

**SUNDAY**

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# LIFESTYLE

## Catfish on the table never gets old

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

**O**n 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.

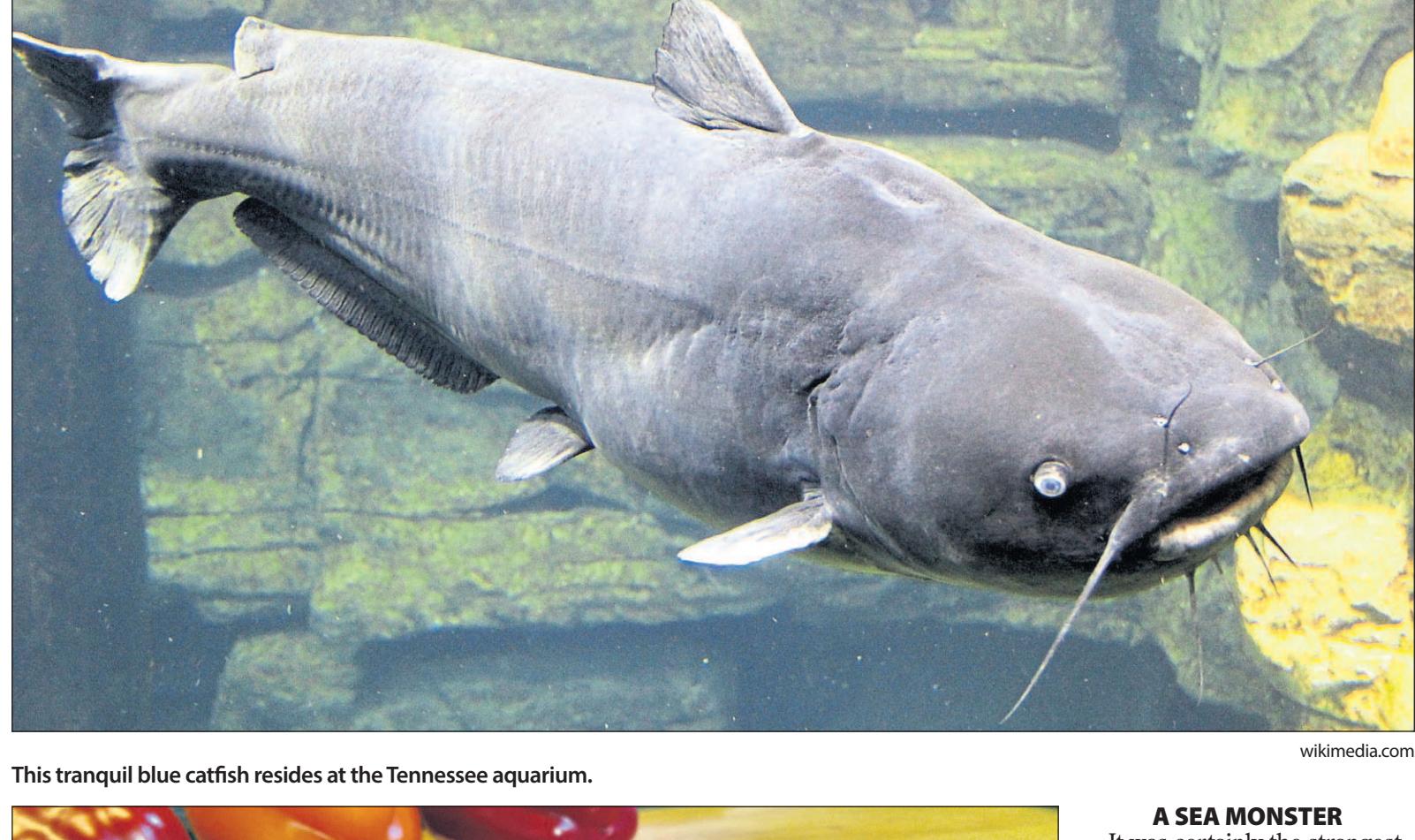
There are 3,000 documented species of catfish, but experts estimate that there may be another 1,500 as yet undiscovered species. Some of the more unusual ones are the Chinese Goonch and the beautiful Amazonian redtail, but not all catfish can reach mega proportions. In 2013, a tiny newcomer appeared 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.



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

Photo by Laura Hunt Angel

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 Carroll, 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

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

walked 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.

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

**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**