

## REGULATIONS

Flathead, channel and blue catfish are classified as game fishes in Texas. Anglers may take them with pole and line, hand fishing, trotline, jug-line or throwline. Check the Outdoor Annual for specifics on placement and labeling of lines. Flathead catfish are subject to a minimum length limit of 18 inches and a five-fish daily bag limit. For channel and blue catfish, the statewide minimum length is 12 inches with a combined daily bag limit of 25 fish. On Community Fishing Lakes, channel and blue cats are limited to five per day with no minimum length.

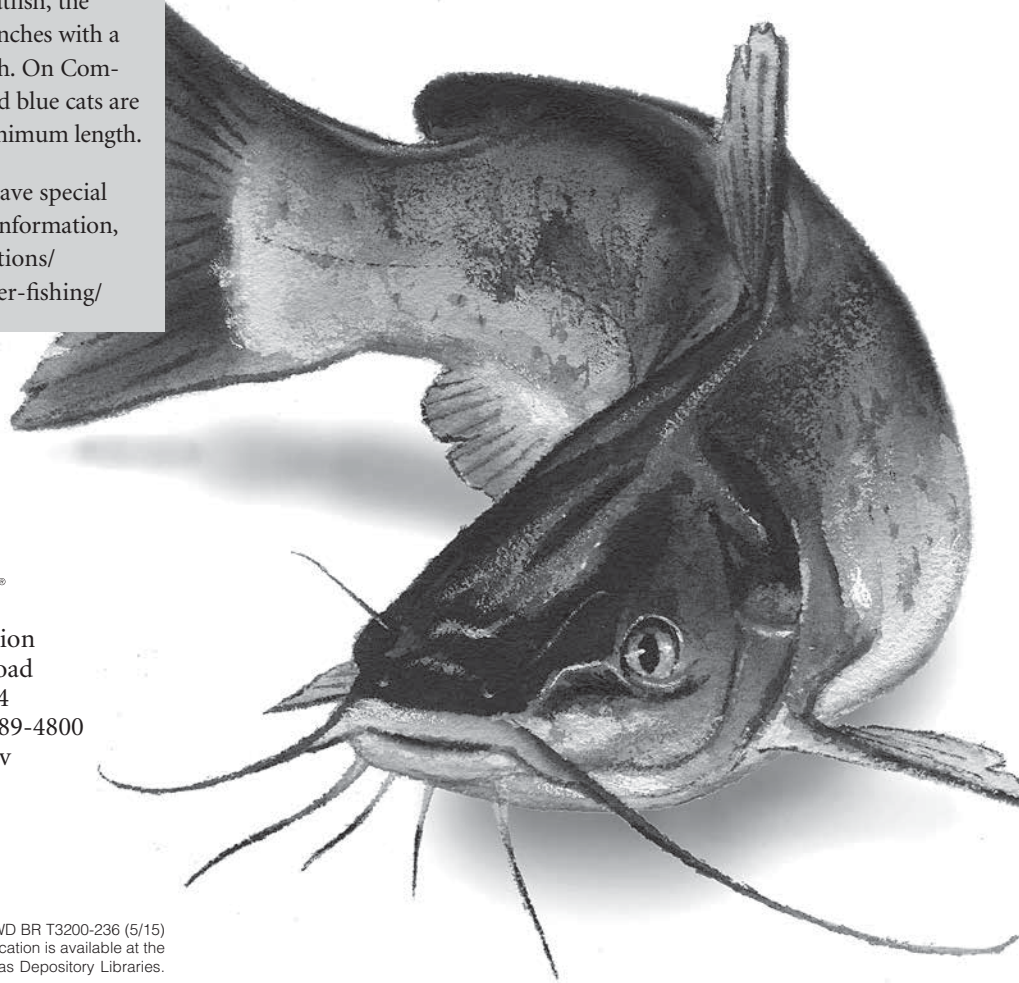
Several additional water bodies have special regulations for catfish. For more information, visit: [www.tpwd.texas.gov/regulations/outdoor-annual/fishing/freshwater-fishing/](http://www.tpwd.texas.gov/regulations/outdoor-annual/fishing/freshwater-fishing/)



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# freshwater CATFISH in Texas



