

James River Catfishing

When first starting out it can be quite challenging. There are a million questions you want answered to ensure your success. With a few simple tips, time on the water, and a bit of patience you can land that fish of a lifetime. There are infinite combinations of gear, location, and bait to catch catfish. This article will detail what you need to know to land trophy-sized fish.

Trophy Blue

Catfishing Part 1 by

John Sherman

My earliest memories of catfishing are with my father. He would carry me out into the river where we fished for channel cats from a big flat rock. Some days we would stay longer, to avoid stumbling across rocks after dark we'd just fish from the boat launch. Hot nights, mosquitoes, and the hiss of his propane lantern, are all great memories. We never really caught anything that big, but it sure got me interested in fishing.

Things have changed a great deal since then; I grew up and moved a few states away. Now I have my own boat, thus nights fishing from shore are long gone. Also gone is the satisfaction of catching small fish. I'm now part of a growing number of catfisherman that get serious when the boat touches the water, and our goal are trophy-sized catfish.

That's right fellas, this isn't your granddaddy's catfishin' anymore. No more lazy nights along the shore drowning a worm. Fast boats with high sensitivity electronics and more rod holders than you can count on your fingers are the ticket. Stout saltwater gear lines the boat and not a single hook smaller than 9/0 to be seen.

Now let's get down to business. The goal of every catfisherman is

to land that one giant trophy. That fish that's so big you carry a picture of it in your wallet to show everyone, after showing off pictures of the kids of course.

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The first order of business is your tackle. You have to be prepared for that fish to take your bait and head for cover. No one wants to think about the one that got away.

Rod: Your rod must be powerful enough to bring in the biggest fish in your waters. In the bodies of water I fish, I have to be prepared to land a 100-pound fish. You have to be able to bear down when you need to, and drag the fish away from cover. I would recommend no less than a heavy action rod. A rod with a line class rating from 25-50lbs is a good

start. Rod length is subject to your tastes but in the world of big fish, rods from 7' to 8' are recommended. My rods of choice are 7'6" Heavy 20-40lb class rating.

Reel: Once again your reel must be tough enough to horse a fish away from cover. Most serious catfisher's use a saltwater reel, which is designed to take punishment and dish it out too. You have to be prepared to tighten down the drag and reel! Saltwater reels have the line capacity and low gear ratios needed for bringing in big fish. My reels of choice hold 320 yards of 20lb test with a gear ratio of 4:3:1.

Line: Line choice is very important. If you choose a pound test rating that's too low, you'll be looking at a broken line. On the other hand, choosing a pound test that's too high could mean you will be fixing backlashes all day. You may ask, "Should I use mono or braid?" This is more personal preference but each has its pros and cons. I use braid for my main line and a heavy mono for my leader, because it combines the better qualities of both for me. Braid doesn't stretch and therefore is easier to keep a fish out of cover. I feel it also gives me a better hook set with circle hooks. The mono leader absorbs the shock of sudden jerks and runs from the catfish and gives the quality of abrasion resistance. This choice, much like rods, must be tailored to the size of the fish in your home waters. For example 65-pound test in waters where a 10-pound fish is considered big is definitely overkill. My braid of choice is Fireline XDS 65 or 80lb test. For mono leaders I use Ande in 60 or 80lb test.

Hooks: The majority of blue catfisherman use circle hooks. They have very high hookup percentage combined with very little damage to the fish. They also prevent gut hooking which is deadly to all species of fish. Your hook must be big enough to leave a gap between the hook point and shank, while accommodating very large bait. Don't get carried away buying big hooks, all manufacturers and hook types are different but normally hooks from 7/0 to 12/0 work great. Buy a few different sizes to experiment with, but most importantly use what works best for

you. My hook of choice is the Daichii Chunk Lite Circle in 7/0 but for very large baits I go to the Gamakatsu 10/0 circle hooks.

