat nets, gill nets and trammel nets. The demand for channel catfish is growing every day, and is already greater than the commercial catch. Fish farmers raise catfish in ponds in the southern United States. More channel catfish are raised commercially than any other type of fish in this country.

Written by:

**Mark Scott, Student Assistant
Donald Garling, Fisheries Specialist
Shari McCarty, 4-H Youth Specialist
Department of Fisheries and Wildlife**

Illustration by:

Maureen Kay Hein



Glossary

Adipose fin—small, fatty fin between the dorsal and tail fins

Angler—one who fishes

Barbel—small, fleshy “whiskers” used to taste food that is still outside the mouth

Caudal fin—tail fin

Dorsal fin—a fin on the back, usually central in position, with rays or spines or both

Fry—a newly hatched fish that still has a yolk sac from which it draws its nutrients

Pectoral fin—paired fins, one on each side of the fish

Reservoir—large lake (often machine-dug) for storing and filtering water

Spawn—breed, reproduce

Turbid—cloudy water due to small soil particles and other materials in the water

Zooplankton—microscopic, free-floating animals



MSU is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution. Michigan 4-H Youth educational programs and all other Cooperative Extension programs are available to all without regard to race, color, national origin, sex or handicap.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. J. Ray Gillespie, Acting Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824.

This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by the Cooperative Extension Service or bias against those not mentioned. This bulletin becomes public property upon publication and may be reprinted verbatim as a separate or within another publication with credit to MSU. Reprinting cannot be used to endorse or advertise a commercial product or company.