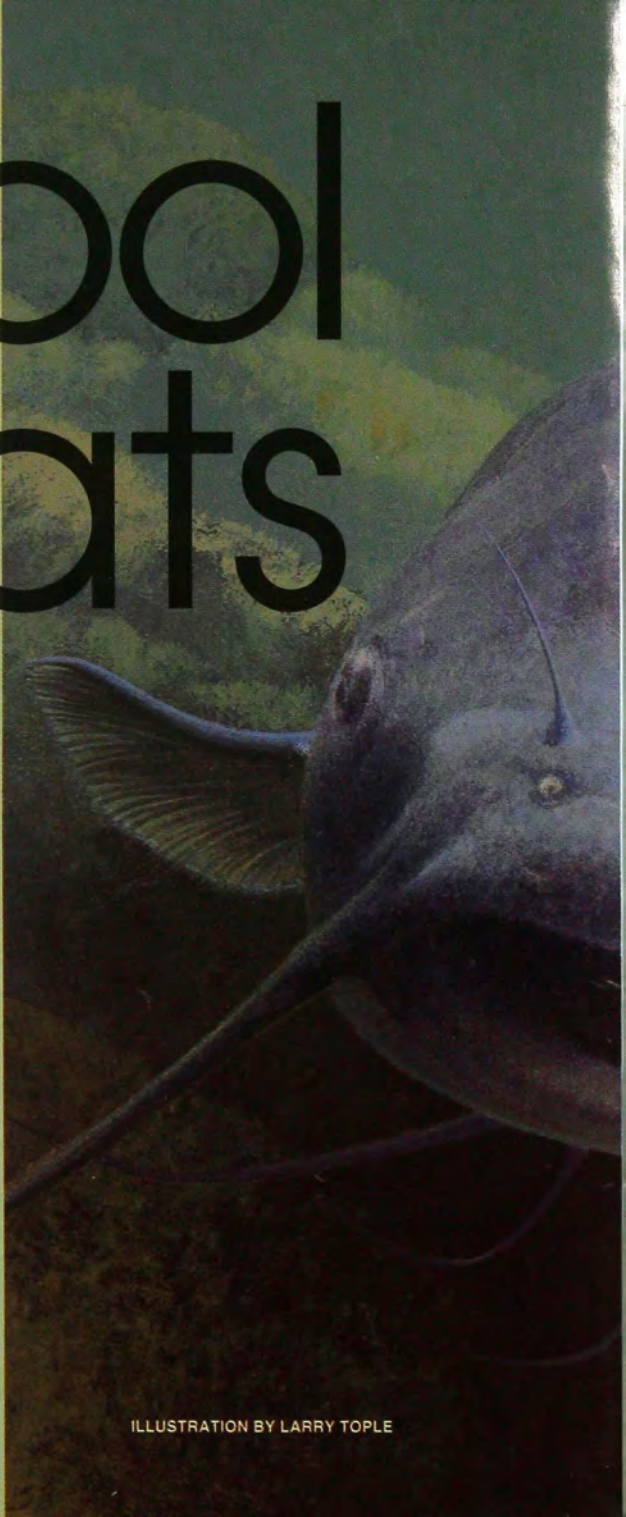


Cool Cats

Big catfish aren't confined to warm southern streams. The Red River of the North lays claim to some of the continent's best catfishing.

By Greg Breining





Red River Catfish

THINK A MOMENT of northern Minnesota and Canada. What do you imagine? Birch and spruce forest stretching as far as you can see? Sparkling blue lakes in basins of solid granite? Walleyes swimming in water so clear you can see bottom 10 feet down?

Now, think again. Think of hundreds of square miles of prairie and farmland stretching out toward Saskatoon. Picture a lazy, brown river, as thick as gravy, winding back on itself again and again. And imagine catfish—catfish that weigh 20 pounds.

