

# Flathead Catfish

*Pylodictis olivaris*



TPWD PHOTO

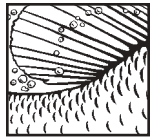


As the common name suggests, this catfish has a flat head, but other than that, it looks like any other catfish: it has smooth, scaleless skin, whisker-like *barbels* around the mouth, and long, sharp spines on the *dorsal* (back) fin and one on each side of the *pectoral* (shoulder) fin.

Northern Pineywoods

# Flathead Catfish

*Pylodictis olivaris*



## APPEARANCE

**Length:** 3 to 4 feet (0.9 to 1.2 m)

**Weight:** Can exceed 100 pounds (45 kg)

### Distinguishing Characteristics

- Olive-yellow to light brown body sometimes marked with dark specks or blotches
- Belly is paler than the body.
- Large mouth with protruding lower jaw
- Eight barbels surround the mouth – four below the mouth, two above the mouth and one on each side of the mouth.
- Square *caudal* (tail) fin

## LIFE HISTORY

**Range:** From the lower Great Lakes through the Mississippi River watershed to the Gulf states

**Diet:** Young feed mostly on invertebrates such as worms, insects and crayfish. When 10 inches or larger, their diet consists entirely of fish—shad, carp, suckers, sunfish, largemouth bass and other catfish (including their own kind).

**Predators:** Alligators, water snakes, turtles, larger fish, and humans

**Sexual maturity:** Between the third and sixth year

**Spawning season:** Late May through August when the water temperature is between 75° and 80° F

**Nests:** Males select hollow logs, caves or areas beneath the banks for their nest sites. Males may even improve their selected sites by creating shallow depressions for the females to lay their eggs.

**Eggs:** Number varies greatly depending on female size, but average is up to 100,000 eggs at a time.

**Incubation:** Four to six days

**Young:** The *fry* (very young fish) will school together at the nest for several days after hatching; afterwards they will seek shelter beneath rocks, roots and other cover and begin their independent lives.

**Life span:** Average is 12 to 14 years, but one recorded flathead catfish lived 24 years.

## HABITAT

Flathead catfish prefer deep pools of streams, rivers, canals, lakes and reservoirs, where the water is *turbid* (cloudy) and the currents are slow.

## BEHAVIOR

Adults are usually solitary, each staking out a favorite spot under a tree or in a cove, in deep water. At night, they move into shallow areas to feed. Males defend their nest and eggs aggressively. They will fan the nest with their tails to keep the eggs clean and provide them with oxygenated water. If females have been eating poorly, their bodies may conserve resources by not releasing eggs. Poor overall health and certain environmental conditions such as drought or flood can reduce flatheads' ability to spawn. In healthy times, clutches can reach 100,000 eggs, but only a small number will survive.

## NOW YOU KNOW!

- Catfish have long, sharp spines on the front edges of their dorsal fins that are connected to venomous glands. Although the spines can tear skin, the glands excrete venom. The venom is irritating and some people have had serious problems with infection afterward. (If you are "stung" by a catfish and are worried about it, please call your doctor.)
- Scientists estimate that a female will lay 1200 eggs for every pound she weighs. A female flathead that weights 50 pounds might release 60,000 eggs at a time.
- *Pylodictis* is Greek for "mud fish." *Olivaris* is Latin for "olive-colored." Flathead catfish are known by other names as well—yellow cat, opelousa cat, pied cat and Mississippi cat.
- Unlike other catfish which are scavengers, flatheads prey only on live fish.

## FLATHEAD CATFISH AND PEOPLE

In size, flatheads are the second largest sport fish in Texas after their cousin, the blue catfish. Among those who selectively fish for catfish, flatheads fall just behind channel catfish as a prized species. Because of their popularity with anglers, they have been introduced in many other states where they have adapted well. In some cases, however, they have out-competed the native fish species, causing those native fish populations to decline sharply, disrupting some natural ecological processes.