

## CATCHING HILLBILLY SALMON

An evening of pond fishing had provided almost constant action as bluegills and occasional 12-inch largemouth bass inhaled small poppers cast near shaded moss beds. Suddenly a gigantic swirl 60 feet from shoreline commanded our attention. A single-haul sent the tiny cork bug toward the disturbance where it surfed the dying wake before settling among the calming surface bubbles. Just as quickly, it disappeared and a hook set telegraphed the message that an unseen behemoth with uncontrollable power was surging for the depths at the base of the pond's earthen dam 40 yards away. Finally that wall-hanger bass was about to meet its match! How big could it be? Eight pounds? Nine? Double digits? As line and backing peeled off the spool, dreams of world-record proportions underscored the necessity of handling each move of the great fish with the utmost care. The tug-of-war lasted 20 minutes before the exhausted trophy rolled on its side and came to hand.

Visions of a record bass evaporated as the bewhiskered fish flopped in the pond-side muck. A channel catfish, albeit a big catfish, was the cause of those 40 seasons ago for crushing disappointment. After all, we fly fishers don't pursue "rough fish." Our long, graceful rods are meant for finer pursuits, right? But what a truly magnificent and memorable fight the 8-pound channel catfish had provided. The humiliation of catching a catfish was replaced by genuine admiration for the species' tenacious fighting ability and even its unique beauty. Many fly fishers who have pursued warmwater fish for several seasons have similar accidental catches on their resumes. Eventually, those intrigued by the thrill of the fight are confronted with the same question: "How can I target channel catfish to catch them with regularity?" Here's how we pursue the fish some folks call "hillbilly salmon."

### Choosing the Right Water

Lots of ponds, lakes, rivers and streams are home to channel catfish. They are, after all, an adaptable species. But the larger the water and the more diverse the species competing for a niche in the ecosystem, the more difficult it becomes to target "ol' whiskers." Unlike bass and bluegills, channel catfish are much less bound to specific types of structure. Many anglers believe that all catfish are associated with muddy bottoms and that carrion is their preferred diet. Hence, it is popular for baitcasters to use tight lining with cut bait or some equally foul-smelling dough bait. However, channel catfish often actively feed by cruising at mid-depth for baitfish. They prefer clean gravel bottoms and clear water to the mud-coated bowls they are sometimes forced to occupy. While they also feed in swift water below dams or riffles, the best waters for pursuing channel catfish with a fly rod are small, relatively clear ponds with areas of gravel bottom, a good population of heavyweight cats, and an abundance of small bluegills or other sunfish fry that can be utilized as prey.

### The Right Stuff

Sizeable channel catfish possess extraordinary strength and stamina. Rods without a sturdy butt section just won't be up to the task. Seven, 8- and 9-weight rods of 9 to 9-1/2 feet are recommended. The rod's length will help provide the leverage needed to keep the pressure on the big ones.

Fighting just one big cat will completely change the concept of reels solely as line storage. Channel cats often use their remarkable strength to make long runs. A smooth and easily adjustable drag and an exposed spool that can be palmed to aid the braking process are helpful. Large arbor reels also come in handy when the fish makes a run right at the rod and slack needs to be recovered in a hurry. In any circumstance, it is best to get the fish on the reel as soon as possible.

Line choice is dependent on the water and conditions being fished. Most cruiser cats can be taken within 2 to 4 feet of the surface; when that is possible there is no need for anything other than a good weight-forward floating line. We use floating lines for this type of fishing about 80 percent of the time. If hookups are few, it may be that the cats are working deeper and a spare spool of sink-tip or full-sinking line makes fly presentations over 4 or 5 feet deep much easier. Thirty-pound-test backing in excellent condition joined to the fly line with a strong knot is a necessity. Expect a large cat to get into the backing if it gets the chance.

Leaders and tippet require strength and durability. Big channel catfish are not leader shy. Depending on the weight and size of the fly being cast, a 7-1/2-foot tapered leader with a 16- to 25-pound test tippet will do the job. If the fly is heavy enough, a level section of heavy tippet material may be all that is required. Abrasion-resistance is a strong consideration due to cats' rough mouths; leaders should be checked after every hookup.

Landing nets with strong handles make sense for proper handling and release. Channel catfish are likely to continue their battle after they are removed from the water and puncture wounds from the spines in their dorsal and pectoral fins are legendary. Try to net the fish head first to better control it while it thrashes.

#### When and Where

Catfish cruise the shadows during the dog days of summer. Tepid water temperatures only increase their activity, and their food supply is plentiful, but cats don't cruise all day. Their most active times are early morning, late after-noon, sunset, after dark and when it is heavily overcast.

The best place to cast for channel catfish is over deep, shaded water early in the morning or late in the evening. They often cruise at a depth of 2 feet over a 15-foot bottom. In still water, fan cast the area, count the fly down to a depth of 2 feet and strip the fly back along the same plane. If several repetitions throughout the 2-foot area fail to bring a strike, either explore another area of deep water at the same depth or recast to the same area, but this time count the fly down to 3 or 4 feet. This systematic approach enables the best coverage and increases the chances of a hit. There isn't any confusion about a catfish strike. The hook set will be similar to snagging a stump. It just won't budge. Double or triple hook sets ensure that the hook is driven home.

## Catfish flies

Despite our initial accidental success with a popper, it is not a good choice when targeting catfish. Success usually comes when flies are chosen that imitate the silhouette and action of baitfish. Yet, imitation of baitfish colors isn't particularly important. Best success comes with darker colors such as black, brown or olive. Flies that contain some red also seem to attract more hits, even though predominately red flies are rarely a better choice. Dark-colored salmon or steelhead wet patterns tied in sizes 4 through 8 or similar sized standard streamers are proven catfish getters. One example is an old steelhead pattern called Black Gordon. Here is the recipe:

Hook: TMC 5262, sizes 4 through 8

Tail: None

Body: Rear third, red yarn, front 2/3rds, black yarn ribbed with oval gold tinsel

Hackle: Long, black and soft

Wing: Black bucktail

Another successful big cat pattern is the Dark Spruce as tied by a "hillbilly salmon" aficionado, Doug Farthing. This is how he does it:

Hook: Mustad 79580, sizes 4 through 8

Tail: Several peacock sword tips

Body: Red floss and peacock herl

Rib: Gold tinsel

Wings: 2 furnace hackle feathers

Hackle: Furnace, tied as a collar

## Fighting and Landing Big Cats

Big channel catfish fight mean, nasty brawls. We must emphasize that cheating bothers them not in the least. Often they go straight away from the rod into deep water and sulk, using shakes of their heads to transmit their displeasure to their captors. This tactic conserves their energy and they have to be pressured into moving. When they do, they can run straight toward the rod with alarming speed. Sometimes their first lunge is under a dock, boat or downed log. If there are rocks or wood nearby, the fish will try to rub the leader or line against the rough obstruction. As if these maneuvers weren't unfair enough, they often roll over and over on lead-ers. Mega-cats may employ all of the above tactics in one fight. And when big cats are exhausted and appear ready to be landed and released, they almost always

make a final surge even while entangled in the mesh of the landing net. Channel catfish are tough customers. Give them a try. They just might add dynamics to the term "rough fish."

Published in The Flyfisher, Keokee Publishing, Inc., Sandpoint, Idaho, Summer 2005

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