Think, too, of how you might levitate a fully equipped bass boat over a shoreline of gumbo two feet deep, a band of oozing muck that prevents you from backing a trailer to within six feet of water. That was exactly the predicament Henry Drewes and I faced as we prepared to launch his boat on the Red River of the North just west of Hallock, 15 miles south of the Manitoba border.

The trip did not begin auspiciously, least of all for Drewes, a fisheries manager for the Department of Natural Resources. Drewes feels passionately about protecting the Red

River's trophy channel cats, which he calls a "national resource." In discussing it, he worked himself into such a lather that by the time we reached Karlstad, he didn't notice the jumbo stop signs and flashing red lights marking the town's busiest intersection. He simply drove straight through toward Manitoba. Within moments he saw flashing red lights of a different sort.

As Drewes talked to the trooper, I leaned against the hood of his pickup and took in the Red River landscape. It is flat—flat as water. A rim of trees rings the horizon like the shoreline of a huge lake. In fact, this land once formed the bed of Glacial Lake Agassiz, a shallow freshwater sea of the ice age. Agassiz stretched from Big Stone County (the bump on Minnesota's western border) westward nearly the breadth of Saskatchewan and northward nearly to Hudson Bay. Lake Winnipeg and Lake of the Woods are the puddles left after most of the lake drained away, leaving a legacy of rich soil and stunning flatness.

Drewes wrapped up his business, and we drove on to Hallock to get a motel room. Then we continued to the river, an abrupt ditch in the landscape. The river had dropped several feet during the summer, leaving a quagmire at the end of the concrete ramp. Drewes backed down the steep ramp as far as he dared.

We pulled on waders and began wrestling with the bass boat, which

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plowed into the river and took in water over the transom. Finally, we skidded the bow over the mud and managed to get the pickup and trailer back up the ramp.

Winding Trough. It's 5 in the afternoon. The late-summer sun barely touches the river. Drewes starts the motor and heads slowly upstream. We watch a beaver waddle from its burrow in the riverbank to the succulent willows nearby. Clam shells show where a raccoon ate. Tree roots dangle from the bank 15 feet above, reminding us of the erosive power of this river when it jumps its banks and floods thousands of square miles of farmland.

Drewes scans his depthfinder to find our fishing spot. The Red is essentially a winding trough, 100 feet wide, with an undulating bottom of clay. Most catfish anglers would look for a riffle dropping into a deep pool. But this riverbed isn't rocky enough to form a riffle. Logjams, the cover of choice in most catfish streams, have been blown out by floods. So Drewes looks for spots where the bottom simply drops into deeper water.

Suddenly, he announces that the river is getting deeper. We continue upstream 100 feet or more until the river begins to shallow up again. Then he spins the boat sideways to the current, and we drop bow and stern anchors to hold us broadside.

"What's beneath us?" I ask.



The Red River's biggest catfish swim in its northern reaches, from Hallock downstream to Lake Winnipeg, where suitable forage is plentiful.

"Eight feet right up here," Drewes says, nodding toward the upstream side of the boat. "And right here," he says, nodding downstream, "it's about 12 feet."

Drewes pulls out a medium-heavy bait-casting rod and a reel spooled with 20-pound-test monofilament.

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He threads his line through a 1-ounce egg sinker and ties on a large barrel swivel. To the other end of the swivel, he ties a 2½-foot length of heavy mono and to that, a 4/0 hook.

He pops open the cooler and lifts out a fresh 10-inch tullibee, also called a cisco. He cuts it crosswise into pieces about 2 inches wide. "The key to catching larger fish is fresh cut bait," he says, driving his hook through a chunk.

"That's the popular conception—they're just catfish, they eat anything," he says. "Well, they don't. All the old axioms about a catfish wanting stink bait are really more folklore than reality. Catfish get to be the size they do by being fish-eaters. If there's a supply of high-oil, high-protein fish available, they won't be grubbing chicken livers or stink baits on the bottom."

After I rig my tackle, Drewes takes my hook and sticks it into the head of the tullibee.

"Canadians told me it's always an honor for a guy to get the head of the fish."

"May be it's an honor, but is it effective?"

