

CHANNEL CATFISH - *Ictalurus punctatus*

Range - Native range is the central drainages of the United States into southern Canada, and possibly the Atlantic coast. Introduced throughout the United States and much of northern Mexico. Channel catfish closely resemble blue catfish. Both have deeply forked tails. However, channel catfish have a rounded anal fin with 24-29 rays and scattered black spots along their back and sides. They have a small, narrow head. The back is blue-gray with light blue to silvery-gray sides and a white belly. Larger channels lose the black spots and also take on a blue-black coloration on the back which shades to white on the belly. Males also become very dark during spawning season and develop a thickened pad on their head. Most common in big rivers and streams. Prefers some current, and deep water with sand, gravel or rubble bottoms. Channel catfish also inhabit lakes, reservoirs and ponds. They adapt well in standing water where stocked.

Food Habits - Feeds primarily at night using taste buds in the sensitive barbels and throughout the skin to locate prey. Although they normally feed on the bottom, channels also will feed at the surface and at mid-depth. Major foods are aquatic insects, crayfish, mollusks, crustaceans and fishes. Small channels consume invertebrates, but larger ones may eat fish. Contrary to popular belief, carrion is not their normal food.

Life History - Spawning occurs mostly in rivers and streams in the spring and early summer when waters warm to 70 to 85 degrees. They also will spawn in larger lakes where suitable habitat is available. Eggs are deposited in nests secluded under banks or logs or over open bottom. The male selects the site, often a natural cavern or hole, clears the nest and guards the eggs and young. A female may lay 2,000 to 21,000 eggs that hatch in six to 10 days depending on water temperature. Males protect the fry until they leave the nest in about a week.

Life Span - Maximum size attained in Florida is about 45 pounds. The fish's weight generally averages two to four pounds. Studies indicate 14 years as the maximum age, but some fish probably live 15 to 20 years.

Sporting Qualities - Most channels are caught by bottom fishing with baits such as dried chicken blood, chicken livers or gizzards, and nightcrawlers. They prefer dead or prepared stinkbaits to live bait, but at times will take live minnows and lures such as spinners and jigs. Strong fighters with good endurance, they are frequently caught on trotlines. Considered one of the best-eating freshwater fish. The meat is white, tender and sweet when taken from clean water.

Threats – Habitat loss and pollution major problems.