

North Carolina Sport Fish Profiles



Flathead catfish

Scientific Name:
Pylodictis olivaris

Other Names:
shovelcat, mudcat,
yellow cat



Illustration by Duane Raver

Identification:

The flathead catfish has a broad, flat head, with a lower jaw protruding beyond the upper jaw. Its back and sides are brown to yellow, with black-to olive-brown mottling, fading to a dirty white or yellow belly. Inside the mouth on the upper jaw, it has a large tooth plate with backward extensions on each end.

Habitats and Habits:

Flathead catfish are native to the river basins of the Gulf of Mexico, such as the Mississippi River Basin. Although native to the New River and several other river basins in North Carolina, they have been introduced to many river basins that flow to the Atlantic Ocean, such as the Neuse, Yadkin and Cape Fear. They are most common in large rivers and lakes where they often inhabit deep, slow stretches near submerged logs, brush, rip rap and underwater piles of debris.

Flatheads feed primarily on live fish. Due to their large size and appetite, flatheads have been associated with declines of several native fish species in waters where they have been introduced. Biologists are conducting research on the life history characteristics of introduced flathead catfish to gain a better understanding of this species. One recent study reported movements of individual flatheads up to 25 miles over a 12-to 18-month period.

Due to possible problems associated with flathead catfish introductions, anglers should not move flathead catfish from one waterbody to another.

Fishing Techniques:

Live fish, such as shad, panfish and bullhead catfish, are the preferred baits for large flathead catfish. Crawfish are reported to work as well. Flathead catfish are rarely caught with chicken livers and stinkbaits, although these work well for most other catfish species.

Good Places to Fish:

Many of the most popular places to fish for flatheads in North Carolina are outside of their native range, such as the Cape Fear River and impoundments of the Yadkin River.

Other Information:

NCARP Minimum Requirements: 30 pounds or 41 inches

State Record: 78 pounds from the Cape Fear River, Sept. 17, 2005

World Record: 123 pounds from Elk City Reservoir in Independence, Kan., May 14, 1998*

** Anglers provide information on their potential world-record catches directly to the International Game Fish Association, which maintains the world records for sport fishing.*

*N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission
www.ncwildlife.org/fishing
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