

Important to note catfish aren't always necessarily bottom fish

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
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Many anglers mistakenly believe that in order to catch a catfish, they must fish on the bottom of whatever lake, pond or river they are fishing. The truth is that catfish regularly swim off the bottom for a variety of reasons.

Biologists and anglers have theorized what causes catfish to suspend off the bottom at different times, with feeding, water quality, oxygen and thermoclines being the most common answers.

In areas where other fish — including black bass or striped bass — are feeding on the surface, catfish are known to leave the bottom and shadow surface-feeding fish to take advantage of missed, wounded or other pieces of baitfish.

Striped bass are particularly known for slashing into schools of baitfish to stun the bait, then circling back to eat the prey. In some cases, the wounded fish sink to where suspended catfish are the next-level feeders without exerting the effort.

At other times, without current to keep them pinned to the bottom, baitfish are freer to move about in a large river and its tributaries.

When catfish are feeding, it's a common scenario to see them leave the bottom and move into schools of baitfish.

During the fall, water

quality in reservoirs turns sour near the bottom, with low levels of dissolved oxygen. That could explain why catfish leave the bottom, but turnover is not a scenario to be found in moving water rivers, nor is it as big an issue in the summer.

"I suspect it has a lot to do with oxygen levels in the water, and, of course, catfish are going to go where the food is, but I couldn't tell you exactly why they, at times, will

suspend up off the bottom," veteran catfish angler David Shipman said.

Catching suspended catfish is often done by mistake. Catfish are caught by anglers fishing for bass, crappie or bream, and a catfish wanders along.

To target suspended catfish, one of the best places to fish are bridge crossings. Catfish will congregate under bridges because the water under the bridge is cooler than the surrounding water.

Catfish also tend to find

ample food supplies by staging around bridge crossings, especially when birds are nesting in the super structure of the bridge.

Bird droppings, eggs and premature hatchlings often find their way in the water and become catfish food.

Insects, reptiles and other assorted small creatures that dwell underneath bridges also fall in the water and wind up as catfish food.

When targeting catfish around bridges, some of the top choices for baits are whole earthworms, or half portions of night-crawlers. Other catfishermen swear by pieces of cooked shrimp as bait for catfish, especially during the summer. The theory behind shrimp for bait is the shrimp mimics the taste of freshwater mussels that die off in warm water and float to the surface, subsequently becoming catfish food.

The bulk of catfish caught this time of year are typically channel catfish. Blue catfish and

flat head catfish are also prevalent in area lakes but are more widely scattered during the summertime.

The best tackle for channel catfish is 10-pound tackle using 10-pound monofilament line and a size 1 or size 1/0 Kahle hook.

Baits can either be fished with a No. 5 split shot weight and placed in a rod holder or rigged under a slip cork set to the depth fish are marked on a sonar unit.

One trick for finding the correct depth of suspended catfish around bridges is to cast a split shot rig, engage the reel and count as the bait pendulums back to a vertical position.

Once a fish bites, remember how many turns it takes to get the fish to the surface and repeat that depth on the next cast.

PHILLIP GENTRY is the host of the podcast radio program "The Outdoors Show with Phillip Gentry & Boat Girl." More information on the show is available at pgand-boatgirl.com.



Catfish are mistakenly believed to be only a bottom-dwelling fish, but they can often be caught suspended around manmade structures during the summer

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