"Oh, yeah," he says. "It's a very small mouthful for these catfish."

We lob the baits 50 feet downstream. The egg sinkers plummet to the bottom and roll slowly toward the center of the channel. We reel in the slack line.

"The current will carry the scent from your bait down throughout

the whole pool," Drewes says. "The fish will key in on it. That's why you don't spend a lot of time in any one spot, because they would have been there if they would have been hungry."

We wait. But not for long. Drewes says he feels a tug. "You'd think a fish that weighs 25 pounds would just pick it up and go, but often-times it feels like a little bullhead tapping on it."

After a couple more taps, the fish seems to take the bait, so Drewes lowers his rod tip to give the fish line. As the line tightens, Drewes rears back hard.

"I missed him," he says, reeling back a bare hook. Other fish—carp, suckers of various kinds, sheepshead—often tap at cut bait, but only channel catfish have mouths big enough to clean the hook, Drewes explains as he threads on another piece of tullibee.

He casts downstream. This time, however, there are no takers. After a few minutes, we lift anchor, putter upstream to a new hole, drop anchor, and cast out our baits. Within minutes Drewes feels more tapping. Once again he rears back.

This time he sets the hook into something solid. The fish takes off downstream. Then it settles into a bulldog fight, making several short, powerful runs. Soon the fish breaks water in front of me, and I can barely believe my eyes.

"They really do weigh 20 pounds,



Henry Drewes cradles a catfish before releasing it in the Red River's murky waters.

don't they?" I blurt out. Its mouth alone would accommodate both my fists side by side. The fish rolls on the surface and dives, stripping line from the reel. "He isn't ready yet," Drewes says.

"I want to see him leap," I say.

"He just did." Drewes laughs. "That was a tail walk."

Finally, he draws the catfish alongside the boat and hands me the rod. The pectoral spines of a catfish this size are like wooden dowels, too blunt to puncture or cut. Drewes reaches down and lifts the cat by the spines as though they were the handles of a trophy cup. He tapes it at 34 inches and

guesses it weighs 18 pounds.

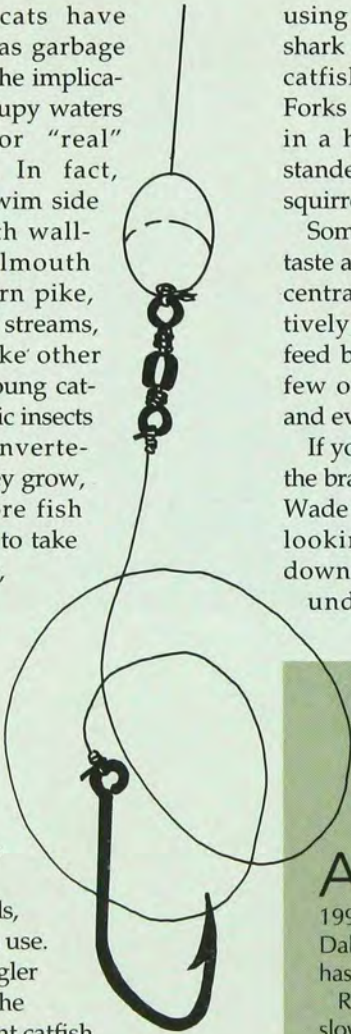
Just a bit on the small side for the Red River.

Taste Buds. Channel catfish swim in streams large and small throughout much of Minnesota. As youngsters, they are sleek and silvery gray, punctuated with the black dots that give rise to their Latin name, *Ictalurus punctatus*. As they grow, they lose their spots and sleek shapes until they eventually resemble giant tadpoles with whiskers. The whiskers and much of the channel cat's body are peppered with taste buds, enabling the fish to find food when visibility is nil.

