

Fishing Patterns for **Flathead** and **Channel Catfish**

by Mike Blech



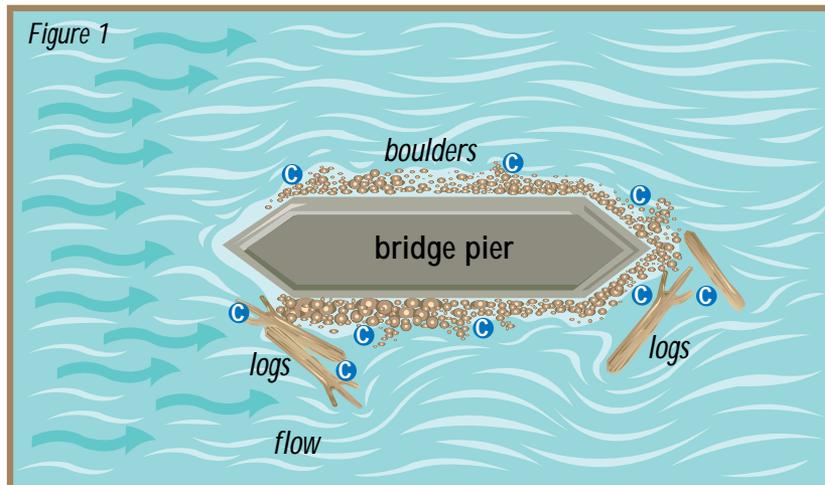
Fishing Patterns for Flathead and Channel Catfish

Pennsylvania's two biggest catfishes, the channel and the flathead, are our most under-appreciated game fish. They are hard-fighting, good-tasting, and locally abundant. Yet, because they seldom take artificial lures, we classify them either as panfish (sure, try to find a frying pan large enough for a 20-pound catfish) or as rough fish. Perhaps the label "rough fish" is somewhat appropriate because they will tear up your bass or walleye tackle.

In many parts of the country, catfish are highly prized both for sport and for their eating quality. Maybe the reason they are not more respected here in Pennsylvania is that we have so many options when we go fishing. Or maybe it is just that other fish are glorified.

One good example is in the Three Rivers area of Pittsburgh. Bass and walleyes attract most of the attention, including large fishing tournaments. During most of these tournaments, two barely legal fish can put you in the money. Certainly, improved water quality has allowed bass and walleye populations to grow to the extent of providing fair sport fisheries, but not as good as they are in many other parts of the state. Catfishing, on the other hand, is superb. Some of the best, maybe the very best, catfishing in the state is within Pittsburgh city limits.

In Pittsburgh, one of the best fishing patterns revolves around bridge piers (see Figure 1). I have no idea how many bridge piers are in the area, but it is certainly in the dozens. And I'd bet that there are catfish around most of them. The best, it seems, are those that are surrounded by the most cover—either boulders or logs. This is one of the keys to lo-

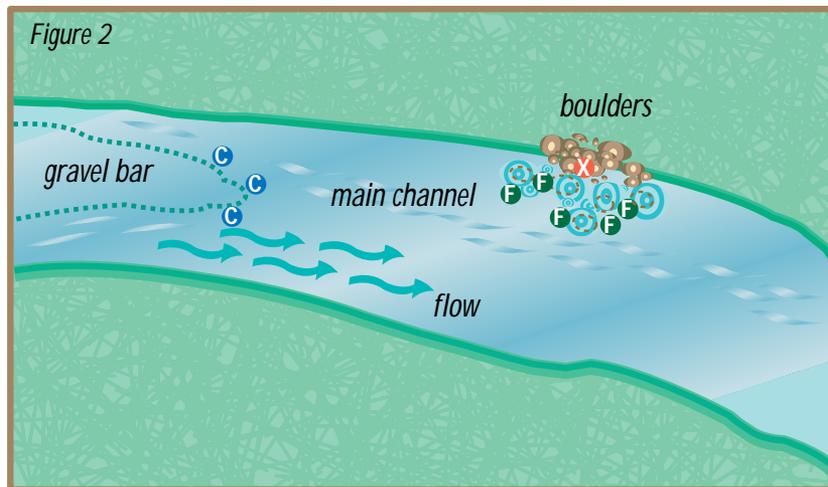


Bridge piers are likely places to find both flatheads and channel catfish ("C"). The best piers are surrounded by cover and water that is at least 15 feet deep. Fish all around piers, including the upstream sides.

graphic-Ted Walke

ating catfish, particularly flatheads. Around these piers is the best place I have observed in Pennsylvania for mixed catches of flatheads and channel catfish.

