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Catfish on the table never gets old

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

On June 18, 2011, Nick Anderson and his son were celebrating Father's Day with a fishing trip to Buggs Island Lake, Virginia. Earlier in the year, a 109-pound blue catfish had been caught, and just a couple of weeks before Anderson's trip his own father, Rick Anderson, had caught one that weighed in at 95 pounds. The younger Anderson men couldn't wait to try their own hands at catching a big one. On that Father's Day, their dreams became reality when, after a 45-minute battle, Nick pulled in a record breaking 143-pound blue. Nick Anderson remains the current U.S. record holder for catfish. The process of verifying a record-breaking fish is complicated, so it's likely that even bigger ones have been caught.

GLOBAL GOBSMACKERS

The catfish is one of the largest freshwater fish in the world. They inhabit every continent except Antarctica, making them also one of the most common. Here in the U.S., the channel cat, flathead and blue are the largest and most popular among fisherman. The channel cat rarely weighs in at more than 30 pounds, but both the blue and flathead can exceed 100 pounds, with the blue coming in as largest overall.

Worldwide, catfish can get much, much larger. Some 19th century accounts indicate that the Wels catfish, which inhabits the U.K. and much of Europe, were once found to be over 600 pounds. The current record holder is Italian angler Dino Ferrari, who brought in a 280-pound Wels while fishing in the Po Delta River in 2007. The giant measured 8 feet, 9 inches long, but this is only the third largest catfish on record, so you ain't seen nothin' yet.

Coming in second is the South American Piraiba. Also known as the Goliath catfish, the official record is held by Brazilian fisherman Jorge Masulo de Aguiar and the 341-pound monster that he wrestled out of the Rio Solimoes in 2009. However, this record is disputed by sport fisherman Larry Dahlberg, who pulled in a whopper 400-pounder in 2007, and also by multiple record-holding fisherman Jacob Vagner, who in 2012 caught a Piraiba that weighed in excess of 400 pounds. Rumors of a giant, man-eating Piraiba have thus far proved false.

The granddaddy of them all is the aptly named Mekong giant catfish. Reeled in by two unnamed Thai fishermen in 2005, the world record largest catfish ever caught weighed an unbelievable 646 pounds. National Geographic compared the behemoth to a grizzly bear. Efforts to keep the fish alive failed, and it was promptly eaten by villagers.

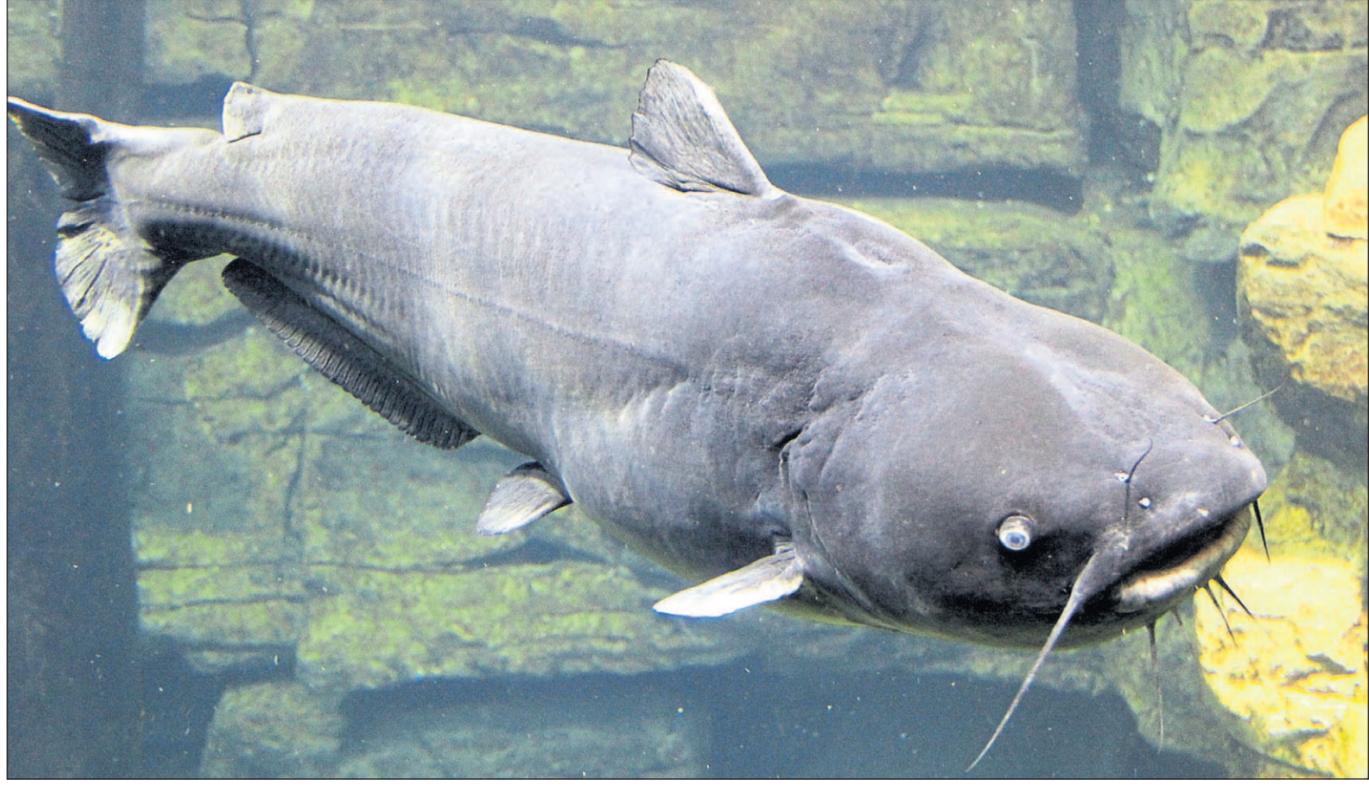
There are 3,000 documented species of catfish, but experts estimate that there may be another 1,500 as yet undiscovered species. Some of the more unusual ones are the Chinese Gooch and the beautiful Amazonian redtail, but not all catfish can reach mega proportions. In 2013, a tiny newcomer appeared on the books that measures just 3 to 3.5 centimeters, or just over an inch; others are even smaller.