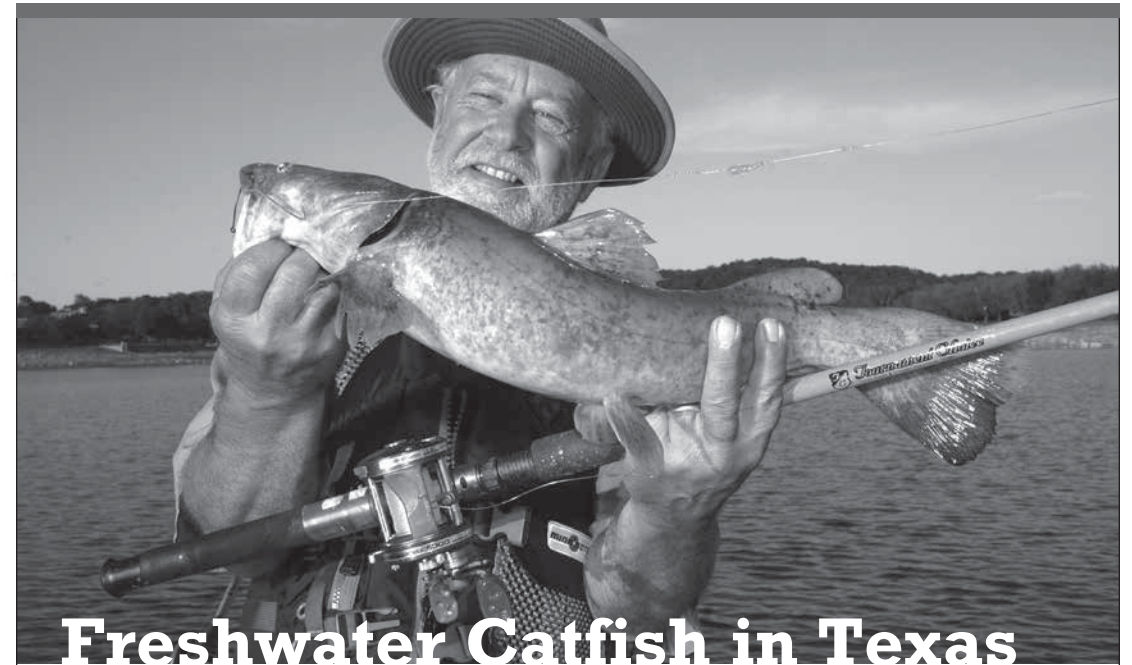
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## Freshwater Catfish in Texas

**W**hen Texans are asked what kind of freshwater fish they like to catch, catfish rank second, just behind largemouth bass. Fun to catch and delicious to eat, catfish are found in streams, reservoirs and small urban lakes throughout the state.

### TYPES OF CATFISH

Ten species of freshwater catfish are found in Texas.

The channel catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*) is the type most often targeted and caught by Texas anglers. Also known as willow cat, fiddler, screwtail and spotted cat, this species lives in reservoirs and large streams. Blue catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*) are similar in appearance and habit, but they grow larger than channel catfish and tend more

toward open water. The flathead catfish (*Pylodictis olivaris*), also called opelousas, ops, yellow cat and shovelhead, often seeks shelter near the banks of rivers and lakes.

Other catfish species include black bullhead, yellow bullhead, brown bullhead, toothless blindcat, widemouth blindcat, tadpole madtom and freckled madtom. Among these, only the bullheads grow large enough to attract angling interest.

Blindcats, pale fishes with degenerate eyes, are found in caves and artesian wells. Madtoms may be locally abundant and are noted for venomous glands at the base of their sharp spines. The venom, though seldom dangerous, is very painful. Bullheads and madtoms may be called polliwogs or chuckleheads, and any member of the catfish family may be referred to as a mudcat.

## IDENTIFYING CATFISH

If the tail is forked, the fish is a channel catfish or blue catfish. If the tail is square or round, it's a flathead catfish or bullhead. If the dorsal and anal fins appear to be continuous with the tailfin, it is a madtom or stonecat.

Distinguishing channel from blue catfish isn't always easy. Young channel cats are usually spotted (but not always), while most young blue catfish are not. However, there is a strain of blue catfish in the Rio Grande that has spots, and channel cats tend to lose their spots as they grow larger. The most reliable test is to look at the anal fin. In the channel cat, it will be round-edged with 23 to 29 rays. The anal fin in blue catfish has a straight edge and 30 to 36 rays. In addition, a blue catfish usually has a sharp rise behind the head.

To distinguish bullheads from young flathead catfish, look at the head. As the name suggests, the flathead has a broad, flat head, and the lower jaw projects beyond the upper jaw. The head on a bullhead is more rounded, and the lower jaw does not project beyond the upper.

## LIFE CYCLE

Catfish spawn in late spring or summer when the water temperature reaches about 75°F. Bullheads create saucer-shaped nests in shallow muddy or weedy water. The nests are 6 to 14 inches in diameter and may contain 6,000 eggs. The large catfishes prefer to spawn in cavities such as hollow logs, under large rocks, or under ledges where the eggs can adhere to a firm surface. Among channel cats, the male fish

selects and prepares the nest. After the eggs are fertilized, the male drives away the female and guards the eggs until they hatch, attacking any intruders. Bullheads and some other catfishes tend to the young for a short period after hatching.

