

# CHESAPEAKE BAY

Story by Joe Zentner



# CATFISH PARADISE

Photos by Mary Syrett

Sometimes the best way to stay unnoticed is to go along quietly, minding your own business — right in front of everybody. Which is the tactic used by some of Chesapeake Bay's tastiest fish that hug the bottom of the Bay and tributary rivers and thereby stay largely under the radar. If more anglers knew what delicious creatures lurk in the watery depths here, there might well be a run on fishing tackle at local sporting good stores.



## THE CREATURE TO WHICH I REFER IS THE **CATFISH.**

**D**espite an ability to grow to immense sizes and a willingness to chomp down on many different kinds of bait, “cats” are accorded respect by too few anglers. Sure, catching a 3-pound largemouth bass or rockfish is fun—but catching a 30-pound catfish is even more fun, in the opinion of many Chesapeake Bay fishing aficionados.

Given the excellent catfish habitat to be found in the Susquehanna River and Upper Chesapeake Bay—catching a 30-pounder isn't all that difficult. Furthermore, a tasty bonus comes with this angling action: for every huge catfish that swims in Chesapeake Bay waters, many smaller “cats,” each one ideal size as the main ingredient for a fish fry, are waiting to take your offering. No matter how you slice it: big fish or small, day or night, sport or supper, catfish anglers can't go wrong.

**Catfish are a diverse group.** Named for their prominently displayed “barbels”—slender, whisker-like sensory organs located on the head—they swim in freshwater environments of many kinds, with species found on every continent except Antarctica. Catfish have no scales but do possess a strong, hollow ray in their dorsal and pectoral fins, through which a stinging protein can be delivered when the fish is irritated.

Channel catfish closely resemble their bigger cousins the blue catfish. Both creatures have forked tails. However, channels, unlike blues, have scattered black spots along their back and sides. The maximum size is about 45 pounds (the world record channel catfish is 58 pounds, 11 ounces, caught in the Santee-Cooper Reservoir, South Carolina, in 1964). Chesapeake Bay catfish average three to four pounds.

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## CHESAPEAKE BAY – CATFISH PARADISE

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The diet of catfish varies, consisting of aquatic insects, crayfish, crustaceans, frogs, mollusks, and even seeds carried in the water. Contrary to popular belief, carrion is not their usual food.

Catfish feed most often at night, using sensory buds located in the sensitive barbels and throughout the skin to locate prey. Although they normally feed on the bottom, catfish will occasionally feed on the surface and at mid-depth in the Bay and its tributaries.

The range of catfish locales spans much of the upper and middle Chesapeake Bay estuary, as well as many streams including the Susquehanna River.

While trolling minnow-imitation lures does occasionally succeed in catching catfish, 99% of them are taken on dead or live bait of one kind or another. Chicken livers and gizzards, shrimp, night crawlers, red worms, fish belly strips and stink baits are all used as catfish bait, which most anglers send straight to the bottom. However, if the bottom is super-weedy, a float can be used to suspend an offering.

**If you're boat fishing,** try to anchor above a known catfish hotspot (for specific locations, inquire at bait shops). Catfish frequently congregate around underwater mounds. Cast in their direction and retrieve slowly. Your rod tip will bend as you drag your sinker up the side of a mound. When the rod tip straightens, you are, likely, on the mound's ridge. Prepare for a strike as you slowly work your bait down the side. Remember: catfish are slow eaters, so be patient before setting the hook.

**Catching Catfish from Shore.** An angler doesn't need a boat to enjoy great catfishing. Catfish anglers, in fact, fish from boats significantly less often than do most other fishermen. In the Chesapeake Bay area, a majority of whiskerfish fans pursue their quarry from shore. If you're among them, the following tips may help increase your catch.

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Select bank fishing sites near prime catfish holding areas—perhaps a shore clearing near a tributary river's outside bend, a spot beside a levee, or a gravel bar adjacent to a deep hole in a small stream. Ideal sites have flat, brush-free banks that make for snag-free casting.

**When bank fishing for catfish,** you can utilize different locations by letting your bait drift in the current beneath a bobber. This activity allows bait to move naturally downstream, flowing through rapids and settling enticingly in or near catfish holes.

Keep your line taut. If your line is slack, it will bow downstream ahead of the bait, leaving you in a poor position for setting the hook once a catfish strikes.