KENTUCKY'S FRESHWATER MONSTERS

Here in the U.S., top catfishing locales include Alabama, Arkansas and even North Dakota. The state of Kentucky hosts the American favorites — blue, flathead and channel cats, as well as white and bullhead catfish.

The top 5 record-breaking Kentucky catfish are, by type:

1. In 2007, Steve Lurie of Taylorsville drew a 3.7-pounder



This tranquil blue catfish resides at the Tennessee aquarium.

wikimedia.com



Photo by Laura Hunt Angel

Perfect for summer cookouts, these spicy fish tacos are a tasty change of pace.

out of Guist Creek Lake.

2. A 5.5-pound bullhead was reeled in at a private pond in Mason County by Randy Kirk of Maysville in 2013.

3. Kyle Estep of South Point, Ohio, holds the record for channel cat with the 32-pounder he pulled out of the Ohio River.

4. Esker Carrol, who was fishing Green River way back in 1956 still holds the record for flatheads with a giant that weighed in at 97 pounds.

5. In 1999, Bruce W. Midkiff of Owensboro brought in a whopper 104-pound blue catfish that broke the line class record not just for Kentucky, but worldwide.

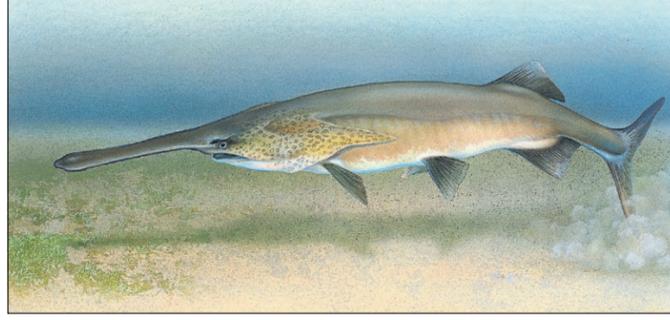
AUNT BETTY'S GREAT IDEA

Of course, when talking catfish we must also include the popular catfish that isn't really a catfish at all — the spoonbill. More properly known as paddlefish, spoonbills are among the most ancient of fishes in existence and are related to sturgeon. Unlike true catfish, which will eat just about anything, paddlefish are plankton eaters (like whales). The snout, or rostrum, of a paddlefish measures about half the size of the fish's body. The record for largest paddlefish/spoonbill catfish was awarded to Calvert City resident William Chumbler, who netted a 104-pound whopper out of the Ohio River in 2004.

I remember well the first time I ever laid eyes on one of the bizarre looking creatures.

We were sitting around Mimi's kitchen table — Mama and Daddy, Mimi and Pap, my sisters and me. Aunt Betty, Uncle Jess and the boys were there, too. This was a while before Aunt Betty discovered the snake ball in Great-grandmaw Mollie's old house, so they still lived just up the road. Aunt Betty often walked down to Mimi's to help out.

On this morning, Aunt Betty had fried up some squirrels for breakfast and made biscuits and gravy to go with them. She had saved the squirrel brains for herself and scrambled them with eggs, which was one of her favorite meals. We were just about finished when somebody



Library of Congress

A beautiful rendering is shown of a paddlefish, commonly known as a spoonbill "catfish."

brought up fishing.