Weight: How much is enough? It depends on what river your fishing. On the James when the tides are ripping, 8oz weights should keep you on the bottom. In lesser currents, 4-6oz weights should be fine. In strong currents it's also smart to refrain from using weights that roll, this will cause your bait to move away from your target and will also get you hung up a lot. I prefer to use teardrop or pyramid shaped weights to prevent rolling in the current. These weights also have a clip at the top, which makes it easy to change sizes when you need to.

Swivels: You're going to need some swivels to connect your main line to your leader line. Don't skimp here with little brass swivels. Buy some heavy-duty swivels rated at 80lbs or higher for saltwater fishing. Also, don't forget to pick up some beads to protect your knots from those enormous weights!

Rig: There are many choices to rig up your hook, line, and sinker. I've found the best to use is a sliding weight rig. Slide the weight up the main line, followed by a bead. Tie it

off to the swivel. Tie your leader line of approximately 12 to 24 inches to the other side of the swivel, and hook to the hanging end of the leader line. This rig allows the fish to pick up the bait and move a little without feeling the resistance of the weight. Leader line length is dependent on the strength of the current. The stronger the current, the shorter the leader line. This prevents line twists and keeps the bait in the strike zone. There are many other choices for rigging up your terminal tackle, however, I have found this rig is the easiest to use and provides the best results.

Knots: The type of knot used is arguably the most important part of the whole setup. The incorrect knot will leave you with a broken line wondering what happened. When tying the braided line to the swivel I use the improved clinch knot. This knot has never broken for me when using braided line. To tie the mono line to the swivel I use the same knot, but to tie the mono to the hook I use the palomar knot. Once again, this has never broken for me and is the best way to keep stress off the knots. It may take some practice to tie an improved clinch knot with 60-80lb test mono because the line is so thick. Don't give up it is possible! Also, don't forget to wet the mono with some spit or water before tightening them down. This will allow them to tighten easier and prevent stress on the line.

Camera: Don't forget this! You're going to need a picture of that trophy! As you can tell everything you select to use when chasing trophy fish is important. Wrong choices will leave you with broken gear, broken lines, and worst of all a broken heart.

Trophy Blue
Catfishing Part 2 by
John Sherman

I know you're just itching for the rest of the pieces of the puzzle

now. Your dreams are filled with visions of gigantic catfish bottoming out your scale. In order to make that dream come true we need to put it all together now.

In part one I covered the basics in tackle needed to land trophy-sized cats. Now, the next most important item is bait. The best thing you can use is something indigenous to the area you're fishing that the catfish eat daily. If the river is full of bluegill, use bluegill. If the river is full of shad, use shad. Preferred bait of choice on the James River is big ole' gizzard shad. Get yourself a cast net (and permit) and learn to throw it. Shad can be pretty easily found in creeks and side channels nearly all year long.

The phrase "big baits catch big fish" is true. It is possible to catch a big one on a small piece but bigger baits will keep the small fish away. Using bigger baits is also a good idea because bigger fish want to spend as little energy as possible to eat. A bigger meal is the ticket they're looking for.

A big shad head or a 6 to 10-inch piece of cut shad is the way to go. Make sure to hook it so the hook point is exposed and the bait does not block the gap. Smaller shad in the 6-10 inch range can also be used by cutting off the tail so it bleeds, and hooking it through the eyes. It may look too big to you but to



Hook a larger piece such as this through a corner leaving the gap clear and the hook point fully exposed. Make sure to remove all scales from the hook point.

Here is a shad cut up and ready to be put on hooks. The head and larger midsection should be cast out to the main deeper target such as a boulder or deep end of a wing dam. The smaller pieces should

be cast to a shallower shoreline target and the other out in the channel for smaller fish to get some action! Always throw the tail away as it will tend to

spin the bait and also pull it off the bottom



Your first tool for locating catfish is a fish finder. A good fish finder is important not only to find structure, but to locate the fish as well. If you don't see any fish on the graph there's no sense in dropping anchor. Read the manual and practice using it to locate fish. The settings have to be right for fish sitting on the bottom to show up. If the settings are wrong you could ride around all day

thinking you aren't seeing any fish.