No matter where you bank fish, never let your guard down when landing a big one. A long-handled net is ideal



Catfish enthusiasts come in all shapes and sizes.

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Channel Catfish are found throughout Chesapeake Bay country.

for landing large fish; still, there are times when beaching a fish may be necessary (such as when the specimen you have snagged is too big to fit into a net). If you anticipate this happening, keep your reel's drag set and pull the fish up on land as far as possible before removing the hook.

All this catfishing talk has made me hungry, even though as I type these words into my computer it's around 3 a.m. I therefore encourage you to prepare yourself for a delicious fish dinner (preferably after the sun has come up) by trying any one — or all — of the recipes at the end of this article!

Chesapeake Bay country has enough fast action for whiskerfish to suit the sporting demands of most anglers. Catfish may not have the cachet of striped bass or trout, but for table fare, they're unrivaled. Bodies of water in and around Chesapeake Bay are filled with big and medium-size catfish. As the photos indicate, they may not be all that great to look at, but try and tell your full stomach that after eating a mess of what many people consider the best tasting fish around. Enjoy and please pack out of a fishing area everything you bring in. 🍷

**For more information and a list of FREE places to fish in the area — Go to**  
[www.HavredeGraceTheMeetingPlace.com](http://www.HavredeGraceTheMeetingPlace.com)

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Joe Zentner is a 65-year-old burned-out professor and freelance writer who, because of extreme insomnia, writes only between the hours of 2 and 7 AM. Joe and his photographer-wife Mary Syrett regularly travel; however, because of an extremely spoiled elderly cat named Babe, who eats only selected pieces of prime beef, they usually don't stay very long.

### Pan-fried Chesapeake Catfish

- 2# catfish fillets
- 2 eggs, slightly beaten
- 1/3 cup flour
- 1 cup cornmeal
- 1-1/2 tsp of salt
- Cooking oil for frying & lemon wedges
- 1/2 tsp freshly ground pepper

Rinse the fish under cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Mix the flour with salt and pepper, then spread the mixture on wax paper. Put the eggs in a shallow bowl and the cornmeal on another piece of wax paper. Dust each fillet in the seasoned flour and shake off excess. Dip a fish fillet in the egg and let excess run off. Then dip fillet in the cornmeal and warm a platter in an oven set at 250 degrees.

In a large skillet, heat a quarter inch of cooking oil. Place your hand over the oil; when you feel heat rising; put the fish in and brown on each side. Don't crowd the skillet; do only a few fillets at a time. Place on a paper towel to drain, then transfer to the platter and continue frying fillets. Serve with lemon wedges.

*Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but try telling your stomach that after consuming a delicious Catfish dinner.*



### Maryland Style Catfish Salad

- 1 lb catfish fillets, cooked and cut into bite-size portions.
- 1/4 cup pitted and sliced green olives
- 2 medium-size tomatoes, coarsely chopped
- 1/2 cup Lawry's Classic White Wine Vinaigrette with Chardonnay
- 1 avocado, cubed
- 7 cups torn lettuce
- 1/3 cup chopped green onions

In a bowl, combine fish, tomatoes, onions and olives. Add Vinaigrette with Chardonnay and toss. Chill one hour. Remove from refrigerator and serve, tossed with lettuce.

### Baked Catfish

- 1/3 cup slivered almonds
- 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 2 lbs catfish fillets
- 1/2 tsp salt and a dash of pepper
- 2 tbsp lemon juice
- 1 tbsp barbecue sauce

Place almonds in a shallow pan and toast at 300 degrees F. for 20 minutes. Remove almonds and set oven temperature at 325. Score fish with cuts approximately two inches apart. Combine lemon juice, sauces and seasonings, then rub mixture into the fish. Place fillets in a lightly greased shallow pan and sprinkle with toasted almonds. Bake for 1-1/2 hours and serve.

### Catfish Chowder

- 1/4 cup chopped onion
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 tbsp melted butter
- 1/2 tsp black pepper
- 1 lb catfish fillets, cut in bite-size pieces
- 2 cups whole milk
- 2 cups diced potatoes
- 1 can of cream-style corn
- 1 cup boiling water

Sauté onion in butter until soft. Add fish, potatoes, water, salt and pepper. Cover and let simmer for 15 minutes or until potatoes are tender. Add milk and corn; heat thoroughly but do not boil. Serve piping hot.