Scooping a forkful of brains and eggs onto a biscuit, Aunt Betty said that we ought to load up and head over to Kentucky Dam for the day for some snagging. I had never heard of snagging before, but my cousins, who were several years older than me, were sure excited about it. Daddy said that he hadn't gone snagging in a long time. He sounded excited, too.

Daddy, Uncle Jess and the boys headed outside to hunt up fishing gear and a couple of big coolers. Mama, Aunt Betty and Mimi rounded up snacks and cold drinks. Mimi and Pap said that they would stay home as it was tricky getting down to the water. I hadn't been to the dam, at least not to remember it, and was curious to see it up close.

It took two or three vehicles to fit everybody along with the equipment. We headed down "old" 41 to Highway 62 like an old-fashioned wagon train. I hopped over the seat into the back of our big blue station wagon so that I could wave behind us at Aunt Betty every time the cars slowed down. If she ever got tired of waving back it didn't show; she just kept on smiling and waving right back. It helped keep me busy during the car ride, which seemed to take forever.

When we finally pulled into the parking lot by the dam, I couldn't see anything. No water, no dam; it looked like we were just parked at the edge of a cliff. But as soon as Daddy lifted me out of the car, I could hear the

roar of the water. He set me on my feet and told me to wait with Mama while he and the men carried our stuff down to the water.

THE BIG DAM

As we rounded a ridge, the dam came into view, and it was so big and loud I could hardly believe it. Water gushed through the dam and we had to yell to hear one another, but I wasn't afraid. Everyone was so excited that it made me excited, too. We were having a real adventure.

Before we started fishing, Daddy took us right up near the top of the dam and explained how it worked. Every now and then I could see a fish make its way through to the shallow side and leap down to the water below. Then Daddy took Mama's hand in one of his and mine in the other and led us down the ridge, across the big rocks and right down to the shore. Neanie and Gina leaped down like wild little monkeys.

Down at the water's edge, Uncle Jess and the boy cousins were already getting things underway. I watched as they prepared their lines with big treble hooks and tossed them into the water. Before long, Uncle Jess let out a yell and his fishing pole started bending, bending, bending. I thought it would snap, but it never did. Mama stood behind me and wrapped her arms around my belly so that I wouldn't stumble on the steep shoreline. We watched as he wrestled the line, then one of the boys grabbed a net to help get the fish in.

A SEA MONSTER

It was certainly the strangest fish I'd ever seen. It was almost as big as I was tall, and instead of a mouth it had something like a long duck's bill. Once he got a firm hold on the fish, Uncle Jess asked if I wanted to touch it. I reached out my hand and stroked its smooth gray skin. Suddenly it wriggled, swinging its big tail around, and Uncle Jess almost lost it.

Then one of the boys hollered that he had one, too. After that, everybody was busy catching and hauling in giant fish, even Daddy, who squatted down and let my sisters and I help reel one of the monsters in.

THE RECIPE

I've never heard of many Kentuckians who got tired of eating fried catfish. In the event that it ever should occur, here is a less common — but no less tasty — way to prepare them. This will work with catfish, spoonbill or crappie, as well as any firm white ocean fish.

Jumbo fish tacos with Baja sauce

Fish tacos are usually made with a mild ocean fish such as Mahi Mahi or Grouper, but if you've ever tried blackened catfish, you know that it holds up well to spicier flavors. A grill pan will make it easier to keep the fish from falling apart. This tasty recipe is simplified by using ready made seasoning blends, prepared ranch dressing and Siracha sauce.

2 lbs catfish filets (or your favorite firm white fish)
2 tablespoons mesquite seasoning (I prefer Weber brand)
2 ½ tablespoons chile powder, divided
Salt, to taste
½ cup ranch dressing
2-3 tablespoons Siracha sauce
2 cups thinly shredded cabbage
1 lime
8 6" flour tortillas

If using a grill pan, spray it with a high temperature, non-stick spray.

Place the fish filets on a plate or shallow dish and sprinkle with the mesquite, two tablespoons of the chile seasoning and salt to taste; let sit 15 minutes. In the meantime, heat the grill to medium high. Cut the lime in half and squeeze it over the fish.

For the sauce, combine the remaining ½ tablespoon of chile seasoning with the ranch dressing and Siracha sauce. Taste for seasoning; add more if you like a spicier sauce.

Place the fish on the prepared grill pan and grill four-five minutes on each side, or until fish is lightly browned and flakes easily. (I like my fish very well done and grill it a little longer.) Remove fish from the grill and squeeze lime juice over the filets. Flake the fish with a fork or simply cut it into equal sized chunks.

Wrap the tortillas in foil and warm them briefly on the grill (or pop them in the microwave for a few seconds). Divide the fish evenly between the tortillas; top with the shredded cabbage and sauce. Makes eight good-sized tacos.