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Channel cats have taken a rap as garbage eaters, with the implication they occupy waters too foul for "real" game fish. In fact, they often swim side-by-side with walleyes, smallmouth bass, northern pike, and in some streams, muskies. Like other game fish, young catfish eat aquatic insects and other invertebrates. As they grow, they eat more fish but continue to take other morsels, living and dead, a habit responsible for the strange and downright repulsive baits, such as blood baits and rotting chicken entrails, many anglers use. A Russian angler once told me he fished for giant catfish on the Volga River

Red River catfish rig: Slip a 1-ounce egg sinker on your line. Tie on a barrel swivel, add 2½ feet of heavy mono and a 4/0 hook. Bait with cut fish.



using a whole duck dressed on a shark hook. Drewes tells of a large catfish caught during the Grand Forks catfish derby and displayed in a horse trough. Amazed bystanders watched as it belched up a squirrel.

Sometimes baits need no smell or taste at all. If you fish in a good concentration of channel cats in relatively clear water where they can feed by sight, you stand to catch a few on jigs, crankbaits, spinners, and even weighted flies.

If you're adventurous, you can try the brave southern art of "noodling." Wade a small catfish river at night, looking for a tangle of roots or downed timber jammed along an undercut bank. This is where

Red River Cat Facts

A COOPERATIVE research project on Red River catfish conducted in 1990–91 by Minnesota and North Dakota, with help from Manitoba, has yielded some interesting facts.

Red River channel catfish grow slowly and live long. Researchers found fish up to 26 years old—twice the life expectancy of catfish in the southern United States. In the Red, as a general guide, 20-year-old fish weigh about 20 pounds.

ILLUSTRATION BY DNR GRAPHICS

male catfish build their nests. Despite the possible presence of snakes and snapping turtles, reach blindly into the crevice and pull out a catfish of unknown size by the lip.

Drewes himself is a southerner. Growing up in Virginia, he learned to catch channel cats on rod and reel, jugs, and trotlines, but he draws the line at noodling. "When I was down in Oklahoma, some of the hill folk down there tried to talk me into going noodling with them, but I figured hell, no, I'm not going to stick my arm up under a bank in the middle of the night."

In 1988, as a fisheries biologist with the DNR, Drewes became involved in management of the Red River and its catfish after anglers and biologists

voiced concerns that catfish might be getting smaller and less numerous because of overfishing.

The first step, Drewes says, was to clean up a mishmash of inconsistent regulations by Minnesota, North Dakota, and Manitoba. At the same time, limits became more restrictive. To protect larger fish, Minnesota and North Dakota now allow a daily limit of five channel cats, only one of which can be more than 24 inches (about 6 pounds).

Next, says Drewes, fish managers needed to learn more about the Red River's catfish and the people who fish for them. In 1990 Minnesota and North Dakota, with help from Manitoba, launched a comprehensive catfish population assessment.

Red River cats are international travelers. One fish tagged near Drayton, N.D., was netted by a commercial walleye fisherman in Lake Winnipeg, 200 miles downstream. Another fish, tagged by Canadians near the border, turned up 14 days later near Hecla Island, far out in Lake Winnipeg, 250 miles away.

Drewes says Minnesota and North Dakota hope to follow the population survey with more research. The studies will provide fish managers with the baseline data they need to determine if sport fishing or other influences, such as pollution, are harming the catfish. So far, says Drewes, Red River cats are faring well, but two threats loom large.

First is the increasing popularity of the Red River cats. "This population is unique," says Drewes. "It's sensitive to overfishing if people don't practice catch and release."

Another threat comes in the form of dozens of flood-control projects planned for Red River tributaries. If they do their job too well or regulate flows in unnatural ways, they could keep catfish and other fish from swimming over or around dams during upstream spawning runs. Says Drewes, "We're screwing around with the whole water-flow cycle on the river because of all these little pork barrels on the tributaries."

—GREG BREINING

Red River Catfish

The study confirmed that Red River cats live long and grow large, especially in the river's northern reaches, where they gorge on goldeye and mooneye—silvery fish up to a foot long. "The reason you see 20-pound catfish in the Red River is that substantial forage base," says Drewes. An earlier Manitoba creel census showed channel cats in Canada averaged 19 pounds.