Little is known of the habits of newly hatched catfish. In hatcheries, channel catfish fry swim in a ball-shaped school for several weeks, feeding on zooplankton. In nature they may disperse sooner. Small groups of 4- to 5-inch fish have been observed on shallow sandbars at night.

Young flathead catfish are cannibalistic and disperse quickly. During electrofishing surveys, biologists have noted large numbers of small flatheads around rock and gravel bars in swift-moving water and along the riprap at the dam in lakes.

## FEEDING HABITS

Fingerling catfish feed on zooplankton or bottom-dwelling organisms. While still very small, they graduate to a diet dominated by aquatic invertebrates and insects. Channel catfish opt for a more varied diet as they grow. Blue cats eat mostly fish once they reach legal size (12 inches). Large blues are effective predators and often rely on schools of shad for most of their food.

Flathead catfish, even at small sizes, eat only living food. By the time a flathead is 8 to 10 inches long it feeds primarily on small sunfishes, suckers, bullheads and shad, with an occasional earthworm or crawfish. As the fish grows, its food items get larger and may include other catfish. Other species eat living and dead material and will readily take prepared food.

## HOW BIG DO THEY GET?

Blindcats and madtoms are usually no more than 3 or 4 inches long. Most bullheads in Texas are small, but they may reach weights of 1 to 2 pounds. The state record, caught on a rod and reel, was just over 5 pounds.

The blue catfish is the state's largest freshwater game fish. The state record, caught at Lake Texoma, weighed 121½ pounds and measured 58 inches. Flathead catfish can also get very large, but they grow slowly at first. A two-year-old flathead may measure only 6 to 9 inches. After that, growth increases rapidly. The state record flathead catfish, caught on a trotline, was 114 pounds, 56½ inches. Specimens of 150 pounds have been reported.

It is a common misconception that channel catfish get no larger than 10 to 15 pounds. This is probably due to misidentification of channel catfish as blue catfish when they reach larger sizes and lose their spots. The current state record is over 37 pounds. Individuals over 40 pounds are common in some parts of the country.

## FISHING FOR CATS

Texas state hatcheries raise approximately 800,000 channel catfish each year for stocking in public waters. A number of small urban lakes receive frequent stockings of 12-inch fish, ideal for family fishing, during the spring and summer months. In addition, Texas stocks channel and blue catfish fingerlings in major reservoirs across the state.

Although catfish have a reputation for being a less challenging quarry than some other species, serious

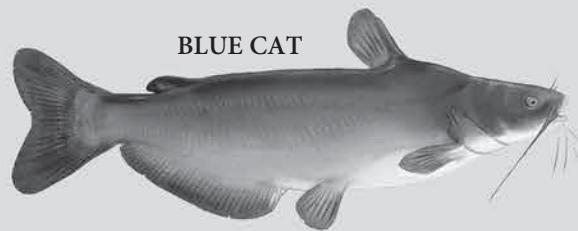
catfish anglers will tell you that's simply not the case. Each species has its own habitats, diet and behavior, which must be taken into consideration. Use a stout pole with a reel capable of handling at least 10-pound line if fishing for channel cats. If large blues or flatheads are the intended quarry, 30- to 50-pound line is more appropriate.

Channel catfish can be captured on a variety of natural baits including liver, worms, grasshoppers, shrimp, chicken, corn, hotdogs and cheese. There are also hundreds of prepared baits on the market. Dough, dip and punch baits all have their advocates. The most popular time to fish for channel cats is spring and early summer, but they can be caught any time of year. Many anglers use soured grain as chum, which can dramatically improve the odds for success. Fishing large flats by anchoring or drifting is also a time-honored practice.

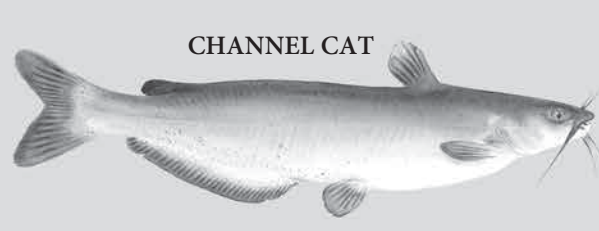
Blue catfish are most often caught on live or dead minnows or shad. Winter is the best time to fish for big blues, but spring is also very good for numbers of blues. Fish the edges of creek channels or other deep holes for the best success.

Flathead catfish are solitary creatures, generally foraging at night near woody cover and rocky areas. While flatheads can be caught on pole and line, the most effective methods are trotlines or throwlines baited with live fish and left overnight.

Anglers are encouraged to release catfish large enough to be considered trophies, as it can take 20 years or more to produce a fish that size. Smaller fish (under 10 pounds) are better eating and are quickly replaced.



BLUE CAT



CHANNEL CAT



FLATHEAD CAT



BULLHEAD