Catfish might be anywhere around piers. They do not, as other fish, seek shelter from the current on the downstream sides of the piers. Catfish retreat under cover when they are inactive. When they become active, they might spread out for a considerable distance. However, the cover around the



In river pools, channel catfish are usually most abundant near the heads of the pools, where riffles enter, and where deep water begins ("C"). Flatheads tend to be more abundant mid-pool, where the water is at least 15 feet deep and where there are some large boulders. "F" indicates likely flathead locations. The spot marked "X" is almost certainly the best place for shore fishing.

graphic-Ted Walke

piers is the center of activity. The odds of catfish finding your baits are best close to the piers. You might even be able to lure them out of cover with the odor of a tantalizing bait.

In my opinion, our state records for both channel catfish and flathead catfish will eventually come from the Three Rivers area. During a walleye tournament there last summer, my frequent fishing partner Charlie Brant boated both a flathead and a channel cat that were in the 30-pound class. "I didn't weigh them because I was in a hurry to catch walleyes," Brant recalled. "Now I wish I had. They were huge."

Many Pennsylvania anglers who got their first catfishing experiences with bullheads assume that their larger cousins, channel cats and flatheads, also inhabit calm water over a soft bottom. Indeed, both species do inhabit the calm water of lakes. But in Pennsylvania rivers, their niche is rock-bottom channels under current that is often the heaviest in a pool (see Figure 2). Generally, channel cats are most abundant at the head of a pool, where a riffle flows into deep water. Flatheads tend to be most abundant in mid-pool, in the deepest water of the main channel.

They sometimes wander from these places. Smaller channel cats often get right in a riffle to feed. Jim Rogers, who once held the state channel catfish record, caught that 35-pound fish while he was fishing for flatheads in the middle of a Venango County pool of the Allegheny River. I have even seen huge flatheads in mildly shallow riffles at night, while using a light to maneuver a boat. But your odds of catching catfish are best when you go with the general rules.

Heavy current creates long gravel bars at the heads of pools. These bars often end with a steep dropoff. Look for channel catfish along the edges of these dropoffs. Cast your bait onto the edge of the gravel bar so that the current pushes it over the dropoff. The trick here is to use a sinker light enough to get washed off the bar, but heavy enough to stay close to the edge. This works best when you anchor your boat close to the edge to minimize the amount of line in the water. The force of the current pulling a long line can require you to use a very heavy sinker.

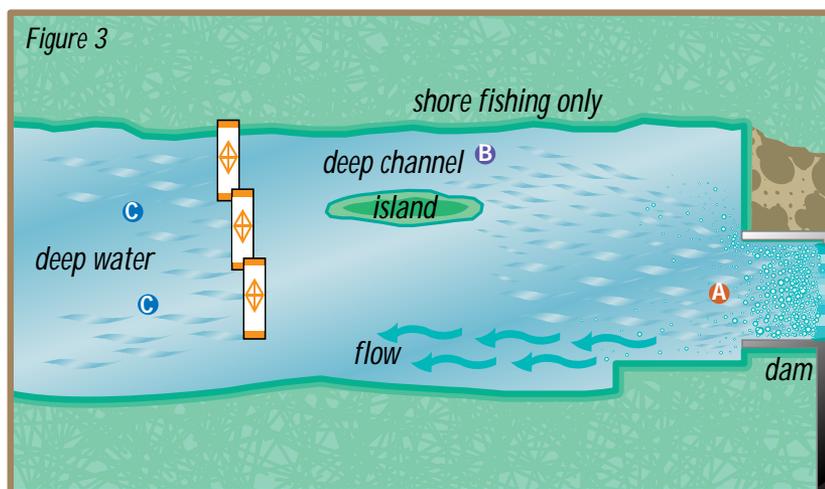
Look for flatheads in the deepest part of the channel, usually somewhere near the middle of the pool. You seldom find flatheads in pools that do not contain large boulders. In the steep Allegheny River valley, the primary flathead water in this state, the areas with large boulders underwater are usually revealed by boulders on the hillsides leading into the water. Also, the best holding areas are at least 15 feet deep.

Anchor your boat right in the current. Anchor safely, from the bow, not the stern. Two anglers can fish two lines right behind the boat, and two more slightly to the sides. Lines fished too far out to the sides usually snag because the force of the current on the line drags the sinker until it hangs on a rock.

