Last May, 15-year-old Marcus Miller asked his mother to clean and cook the fish he'd just caught He didn't realize it was a new state record.

'Call Your Grandfather'

Story By Joe McFarland

It's probably best that Cindy Miller doesn't know how to clean fish. When Miller's phone rang last May 14, it was her son Marcus calling with a request: He'd caught a nice fish in the family pond in rural Jefferson County—and would she be willing to clean it for supper?

"I told him to call his grandfather," Miller recalled. "He's the fisherman. I don't know how to clean fish."

Fifteen-year-old Marcus then called his grandfather, a dedicated crappie fisherman with years of experience. When Herman Rowcliffe arrived at the farm pond that evening and saw the fish his grandson wanted to eat, he was stunned.

Nobody was going to eat that fish. In fact, Rowcliffe rushed it to a livewell to keep it alive.

"I'd seen a lot of crappie in my life," Rowcliffe said. "But I'd never seen a crappie like that." The fact is, nobody in Illinois had ever seen a crappie weighing 4 pounds, 8.5 ounces—the largest crappie ever caught by anyone in Illinois. After being examined by state experts, it was declared a new record in early July.

"It's actually a natural hybrid between a black and white crappie," explained Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Mike Hooe, who verified the record. Panfish often produce natural hybrids in the wild, with various species intermingling. Illinois maintains records for black and white crappie, but also for natural crappie hybrids. Miller's astonishing catch beat all records.

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

New state record-holder Marcus Miller at his family's farm pond in southern Illinois. It's where he landed a natural hybrid crappie weighing 4 pound, 8.5-ounces.

The teen angler's secret?

"I'd been fishing just a few times in my life," the new record-holder explained. "I hadn't really fished the pond in years."

On the day of destiny, Miller and a friend strolled out back to give fishing a try.

"We had only been fishing 15 or 20 minutes when I hooked it on a piece of nightcrawler," Miller said. "I knew it was a big fish and so my friend helped land it."

After calling his mother, they continued to fish for hours, not realizing the giant fish in their bucket would make state history. Miller didn't even know it was a crappie.

It wasn't until the next morning—after the crappie had expelled its eggs and died—when Miller was able to have it weighed on a certified scale.

"The fish would have weighed even more if it still had its eggs," biologist Hooe pointed out. "Still, what an amazing catch."

(Photo courtesy the Miller Family.)