

# Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Blue catfish

By Jeff Hansbarger

**Common Name:** Blue cat, also known as blue channel, humpback blue, highfin blue, great forktail cat, fulton cat, chuckle-headed cat, cold boarder, white fulton, chucklehead, humpback

**Scientific name:** *Ictalurus furcatus* which translates to 'fish cat' and 'forked.'

**West Virginia status:** Blue catfish, along with several other large river species once native to West Virginia (paddlefish, shovelnose sturgeon), were all but eliminated from portions of the Ohio River in West Virginia and the Kanawha River due to poor water quality, habitat degradation, barriers to movement, and other unknown causes within the last 50 years. Over the last five years the West Virginia DNR Wildlife Resources Section has attempted to re-establish blue catfish and other native large river species due to improved water quality and a greater interest in re-establishing native species nationwide. Presently the DNR stocks blue cat fingerlings and advanced fingerlings in the Kanawha and Ohio rivers.

Anglers now catch blue cats in both the Kanawha and Ohio rivers. There is a 24-inch minimum, two fish a day creel limit in effect for all of West Virginia. The current blue cat record in West Virginia weighed 29 pounds, 12 ounces, and was 42.25 inches long. Lynn Lange caught the huge fish from the R.C. Byrd pool on the Ohio River in Mason County. Lange, who is from Springfield, Ohio, was fishing in a Cabela's catfish tournament on September 12, 2009, when she made her record catch. The state blue cat record has been eclipsed by larger fish in each of the last three years.

**Description:** The blue catfish is the largest North American freshwater catfish, regularly reaching weights in excess of 50 pounds.

Blue catfish and channel catfish are similar in appearance. Blue catfish usually have a bluish tint that fades to



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silver/white along the sides. Smaller-sized channel catfish occasionally are peppered with black spots along their sides; blue catfish never have spots. A few more defining characteristics can help determine what species you caught. First, the anal fin is more straight-edged and comb-like on a blue cat and contains 30 or more rays (fin bones), while a channel catfish's anal fin is more rounded and contains 24 to 29 rays. Additionally blue catfish usually have an overbite, and seldom if ever possess an underbite — something frequently seen in larger channel catfish.

Blue cats reach a larger size than channel catfish and can appear to have a humped back at larger sizes. The current all-tackle world record for a channel catfish is 58 pounds taken from Lake Moultrie in South Carolina in 1964, while the current all-tackle record blue cat caught in 2005 from the Mississippi River weighed in at a whopping 124 pounds! Finally, a channel catfish has one of the most forked caudal (tail) fins of all the catfish species. A blue cat's caudal fin is less forked in comparison. Sometimes even veteran anglers and fish biologists, however, find it difficult to differentiate between the two species, especially among smaller fish.



Courtesy of Tim Pruitt

*Tim Pruitt caught the current all-tackle record blue catfish in the Mississippi River in 2005 — 124 pounds, 54 inches long.*

**Habitat:** Their preferred habitat in large rivers is deeper areas that have a moderate to strong current. Within these areas, blue catfish generally seek out deep holes with abundant cover that provide relief from strong currents, but they will move up to swift water to feed, primarily at night. Outside bends in rivers, tailwaters below dams, creek mouths and discharges are all common blue cat locations.

In large reservoirs, they seek many of the same features as they do in rivers: deep, secluded areas with plenty of



David Fattaleh/WV Dept. of Commerce



Ryan Bosserman/WV DNR

The anal fin is more straight-edged and comb-like on a blue cat, above left, and contains 30 or more rays (fin bones), while a channel catfish's anal fin is more rounded and contains 24 to 29 rays.

▲ The blue catfish's preferred habitat in large rivers, like the Ohio River above, is deeper areas that have a moderate to strong current. Presently the DNR stocks blue cat fingerlings and advanced fingerlings in the Kanawha and Ohio rivers.

brush and other natural or manmade cover. The absence of current in many reservoirs causes blue catfish to cover more water when searching for food, which often brings them to shallow water during peak feeding periods. Therefore, they often seek areas that provide both the security of deep water and the easy access to shallow feeding areas. They will frequently stay suspended over deep water at specific depths in relation to structure (points, humps) or forage such as shad or skipjack herring in both rivers and reservoirs. Their optimal temperature range is between 70 to 82 degrees.

**Range:** Blue catfish are native to large rivers and their tributaries (principally the Mississippi, Missouri and Ohio rivers) from Minnesota and Ohio southward into Mexico. They have also been introduced into many large reservoirs and rivers across the United States to establish new sport fisheries.

**Diet:** Usually a nocturnal predator, blue catfish feed on fish, aquatic insects, crayfish, clams, mussels and miscellaneous animals they encounter. They will consume both live and dead organisms but prefer

live prey or very fresh bait. Large blue catfish often feed exclusively on other fish. Many Ohio River anglers prefer to use skipjack herring — either whole, in filet form, or cut-up — when fishing for trophy blue catfish. Anglers sometimes take larger fish on plugs and spinners while fishing for other species during warmer periods when blue catfish are most active and are keying on a specific type of food.

**Life History:** Blue catfish begin spawning when the water temperature reaches 70-75 degrees in June to early July. Like other catfish they build a nest in a sheltered area under a log or within a rock pile or other cover. Both the male and female assist in making the nest, and guarding and rearing the young until they leave the nest. The male is particularly active in guarding the young. Eggs hatch after about one week. Soon after birth, young blue catfish will go their own way. By the end of their first year, they will reach 2.25 to four inches in length.

**Angling Information:** It is prized as a sportfish and marketed commercially in some locations due to its excellent tasting flesh. Heavy tackle (stout

rods, strong reels and heavy line) is recommended when fishing for blue catfish. Some anglers even pursue them with saltwater tackle. A combination of size and strength makes the blue catfish a supreme challenge to all anglers. Many river anglers claim blue catfish are triggered into feeding by the passing of large ships and barges.

The current all-tackle world record blue cat weighed 124 pounds, was 54 inches long and 44 inches around its middle. This massive blue cat was caught by Tim Pruitt in the Mississippi River near Alton, Illinois, on May 22, 2005. For more information, check [www.timpruitt.net](http://www.timpruitt.net). In 1879, a 150-pound specimen from the Mississippi River was found in a St. Louis market and sent to the United States National Museum. Legends exist about 300- and 350-pound blue catfish, but none have ever been documented.

**Conservation and potential threats:** No species specific threats in the Mountain State.

*Jeff Hansbarger is the Assistant District Fisheries Biologist in Pt. Pleasant.*