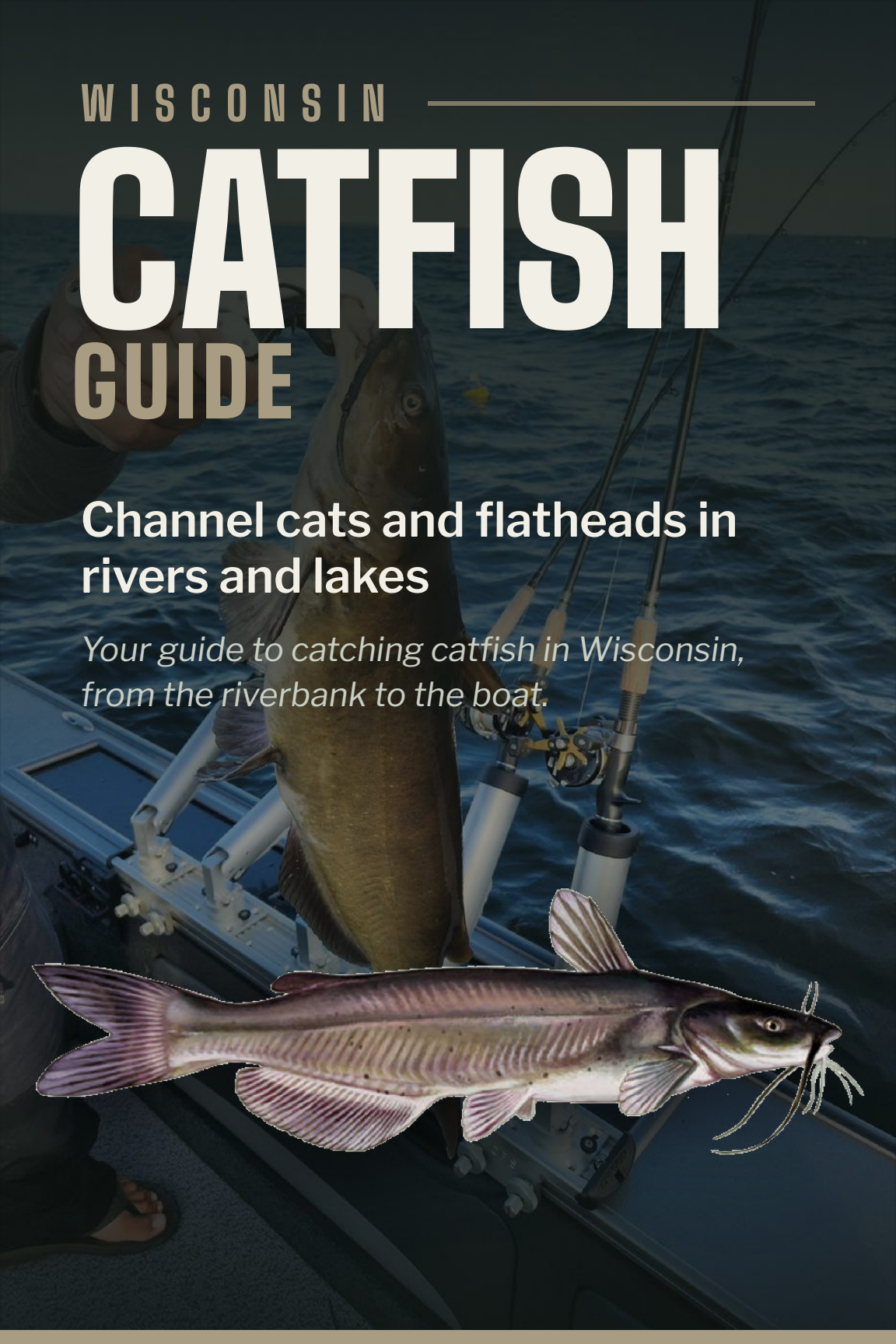
WISCONSIN

CATFISH GUIDE

Channel cats and flatheads in rivers and lakes

Your guide to catching catfish in Wisconsin, from the riverbank to the boat.



WISCONSIN

CATFISH

Guide

Channel cats and flatheads in rivers and lakes



Wisconsin Catfish Guide
First edition, October 2026

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Read this first. Fishing rules change every year and differ by lake. Everything about seasons, sizes and bag limits in this book is for the 2026–27 season, checked 2026-10-08. Always check the current Wisconsin DNR rules and your lake's own rules before you fish. Depth maps are not for navigation. Ice is never guaranteed safe. You are responsible for your own safety and for following the law.

Lake Sheet is not affiliated with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Lake facts come from DNR survey and stocking records as published by Lake Sheet; see the sources at the back of the book.