Fishing from shore can be difficult for this same reason. However, there are several places along the river where the main channel is very close to shore. Find a large boulder that protrudes into the channel, and fish off the end with as little line as possible. You will probably have to use a heavier weight than you would when fishing from a boat so that the terminal rig does not get dragged into a snag.

Dam tailwaters

The tailwaters of dams, from Kinzua Dam to the navigation dams downriver, and power dams on the Susquehanna River, are excellent places to fish for channel catfish. Channel cats feed right under the turbulence immediately below dams, and in deep, swift channels a bit farther downstream.



graphic: Ted Walker

This is a simplified drawing of the Kinzua Dam tailwaters showing the types of areas where you might find catfish below this dam, and below any dam. Area "A" is the turbulent outflow. Rocks in the stilling basin provide good cover for catfish. The deep channel marked "B" is good catfish water because it is the deepest water in the area. Area "C" is similar to the head of any river pool, with riffles leading into deep water. It is a likely place to find channel catfish.

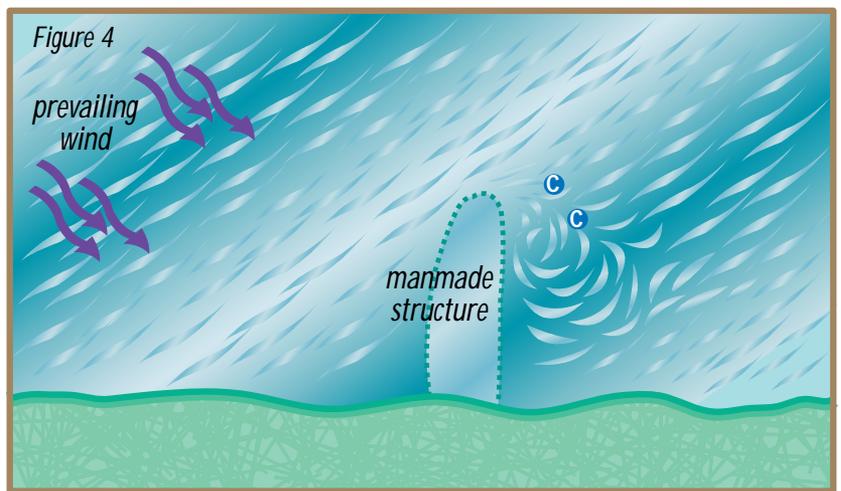
The Kinzua Dam tailwaters serve as a good example for the different types of catfish patterns you might find below any large dam (see Figure 3). Boulders are strewn on the bottom just below the gates of the dam to prevent erosion. Fishing is difficult here because there are so many snags, but this area is loaded with channel catfish. A deep channel alongside a small island just a few hundred yards below the dam is a favorite area for local catfish anglers. This is the deepest water, about 15 feet, between the outflow and three "no boats" signs a few hundred yards below the island. The depth is relatively shallow and the current quite swift between these signs, but the bottom drops quickly just downstream from the signs. This is another excellent area to fish for channel catfish.

Twenty-pound channel cats have been caught from such unlikely places as the tailwaters of Cowanesque Dam, a creek otherwise too shallow for large catfish. Below most smaller dams is a stilling basin, which is relatively deep with boulders on the bottom, similar to larger dams but on a smaller scale. Set baits in the deepest parts of the stilling basins for channel cats.

By now, you should have noticed some common elements among catfish hotspots—current, depth, and cover. In our rivers and creeks, flatheads and channel cats are creatures of the current. Their flattened heads are perfectly shaped for life under the current. But in lakes, where there is no appreciable current, they show their adaptability.

Sand and surf

The best channel catfishing I have experienced in Pennsylvania was in the surf at Lake Erie. The key here appears to be the sandy bottom. I suspect the reason is that wherever sand is deposited, so also deposited are things that channel cats eat. One example is manmade structure that extends into the lake (see Figure 4). Prevailing wind from the northwest



graphic—Ted Walke

Manmade structures that jut out into the Lake Erie surf collect channel catfish because they also collect things catfish eat. Fish right where the surf begins breaking on the lee side of these structures ("C").

pushes surf against the structure, and sand collects in the relatively calm lee sides. There is also some good catfishing at the mouth of Walnut Creek, though I suspect this has more to do with the breakwaters at the mouth of the creek than with the creek itself.

