

Outdoors

The best catfish

The story is told in East Texas about the notorious noodler who showed up one Saturday afternoon on the Crockett town square, very excited.

"Noodling" is sort of like arm-wrestling a big fish bare-handed. The noodler locates a catfish under a cut bank or fallen tree trunk, or perhaps in a discarded oil drum, takes a deep breath and dives down and gently feels his way around the fish until he can slip his fingers into its gills.

All the time he's feeling up the fish, of course, he's devoutly hoping that it is a fish ... and not a snapping turtle or cottonmouth moccasin! When he gets his grip, he hauls the fish out of its hole and the battle begins. The noodler hangs on for dear life and tries to surface with his prize before he runs out of air.

The noodler in this story found a bunch of his cronies working on a six-pack on the square and breathlessly announced that he'd discovered a huge yellow catfish in a deep hole in a bend of the Trinity River south of town.

"She's hanging out in an old car body, a Model A Ford!" he told his audience.

"Well," one of his listeners asked, "You're a heckuva noodler! Why don't you just reach in and grab aholt of that fish?"

"I've tried," was the answer, "But every time I'm almost gettin' my hold, she rolls th' dadblamed window up!"

I'm sorry; I just couldn't resist telling that yarn while wondering how to do a column on yellow catfish, aka flathead catfish, aka Opelousas catfish, aka etc.

However, noodling is not a joke; there are real people who really do this for fun and profit.

Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

Yellow cats are the second largest fresh-water fish in the Hill Country, exceeded in maximum size only by the blue catfish.

Both species grow larger than 100 pounds. The difference is that a big flathead is always excellent eating, while a big blue cat tastes like oil-soaked mechanics' rags. Little blues — under five pounds — are better, but still cannot compare to a yellow cat of any size. The flesh of a blue catfish always seems sort of mushy, but the yellow cat has firm meat that holds up to grilling and neither loses flavor nor dries out. An old catfisherman friend of mine and lifelong resident of the Hill Country, when told that I had a slab of yellow catfish, summed it up in three words: "It's the best!"

A major difference between blue and yellow cats is that the latter are predators, feeding on live fish and never scavenging. A flathead disdains to bite on a stink bait, cut bait or any of the other unappetizing things fishermen brew up to tempt catfish.

Flatheads, being self-respecting catfish that gravitate to the nicer neighborhoods, prefer clear water with a firm bottom and a little current.

Most yellow cats seem to be taken on trotlines or limb-lines on stormy or at least rainy nights. A river rise seems to put the flatheads on the prowl,

But a trotline can be a dangerous thing, with up to 50 stagings — each with a sharp #6 or #7 hook attached — and a very powerful hooked



Photo by John Wootters

Master hunter, fisherman, knifemaker, trapper, photographer, rifleman and homebuilder Leon Treiber with a recent catch.

fish in the water. Snagged fisherman have actually been dragged overboard and drowned by monster catfish.

Experienced trotliners wear sharp sheath knives on their belts while handling baited lines. The preferred flathead bait is live perch or other fish up to a foot long.

The man in the picture, showing off a 26-pound yellow catfish taken last week in the Guadalupe, is my pal Leon Treiber, a master hunter, fisherman, knifemaker, trapper, photographer, rifleman, and homebuilder who lives near Hunt, only a few hundred yards from where he was born up on Kelly Creek.

He is not a noodler, but he is a veteran fisherman for yellow catfish, and the pictured fish is one of four flatheads he caught last week. Interestingly, his limb-lines

took two yellow cats, hardly 40 yards apart in same river, on the same night. One of these fish was the same color as the one in the picture, a dirty greenish brown, while the other was bright golden yellow! There is no question that these are the same species of fish, and no explanation that I know of for the startling difference in color.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.