The importance of the fish finder is magnified because blue catfish relate heavily to structure. It may be a wing dam, downed tree, underwater boulder, drop-off, or ledge, but it has to be located and ruled a likely spot for the fish to be.

The key to the examples of structure I mentioned is a current break where the catfish can sit out of the current and still have easy access to food. All of them can hold fish year round but depth is the key. Generally speaking a tree in 20ft of water will have a chance of holding bigger fish than a tree in 5ft of water.

For seasonal locations catfish will generally hold deeper in winter and shallower in summer. There are exceptions of course but for the most part this is true. You will learn which applies to your body of water the more you fish and with a few tips provided here. Winter is big fish season on the James River. Most big blues will move to deep structure and stay there all winter long. They will continue to feed and remain active, which gives cat fisherman an excellent opportunity for a trophy.

During the warmer months catfish activity is based largely on water temperature. The higher the water temperature out of their ideal range of 75 to 80 degrees, the more lethargic they become. For this reason the daytime bite during the summer is largely non-existent and the catfish will instead feed during cooler nighttime periods. When the sun goes down the fish will begin to move in search of food. The catfish will move along ledges or move up to a flat in search of baitfish. This behavior is harder to predict which is why trophies are harder to come by in the summer. Instead of concentrating on hard structure when fishing at night, you should concentrate on ledges and flats nearest the structure or hole that you've located.

Here are a few generalizations that work well in either season. Fishing a steep drop-off or ledge with deep water that allows quick shallow water access is a high percentage spot. Wing dams are also a high percentage spot. Inactive catfish will be able to hold behind the wing dam out of current to rest. Active catfish will sit in current breaks in front of, along side, and in scour holes by a wing dam. Once again a wing dam that reaches 25ft deep at the end generally will be more productive than a wing dam that reaches 10ft at the end. Bridge pillars are another popular target for cat fisherman. They also allow catfish to sit in current breaks in front, along side, and in scour holes by the pier to feed. During periods of inactivity they will sit behind the bridge pillar.

I'm sure by now you've noticed the theme. Current breaks, current seems, and eddies provided by structure are what you need to look for. They may be obvious such as with a bridge pillar or you may

notice a subtle ripple on the surface from a boulder 20ft down. It

all comes from reading, learning the river and watching your depth finder



This picture shows targets to aim for. #1 is a sharp drop off parallel along the shoreline that drops quickly from 5 to 15 feet. #2 is a drop off perpendicular to the shoreline dropping from 22 to 30 feet. #3 is a ledge that runs parallel to the shoreline dropping from 25 to 34 feet. If you look closely at the picture you can see slight ripples on the surface from the drops for 1 and 2. All 3 in the same area makes for a productive spot. All were found using my depth finder. In this case #1 caught a 24lb fish, #2 a 35lb fish, and #3 the 63lb fish I'm holding. I also had a fourth rod cast out to

the left of #3 in the main channel that did not get a bite. This picture also shows that I have 4 rod holders across the back of the boat to effectively fish a hole or structure using circle hooks.

The last thing to cover is that current is your friend when fishing for blue catfish. In some rivers the current is always present but in tidal rivers such as the James, it's very important to look at a tide chart so you can fish when the tides are moving. During slack tide the catfish tend to roam around making their location unpredictable. When the tides are moving it puts the catfish back on the structure to be protected from the current. I don't see much difference from incoming and outgoing tides. I feel as long as it's moving you're in good shape.

Take the time to read up on blue catfish. Learning their seasonal movements and biology, then adding to the above tips will go a long way in your success. Most importantly please practice catch



**We saw that
100 Pound Cat
From the
James in 2009**

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