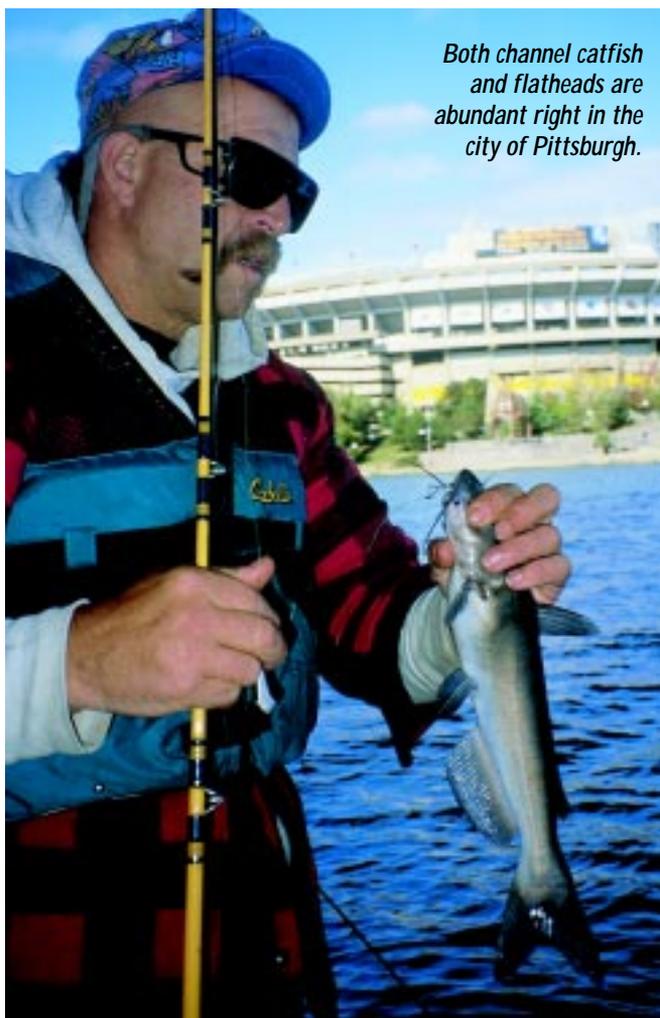
In my limited experience with Lake Erie channel catfish, I have found the best place to set baits is right where the surf starts breaking. Surf action jerks and pulls the line, making it difficult to detect hits. The best system I have used in this situation is placing a bobber loosely on the line between the first and second line guides above the reel, with enough slack in the line so that the bobber hangs about 18 inches below the rod. When a catfish takes the bait, the bobber is pulled toward the rod (see Figure 5). The rod should be placed in a secure rod holder.

Finding catfish in our inland lakes can be challenging. Almost always you find channel cats that are adaptable to several situations. They will be where the food is, but this is difficult to predict without knowing a lake very well. I have found them on points, on steep banks, in the deepest part of the basin, on rock bottoms, and on clay bottoms. Though usually thought of as bottom feeders, I have caught channel cats suspended well above the bottom. Finding them is generally a matter of trial and error, or better, a matter of asking around. Check the local bait shops. Watch for lanterns along the shoreline at night.

Baits

Simplicity is one of the charms of catfishing. Once you find a catfish hotspot, all that is left is tossing a bait in the water and waiting. However, serious catfish anglers know that the type of bait you use and the way it is used is very important (see Figure 6).

Catfish baits should attract catfish. This is not quite as simple as it might seem. When you fish for other sport fish, like bass, walleyes, and trout, usually a lure or bait is moved, either retrieved, trolled, or drifted, to find the fish. With



Both channel catfish and flatheads are abundant right in the city of Pittsburgh.