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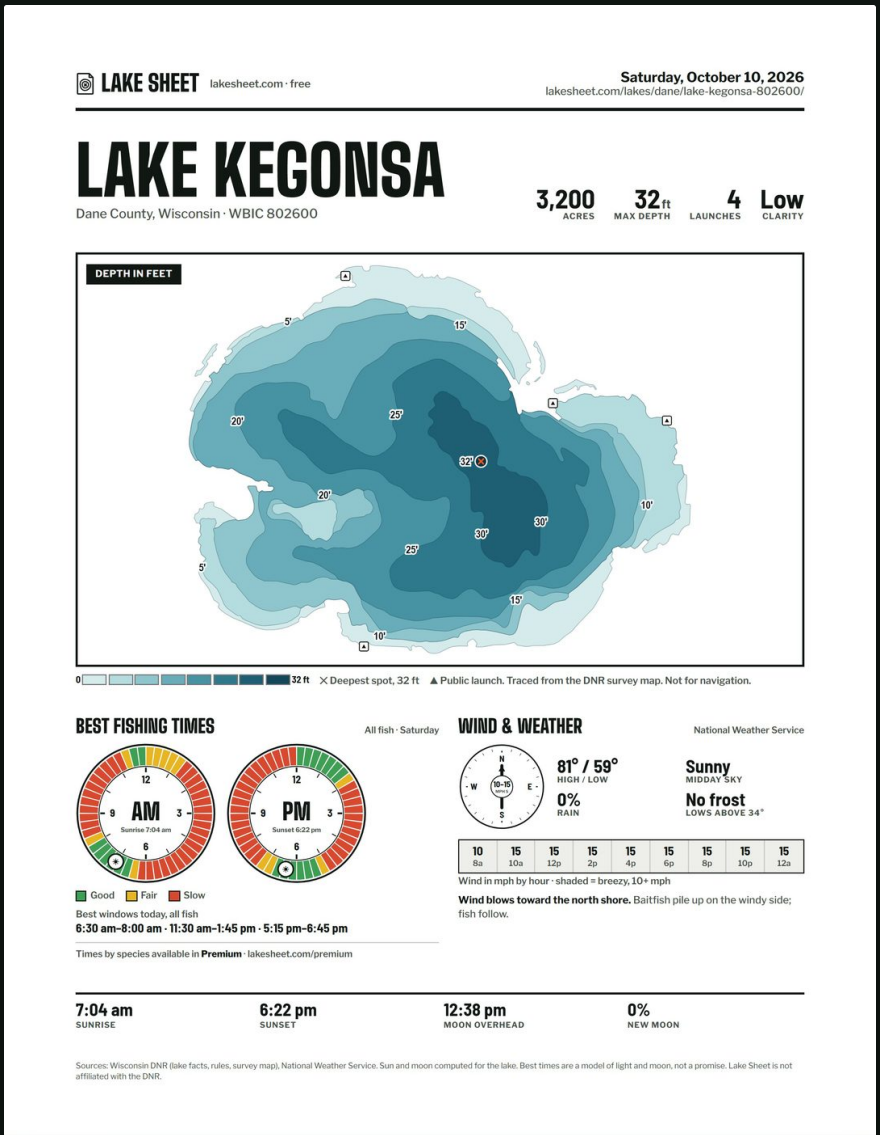
FREE WITH THIS BOOK

YOUR FREE LAKE SHEET

Free for more than 4,600 Wisconsin lakes: two printable pages, made for the boat. This is the real sheet for Lake Kegonsa.



LAKE SHEET lakesheet.com · free

Saturday, October 10, 2026
lakesheet.com/lakes/dane/lake-kegonsa-802600/

LAKE KEGONSA

Dane County, Wisconsin · WBIC 802600

3,200	32 ft	4	Low
ACRES	MAX DEPTH	LAUNCHES	CLARITY

DEPTH IN FEET

5' 15' 20' 25' 32' 20' 10' 30' 30' 25' 5' 15' 10'

0 32 ft · ✕ Deepest spot, 32 ft · ▲ Public launch. Traced from the DNR survey map. Not for navigation.

BEST FISHING TIMES

All fish · Saturday

AM — Sunrise 7:04 am

PM — Sunset 6:22 pm

Good · Fair · Slow

Best windows today, all fish
6:30 am–8:00 am · 11:30 am–1:45 pm · 5:15 pm–6:45 pm

Times by species available in **Premium** · lakesheet.com/premium

WIND & WEATHER

National Weather Service

81° / 59°
HIGH / LOW

0%
RAIN

Sunny
MIDDAY SKY

No frost
LOWS ABOVE 34°

10	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
8a	10a	12p	2p	4p	6p	8p	10p	12a

Wind in mph by hour · shaded = breezy, 10+ mph

Wind blows toward the north shore. Baitfish pile up on the windy side; fish follow.