Red River catfishing begins in late May and early June, as water temperatures reach the upper 50s. Fishing can be fast, but high water makes boat handling tough at that time of year. For that reason, Drewes plans his catfishing trips for mid-summer. Fishing continues through September and even later, until the water temperature falls into the mid-50s and the fish go off their feed.

Slow Fishing. It's only August, but already the fish seem to be slipping into their fall torpor. Drewes' big cat provides the last action of the day. By nightfall, the air is downright chilly. Rather than pull the boat through the mud in the dark, we decide to beach it and come back in the morning.

Returning the next day, we climb into waders covered with yesterday's mud. Drewes heads upstream through a thicket of willows to find the boat. Ten minutes later, his boat rounds the bend and comes ashore. I load the gear, hop aboard, and we begin fishing the holes we fished the

evening before. We continue up-river, spending no more than 20 minutes at a spot. In a word, the fishing is slow.

We surmise that yesterday's cold front has put the catfish down. It's hard to believe that anything lying beneath 10 feet of brown water could have any awareness of changes in the atmosphere. Indeed, divers have told Drewes the river is pitch black at any depth. Yet unquestionably, the fish are in a sulk. They're probably lying in the deepest holes and moving very little, Drewes says. Our only strategy is to keep moving.

Finally, Drewes feels a tap on his bait. He drops his rod tip, leans forward, then rips the rod back through the air.

"Here," he says. "You take it."

"No, no. It's your fish."

"Take it. I want you to feel this."

I grab the rod. The fish strips line with the determination of a mала-mute. Each time I bring it toward the surface, it rolls and dives, as if to escape the startling sunlight. At last, it comes to the boat. I hand Drewes the rod, lean over the gunwale, grab the pectoral spines, one in each hand, and hoist my trophy aboard. About 16 pounds, Drewes says.

I back the hook out of its rubbery lip and ease it back into the river. It rights itself and disappears.

Now, our only remaining challenge is to winch a 500-pound bass boat across 10 feet of mud and wrestle it onto a trailer. □

The Catfish Gourmet

MANY GOURMETS consider the catfish's firm, white, flaky meat among the finest for eating. Here's advice for cleaning and cooking catfish. (Before you decide to keep your catch, consult the *Minnesota Fish Consumption Advisory*, available through the DNR Information Center. See page 63.)

The first step in cleaning a catfish is to skin it. (If you have a small cat, it's skin is edible, and you can skip this step.) Cut the skin all the way around the head, in front of the dorsal and pectoral fins. Hold the fish's head by grabbing its upper jaw with a pair of pliers or by nailing the head to a tree. Then grab the cut skin with a pliers and peel it all toward the tail.

Now you can fillet the fish as you would any other species. Or you can gut it by making a deep cut behind the head, grasping the fish's head and pulling it toward the belly and away from the fish. This removes the head and entrails. Cut off the fins and tail.

Pescado Borracho

This is a Mexican method for cooking a 5-pound catfish.

- 6 dried ancho chilies
- 1 cup hot water
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup parsley, chopped
- 3 tomatoes, peeled and chopped
- ½ teaspoon cumin
- ½ teaspoon oregano
- 2 tablespoons capers



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1 cup pimento-stuffed green olives, chopped

2 cups dry red wine

1 cup flour

salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Tear ancho chilies into pieces and soak in hot water for about 1 hour. Drain and blend chilies to a chunky purée in an electric blender. Dust catfish with a mixture of flour, salt, and pepper. Brown fish in oil in frying pan. Transfer fish to an ovenproof casserole and set aside.

Sauté onion and garlic in the remaining oil. Add chili purée, parsley, tomatoes, cumin, oregano, salt, and pepper. Cook over moderate heat 5 minutes. Add olives, capers, and wine. Stir well. Pour entire mixture over fish. Cover and bake in oven 20 to 30 minutes.

—ROB BUFFLER

This and other recipes appear in Fishing for Buffalo (Culpepper Press, 1990) by Rob Buffler and Tom Dickson.