photo—Mike Bleech

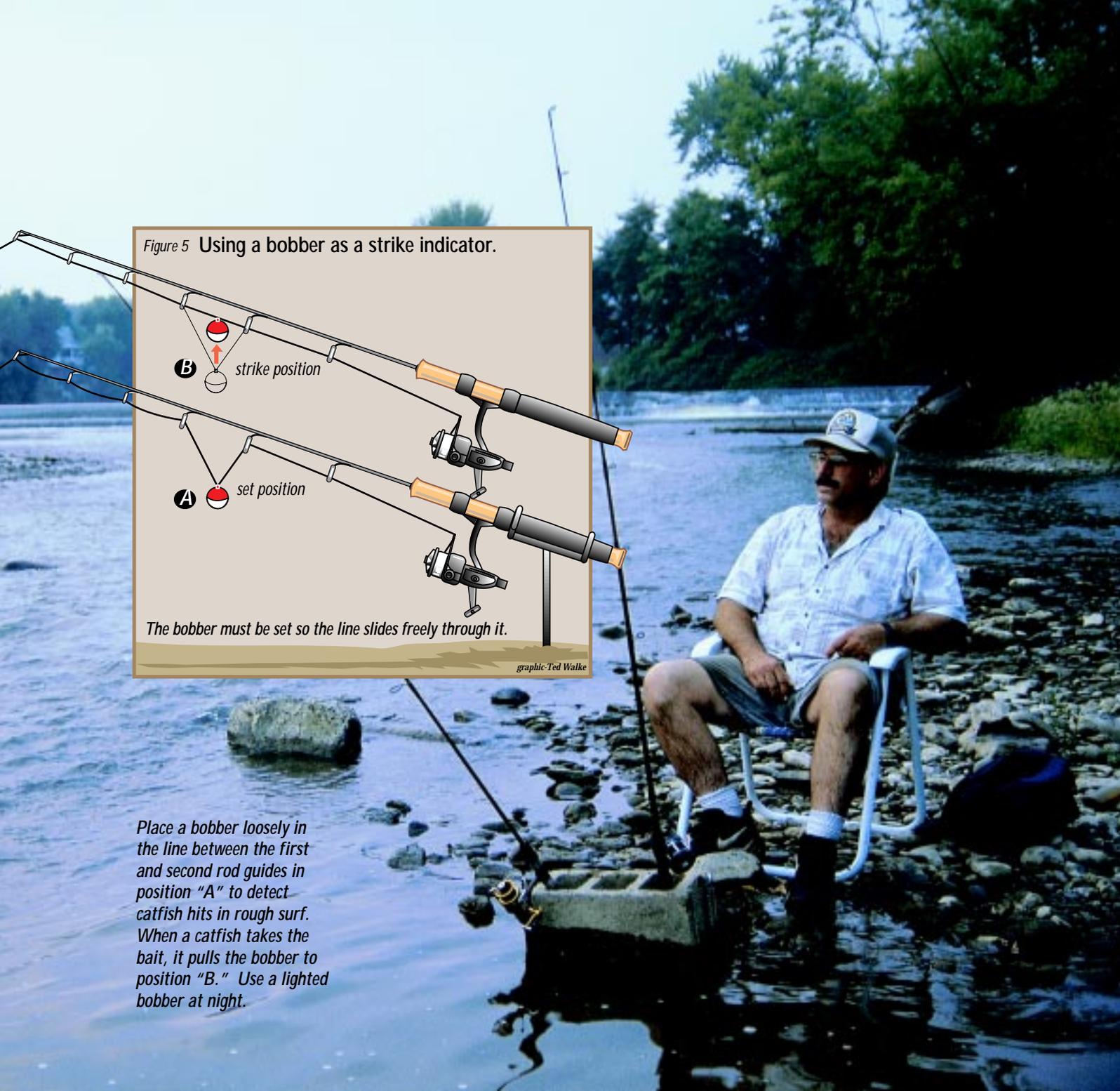


Figure 5 Using a bobber as a strike indicator.

B strike position

A set position

The bobber must be set so the line slides freely through it.

graphic-Ted Walke

Place a bobber loosely in the line between the first and second rod guides in position "A" to detect catfish hits in rough surf. When a catfish takes the bait, it pulls the bobber to position "B." Use a lighted bobber at night.

photo-Mike Bleech

catfish, the usual approach is to let the fish find the bait. This is accomplished in one of two ways—either the catfish smells the bait, or it senses movement of live bait.

There is a popular misconception that all catfish are scavengers. Even though it is certainly true that flatheads and channel cats do scavenge, both are also, and in some habitats primarily, predators.

Lively chubs might be the best live bait for Pennsylvania catfish. They remain lively longer than most other minnows, attracting catfish by their struggles on a hook. Other live minnows can be used, but few other species are as lively as certain chubs.

Flatheads feed heavily on crayfish, but I have had no success using them as bait for flatheads. However, they are fine channel catfish bait.

Shrimp are excellent channel catfish bait at Lake Erie, but in my experience, only at Lake Erie. Buy the shrimp a few hours before they'll be used. Then let them sit in the sun still wrapped in plastic so that they don't dry out.

Cut bait is my personal second choice for catfish bait. Sometimes it even seems to work better than live chubs. Any fish can be used for cut bait. I have had good results using horned dace. The chunks should be cut about an inch in length, or maybe longer with fish with a smaller diameter.

The bait can be cut as it is used, or cut in advance and frozen for later use.

