When fisheries biologists began an in-depth study of flathead catfish in the Rock River, volunteers surfaced everywhere.

Big Cat Co-op

Story By Dan Sallee
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The group struggled together on a series of three, cold, autumn days to lift net after net from the river. By the end of the day, they would lift from the water thousands of gleaming fish, including 945 flathead catfish. Some were as small as 15 inches. Occasionally a big bruiser would appear in the nets, such as the monster tipping the scales at 53 pounds and measuring 48 inches in length.

Why would a commercial fisherman and catfish tournament anglers and promoters volunteer to spend a day getting wet and chilled alongside Department of Natural Resources biologists? All have a personal interest in the health of the Rock River's flathead catfish population.

Catfish angling is increasing in popularity around the country, with a marked increase in magazine articles, organized tournaments, fishing clubs and specialty publications. In the Prairie State, an estimated 6.5 million days were spent fishing for catfish species in 1998, making it second only to bass angling in terms of number of days fished annually. The average catfish angler places more emphasis on harvesting fish than most other anglers, but flathead and blue catfish anglers place a great emphasis on catching a trophy-sized fish.

DNR Fisheries Biologists Ken Clodfelter, Dan Sallee and Joe Ferencak are suited up and ready for a cold day of processing flathead catfish on the Rock River.

This growing popularity has led to increased sophistication of techniques, and some concern that Illinois catfish fisheries are vulnerable to over harvest. As a result of this concern, catfish afficionados requested DNR review catfish angling regulations. To develop a better understanding of the status of Illinois' catfish populations, DNR implemented a monitoring program in 1999.

Commercial fisherman Ron Brown and DNR staff recover a hoop net bursting with trophy flathead catfish (above), which were then sorted for processing (right).

To conduct this monitoring, DNR enlisted the aid of Ron Brown, a commercial fisherman based out of Thomson. Uniquely qualified to sample catfish on the Rock River, Brown has the specialized gear needed to collect flathead, and an intimate knowledge acquired from more than 30 years of contract fishing on the river. Generously donating time to help with the sampling were a group of tournament anglers.

Four rounds of monitoring of the Rock River between Dixon Dam and Prophetstown between 1999 and 2006 have revealed just how remarkable flathead catfish populations are in comparison to most other fisheries. Although there is some argument as to how big a flathead catfish must be to be designated trophy-sized, most state experts agree that a 36-inch flathead is a trophy-class fish. During the most recent survey, 119 trophy-size fish were collected, comprising 12.6 percent of all fish sampled during the survey.

When compared with typical surveys of other species, the percent of trophy-sized flatheads is remarkable. Usually, no more than one or two trophy muskies are sampled in a year, and most Illinois biologists have never sampled a trophy-sized largemouth bass.

In Illinois, a flathead reaches 36 inches between 18 and 21 years of age and at that point it weighs about 28 pounds. Growth slows at that point, with annual increases in lengths of between 1 and 2 inches. By the time flatheads reach 40 inches, growth has slowed to about 0.25 inches per year. Weight, however, continues to increase with a 40-inch fish typically tipping the scales at about 40 pounds. Flatheads typically weigh 50 pounds when they reach 45 to 48 inches.

Other studies of flathead catfish in Illinois indicate that the Rock River is not unique. Other large rivers, such as the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, also harbor good numbers of trophy fish, and even smaller streams can have good, fishable populations.

In an effort to estimate harvest, flatheads from the Rock River have been marked with reward tags. Of the 227 flathead catfish tagged in 1999, only eight were reported caught in 2000 (five were reportedly harvested). In the fall of 2001, an additional 365 fish were tagged, with 20 tagged fish reported caught, and 14 harvested, in 2002. These data indicate that harvest is currently low enough to easily sustain the current fishery.

The bottom line, to quote Carol King, is “these are the good old days” for flathead catfishing in Illinois.

The fish are not that difficult to target, and there are a significant number of trophy-sized fish available. Radio-tracking studies indicate that flatheads

Large commercial hoop nets are used to collect flatheads during their fall movement period when they are most vulnerable to capture.

Rock River flathead catfish study summaries

Year	Effort in net days	Fish per net day	No. > 11 inches collected	percent >16 inches	percent > 24 inches	percent > 28 inches	percent > 36 inches
1999	308	0.77	227	99.1	75.3	59	24.2
2001	280	1.38	365	98.9	86	74.5	37
2003	400	0.89	355	98.3	78	64.5	38.6
2006	945	2.18	945	100	56.3	29.1	12.6

often are associated with deep, woody structure and research proves they are positively thigmotactic, which means they actually prefer to be in contact with this structure.

Flatheads prefer fresh, live prey whenever possible, instead of the stink baits or other prepared baits that appeal to their scavenging cousins, the channel catfish. During the day they opportunistically feed from their resting structure, making them vulnerable to slow presentations with large, live baits. At night, flatheads become much more active and may move up to several miles hunting for prey.

When hunting, flatheads may exhibit the same movement pattern night after night, and they often return to the same resting structure before dawn each day. Take advantage of these tendencies. At night, the slow jigging presentation works, but so will presentations in shallow water and obvious places flatheads might hunt. These include dam faces, tips of islands, gravel shoals and other places where prey fish concentrate. If you are fishing during the day, use a slip sinker heavy enough for positive contact with the bottom, and slow jig a large, live bait, such as a sunfish or sucker, as close to the structure as possible.

Always remember your conservation ethics. Catching your own live bait and transporting it to another body of water should be undertaken with extreme caution. Live bait introductions can contribute to exotic species transfer and disease contamination in some Illinois waters. Never release leftover bait into the water. Always dispose of live bait properly on dry land or in the trash.

And to provide continued, exhilarating flathead angling experiences, practice CPR—catch, photograph and release—of these remarkable fish.

Flathead catfish are top-end predators, preferring fresh, live prey. During this study, 3-pound fish were recovered from flathead stomachs.

DNR biologist Rob Hilsabeck (left) muscled a medium-sized flathead into the holding tank. The author marked a flathead (below). Recapturing marked fish allows biologists to estimate population size.

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