

TOP 10

Keystone State Lakes for Channel Catfish

by Mike Depew,
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Upon arriving at Loyalhanna Lake, Westmoreland County, I quickly unloaded my gear and made my way to my fishing spot. I set up my gear and began to relax. After rigging up one of my spinning rods, I threaded a hunk of chicken liver onto the snelled hook and cast out into the cove.

As I rigged up my second rod, I glanced over at my deployed rod and noticed that the line I had left slack had tightened considerably. Moments later, the rod began to bend as something began to steadily pull on the line. I dropped the rod I was rigging up, grabbed the first rod and set the hook. I immediately felt the weight of a nice fish. After making a few runs and attempting to wrap itself around a couple of stumps and pieces of woody debris, the fish tired and finally came to hand. Only a few minutes after I had started fishing, I had landed the first of many nice Channel Catfish that I would encounter that night.

Channel Catfish are one of the most popular fish sought by anglers in Pennsylvania. Many of our major river systems contain excellent populations of Channel Catfish that reproduce on their own and support popular fisheries with anglers. There is also a wide-range of lakes in Pennsylvania that support

populations of Channel Catfish. In fact, the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) stocks over 50 lakes statewide with almost 200,000 fingerling catfish. Other lakes support naturally reproducing populations of Channel Catfish as well.

As a biologist with PFBC and co-author of Pennsylvania's Channel Catfish Management Plan, I've had the opportunity to review most of the statewide data collected from surveys on lakes managed for Channel Catfish. In order to assess many fish populations in lakes, including Channel Catfish, biologists routinely use Pennsylvania style trap nets to determine the density of fish present.

Although good Channel Catfish fishing can be found in other impoundments statewide, here are 10 of the top waters, based on trap net catch rates and our biologists' professional expertise.

10. *Lake Galena

Lake Galena is a 365-acre impoundment located just west of Doylestown, Bucks County. The lake is located in Peace Valley Park, which is owned by the Bucks County Parks Department, and the entire shoreline, minus a small cove portion managed

as a Nature Preserve, is open to fishing. Boating is permitted with an electric motor only restriction.

9. *Octoraro Lake

Another southeast Pennsylvania water is the 669-acre Octoraro Lake, also known as Octoraro Reservoir or Chester Octoraro Lake. This large City of Chester water supply reservoir straddles the Chester and Lancaster county line just west of Oxford. A large population of Gizzard Shad provides abundant forage for the naturally reproducing Channel Catfish population in the lake. Although no recent survey information is available, historic surveys have captured abundant numbers of catfish ranging from 3 to 29 inches.

8. Loyalhanna Lake

This 479-acre United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) impoundment located north of New Alexandria, Westmoreland County, is where I caught those Channel Catfish that August evening. So, how did I know where to fish for them? Well, assisting on the 2014 trap net survey of Loyalhanna Lake certainly didn't hurt. Biologists from the Area 8 Fisheries Management office in

Somerset surveyed the lake in the spring of 2014 and captured Channel Catfish ranging from 7 to 28 inches, plus a good number of nice bullheads and White Catfish as well. Many of the nets with good catch rates were set in the shallower coves of the lake, where Channel Catfish often prowl at night looking for Gizzard Shad, small panfish or other forage.

7. *Nockamixon Lake

Nockamixon Lake is a 1,450-acre impoundment located in Nockamixon State Park, Bucks County. The majority of the shoreline is open to public fishing, and boats can be launched at any of the four ramps on the lake. Boating is restricted to a 20 horsepower limit. Gizzard Shad, Alewife and small Bluegills provide forage for the naturally reproducing Channel Catfish population.

6. *Ontelaunee Lake

Channel Catfish and ice fishing aren't often associated with each other, but anglers at Ontelaunee Lake, Berks County, may beg to differ. The 1,082-acre water supply impoundment for the City of Reading is a well-known ice fishing spot where anglers routinely catch catfish through the ice. Primary tactics on this impoundment include setting up tip ups rigged with a large Creek Chub or shiner in portions of the main lake, as Channel Catfish seem to be less frequently caught in the coves. Fish with a few buddies. More lines in the water allows you to cover more ground and may help you pinpoint where the fish are located. Approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of the shoreline at Ontelaunee Lake is open to fishing. Boating is not permitted at the lake.

5. *Foster Joseph Sayers Lake

Located near the town of Milesburg, Centre County, this 1,730-acre USACE impoundment is the centerpiece of Bald Eagle State Park. The majority of the shoreline is publicly owned and open to fishing. Eight boat launches are also available to anglers, and there are no horsepower restrictions for boaters.

A recent survey of Foster Joseph Sayers Lake in 2011 yielded a large

catch of Channel Catfish ranging from 5 to 29 inches. The lake's population is a result of both stocking and natural reproduction. In fact, Foster Joseph Sayers Lake has served as one of the few pilot waters to test the usefulness of catfish spawning boxes, designed to boost natural reproduction of catfish in waters where little or no reproduction occurs.

4. *Blue Marsh Lake

Blue Marsh Lake is a 1,150-acre USACE impoundment on Tulpehocken Creek, Berks County. Recent surveys of the lake agree, with an abundance of Channel Catfish captured in 2014, ranging from 2 to 30 inches. Catfish can be caught here in the early spring from soon after ice out up until mid-April. During this time of the year, fish chicken liver on the bottom in some of the shallower, warmer coves.

3. Pymatuning Reservoir

Area 1 biologists Tim Wilson and Freeman Johns know a thing or two about catfish. After all, three of the top 10, and arguably the top three waters statewide, reside in their fisheries management area. One of the waters, Pymatuning Reservoir, Crawford County, sits a stone's throw from their office in Linesville. As portions of Pymatuning Reservoir are located in Ohio, Wilson reminds anglers that an Ohio license is required to fish from the Ohio shore.

2. Shenango River Lake

In terms of sheer numbers of catfish, Shenango River Lake Mercer County, takes the top prize. Wilson and Johns handled over 700 catfish from the lake in 2014. Like Pymatuning Reservoir and *Lake Arthur, Butler County, natural reproduction drives the fishery on this 3,561 acre USACE impoundment. "Expect to catch a lot of catfish in the 16- to 18-inch range," said Wilson. "They are particularly abundant."

1. *Lake Arthur

Located in Moraine State Park, Butler County, the 3,225-acre Lake Arthur is loaded with Channel Catfish according to biologist Tim Wilson. "They are abundant, they are large, and they appear to be underutilized," said Wilson. Indeed, recent surveys of Lake Arthur in 2011, 2013 and 2014 have captured 566, 768 and 559 Channel Catfish respectively. More impressive is their size. "Channel Catfish at Lake Arthur are typically bigger than the ones we get at Shenango River Lake and Pymatuning Reservoir, with most of the fish ranging between 20 to 25 inches. There is an abundance of forage, particularly Alewife, which keep the fish fat and healthy," said Wilson. 

**This water is currently part of Pennsylvania's Best Fishing Waters Channel Catfish program (www.PaBestFishing.com).*



Foster Joseph Sayers Lake, Centre County, is a popular and scenic spot to catch Channel Catfish.