Would you reach into a hole underwater and slip the mouth of a 73-pound catfish?

Hands-On Cat

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Some years ago I worked for a small-town newspaper where I wrote articles about local events considered important enough to make the front page of rural Illinois newspapers. Whenever a local gardener produced a 3-pound carrot, for example, or when a shopper found a peach resembling a president among a crate of otherwise ordinary peaches, I was the reporter who'd pick up a staff camera, race to the scene of the local excitement, and claim the story for the evening newspapers. It really was a tremendous job.

One day in early summer a tall man lumbered into the newspaper office holding a photograph he'd taken of himself.

"Here," he said politely, towering above my desk, "I thought you might want to run this in the newspaper."

I glanced at the submitted image, which included the gargantuan man before me and a flathead catfish of absolutely unbelievable size.

"Well now," I smiled, straightening up in my chair. "What have we here?"

I picked up my pencil and prepared to break the story.

"It weighed...how much?" I began the interview as the man shifted uncomfortably.

"Seventy-three pounds," he replied. The guy was twice my size. I saw no reason not to believe him, even though the alleged weight nearly matched the state record. In the photo, he looked small compared with the catfish.

"And where did you catch it?" I continued.

"Rend Lake, somewhere," he said, fidgeting.

"And this was on a trotline? Rod and reel?"

"I was hogging," he replied.

I nearly dropped my pencil.

For those unfamiliar with the ancient art of bare-handed fishing, "hogging," as the man called it, or "noodling," or "grappling," are terms used to describe the perfectly legal technique of locating and pulling catfish out of the water with only one's bare hands. What's more, in order to perform this plunge of faith, brave fish-

erman must first slide a hand into the fish's gaped mouth, allow the fish to chomp down, then haul the angry catfish out of the water.

I stared again at the photograph, then glanced up at the giant man.

"Seventy-three pounds," I said, shaking my head. "From Rend Lake. And where, exactly did you manage to...?"

He interrupted with a request.

"Don't print where I caught it in Rend Lake," he suggested, leaning over to read my handwriting. "Just say, 'Rend Lake,' if you don't mind."

I didn't mind. A fisherman needs to keep certain secrets—and he made a very convincing argument simply by standing over me. I felt like a quarterback staring up at the linebacker who'd just sacked him senseless. Images of myself with black eyes and missing teeth flashed in my mind, along with the inevitable headline: Local Reporter Still Hospitalized Following Bad Decision.

"Sure thing," I agreed cheerfully, deliberately writing "somewhere in Rend Lake" for his eyes to witness.

If fishermen in general reveal no secrets, catfish hoggers are far more secretive, for one reason: Their secret fishing holes are exactly that—underwater cavities which never move, and therefore should never be revealed.

Unlike many Illinois gamefish, which spawn in shallow water along shorelines, catfish spawn in natural hollows such as undercut creek banks or submerged, hollow logs. Spawning occurs when water temperatures hit 75 degrees Fahrenheit, typically between June and July. Instinctively, catfish will move into these familiar cavities and remain there, guarding the home even as a daring human hand reaches into the hole to feel around.

The fact any fish would allow a human to touch it might seem puzzling. But what's really surprising is the sex of these fish.

Catching a catfish by hand is one of the most rustic of all fishing techniques still in use today. Fearless fishermen wade into summer waters, reaching to find hiding catfish—then grab them and pull them out.

Little Grassy Fish Hatchery Manager Alan Brandenburg said catfish reproductive rituals begin and end with the male. The female's spawning role is relatively brief—she lays the eggs then swims away.

"The male is basically a stay-at-home dad," Brandenburg explained. "He selects the site, prepares the site by fanning it out, then stays there to guard the young."

Initially, the female might stay on the nest for a few days after accepting the site. But, chances are, the catfish people pull out will be a brooding male catfish—or something entirely different.

Everything from muskrats to snapping turtles have been reported as hogging surprises, which makes the act of hand fishing a gutsy test of courage—like being chased by bulls through the streets of Spain.

"Everything in your rational brain tells you to jerk your hand back," Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Mike Hooe said, "especially when the catfish closes its mouth on your hand."

For these obvious reasons, the number of Illinois fishermen who employ hand fishing is relatively small compared with other fishing methods. But it's a perfectly legal practice on waters where wading is allowed and where site regulations do not prohibit such activity.

All you need is a valid Illinois fishing license (unless exempt), a strong grip and a craving for primitive adventure.