

# Fall River Fishing for Channel Catfish



*The writer and his father caught these nice Channel Catfish from the Juniata River on a warm September night.*

*by Jeff Woleslagle photos by the author*

We launched the boat about 30 minutes before dark, allowing plenty of time to get the rods rigged and the boat anchored. It was a beautiful early autumn evening, and when the rods were baited and in their holders, it wasn't long after darkness fell that the first nice catfish took the bait. The bite was anything but subtle as the rod lurched in the holder, with the tip almost touching the surface of the Juniata River. Clumsily, I wrestled the rod from its holder and reared back, even though the fish was already solidly hooked. Feeling the added pressure, the big catfish made a long run down river as line peeled steadily from my spool. Finally, it settled in the main current. I tightened the drag just a little, so I could start putting additional pressure on the fish. After a few solid minutes of tug of war, the fish began to tire enough that I could work it to the side of the boat. My fishing partner shined the portable spotlight into the greenish water, and we got our first glimpse of the fish. It didn't like being illuminated and reacted to the light by making another strong run, forcing me to circle the motor and move to the opposite side of the boat. The first attempt at getting the fish in the net was unsuccessful and

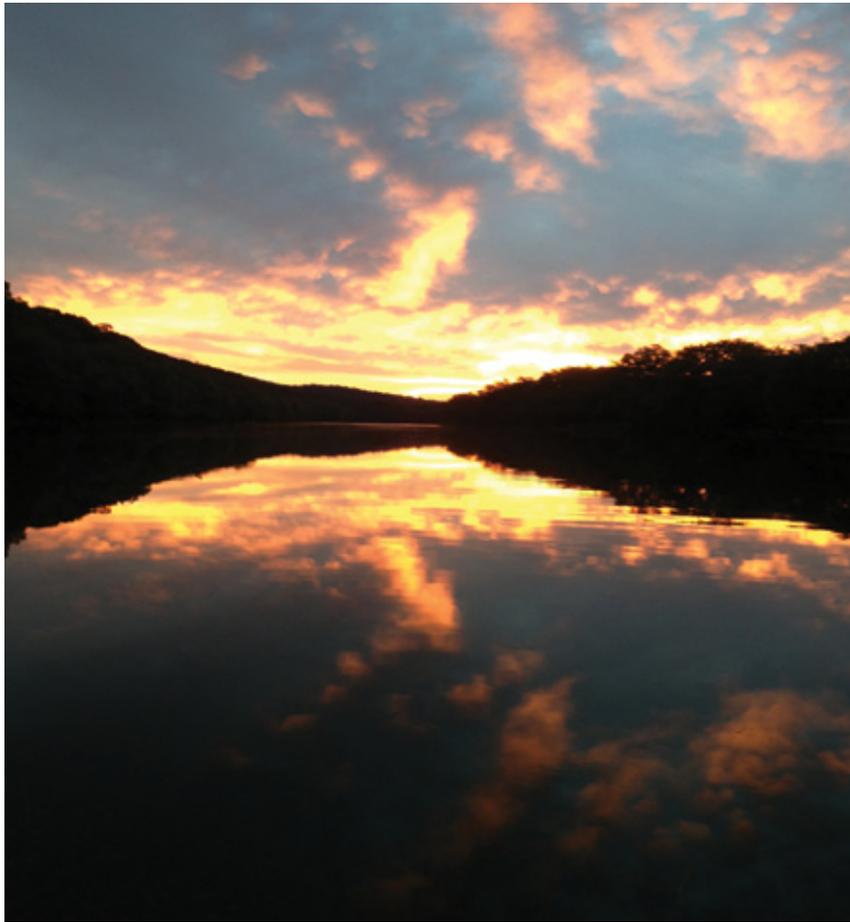
caused the catfish to run directly under the vessel. Luckily, I was able to keep enough pressure on the fish to prevent the line from being cut on the side of the boat. This time when the fish began thrashing at the surface of the river, my friend was ready with the net. The first of many big Channel Catfish for the evening had been landed.

On a typical fall night in September, you can expect steady catfish action in many rivers across Pennsylvania. When the leaves start to change color, I know some of the best catfishing of the year is at hand. Cool nights and warm days trigger most fish to feed heavily in preparation for the upcoming winter, and Channel Catfish are no exception. In September, I like to target flat areas with an average depth of 3 feet or more. I find that when the water is still warm, fish like to roam the large, flat, shallow areas feeding and aren't necessarily stacked up in deep water. As September turns to October and water temperatures drop, the fish begin to move out of the shallows and position in deeper water. This is the time when I begin to focus on deeper holes and river channels to find consistent action. If you aren't getting bites in shallows, move to the drop-offs and transition areas adjacent to deeper water and, if that isn't working, move to the deep water. A little roaming can quickly help establish just how far along the fish are in the migration to their eventual winter haunts.

Getting set up for river Channel Catfish fishing is simple with no fancy gear required. I prefer medium-heavy rods in the 7-foot range or longer. I use both baitcasters and spinning rods, which I spool with 12- to 14-pound-test monofilament line. I like to tie a ½-ounce bell sinker to the end of my line. Depending on the current and depth, I move up to a 1-ounce weight if I can't hold bottom. About 6 inches above the sinker, I will tie on a size 4



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*Get on the water before darkness falls, so you can be set up and organized in a prime location, such as the Juniata River, before the action starts.*

bait-holder hook and about 12 inches above that I will add another one. Cut bait is hard to beat in the fall, and I will use chunks of Fallfish and Creek Chubs most evenings. I like a chunk about 2-inches thick and 2-inches long, which I hook right through the middle. I also use whole nightcrawlers and crayfish, but most of the larger catfish I catch each fall are taken on cut bait. I get snagged less on the river bottom by casting parallel to or down river of the anchored boat. Have plenty of flashlights at the ready and your boat lights in the proper working order. I like to use battery-powered lanterns at the bow and stern as well. It is a big help to get on the water a little before dark to get everything situated and organized. The last thing I want to do is to be fumbling around in the dark with a big catfish on the line.

Many nights the catfish will bite aggressively within an hour after dark, and the action will then slow down. If I wait another hour or two, there is usually a second peak in activity and sometimes a third if I fish all night. If I am not getting bites in one area, I will move frequently until I find actively feeding fish. The fall bite can continue until ice shows up on the river, but the fishing gradually declines as water temperatures drop. If you have never given fall Channel Catfish fishing a try, take an evening and get out on the river. You will find some of the hottest and most consistent action of the year. ☐