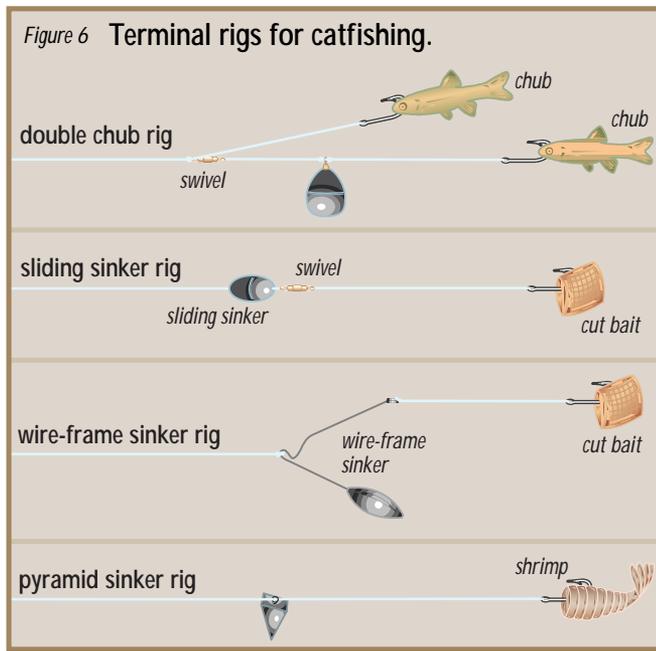
Whenever I cut bait for future use, I add a liberal amount of garlic scent before freezing. This allows the garlic scent to work into the bait, and it is better than freshly scented bait. Scent, at least a good scent, always improves bait.

Several brands of commercial catfish baits are very effective for channel cats. But I have never caught a flathead using any of these baits.

Rigs

The primary purpose of a terminal rig for catfishing is to anchor the bait on the bottom. Catfish are not very wary of heavy line or rigging. If big cats are your goal, use line testing at least 30 pounds. Tie the terminal rig directly to this line. The hook size varies with the bait. Size 1/0 is about average. Sinker weights must be adequate to hold position on the bottom. An assortment from 1/2-ounce to 1 1/2 ounces can handle most situations.

A double-chub rig, which is adequate for any catfish, but particularly for flatheads, consists of a sinker and two hooks. One hook is at the terminal end of the line about two feet behind the sinker. The other is tied to a one-foot leader that attaches to the main line above the sinker. Instead of making a loop that weakens the line significantly, I tie a barrel swivel into the line. Then I tie the leader to the leading ring of the swivel. Using two chubs more than doubles the vibrations because the chubs cause



Any of these terminal rigs can be used for catfishing in nearly any situation. However, each has a specific advantage in specific situations. The double chub rig excels for flatheads. The sliding sinker rig allows catfish to take the bait without feeling the weight of the sinker, and it is the most versatile rig. The wire-frame sinker rig improves sensitivity and reduces snags when fishing from a boat in strong current. The pyramid sinker rig holds baits well in sand.

Lake Erie surf for the same reason. Pyramid sinkers dig into the sand. Most other designs roll or drag. Use the pyramid sinker with either single-hook or double-hook rigs.

Many commercial catfish baits have the consistency of putty. They do not stay on single hooks very well. Use treble hooks instead with all these terminal rigs.

I have described rigs third because they are third in priority to fishing in the right places and using the best baits.

each other to move more than they would move if used separately.

The sliding sinker rig might be the most versatile catfishing rig. It can be used in virtually any situation. Tie a hook to the end of the line, and then cut off about two feet of line with the hook attached. String a sliding sinker on that line, and then tie a barrel swivel on the end of the line. Finally, tie the two-foot section of line with the hook and swivel to the main line from the reel. This is an excellent rig for inland lakes.

Wire frame sinkers improve sensitivity and reduce snags when fishing from a boat in strong current. Tie the sinker to the end of the main line. Then put the hook on a two-foot leader behind the sinker.

A pyramid sinker, the type used by ocean surf anglers, works well in the

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Follow these priorities and you should have some exciting sport with our big cats—channel catfish and flathead catfish. Maybe you will be the first Pennsylvania catfish angler to break that elusive 50-pound barrier.

Good luck! ☐



photo-Mike Bleech

Flathead catfish. There is a popular misconception that catfish are scavengers. Even though it is certainly true that flatheads and channel cats do scavenge, both are also, and in some habitats primarily, predators. Lively chubs might be the best live bait for Pennsylvania catfish.