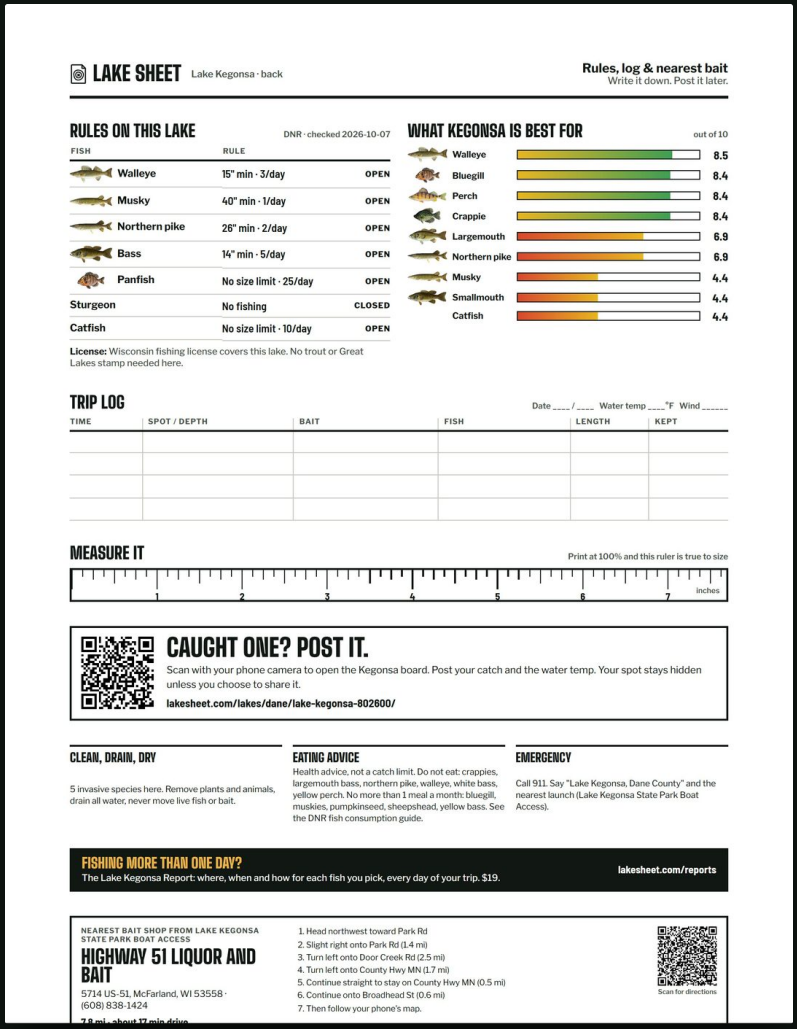
7:04 am	6:22 pm	12:38 pm	0%
SUNRISE	SUNSET	MOON OVERHEAD	NEW MOON

Sources: Wisconsin DNR (lake facts, rules, survey map), National Weather Service. Sun and moon computed for the lake. Best times are a model of light and moon, not a promise. Lake Sheet is not affiliated with the DNR.

1. **Depth map** traced from the DNR survey, deepest spot marked (traced lakes)
2. **Lake facts:** acres, max depth, launches, clarity
3. **Best times** from the sun and moon on AM and PM dials
4. **Wind and weather** by the hour, and which shore the wind hits
5. **Sun and moon** times for the lake
6. **Sources and date** on every fact

THE BACK OF THE SHEET

RULES, LOG & NEAREST BAIT



LAKE SHEET Lake Kegonsa · back

Rules, log & nearest bait
Write it down. Post it later.

RULES ON THIS LAKE

DNR · checked 2026-10-07

FISH	RULE	
Walleye	15" min · 3/day	OPEN
Musky	40" min · 1/day	OPEN
Northern pike	26" min · 2/day	OPEN
Bass	14" min · 5/day	OPEN
Panfish	No size limit · 25/day	OPEN
Sturgeon	No fishing	CLOSED
Catfish	No size limit · 10/day	OPEN

License: Wisconsin fishing license covers this lake. No trout or Great Lakes stamp needed here.

WHAT KEGONSA IS BEST FOR

out of 10

Walleye	8.5
Bluegill	8.4
Perch	8.4
Crappie	8.4
Largemouth	6.9
Northern pike	6.9
Musky	4.4
Smallmouth	4.4
Catfish	4.4

TRIP LOG

Date ____ / ____ Water temp ____°F Wind _____

TIME	SPOT / DEPTH	BAIT	FISH	LENGTH	KEPT

MEASURE IT

Print at 100% and this ruler is true to size

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 inches

CAUGHT ONE? POST IT.

Scan with your phone camera to open the Kegonsa board. Post your catch and the water temp. Your spot stays hidden unless you choose to share it.

lakesheet.com/lakes/dane/lake-kegonsa-802600/

CLEAN, DRAIN, DRY

5 invasive species here. Remove plants and animals, drain all water, never move live fish or bait.

EATING ADVICE

Health advice, not a catch limit. Do not eat: crappies, largemouth bass, northern pike, walleye, white bass, yellow perch. No more than 1 meal a month: bluegill, muskies, pumpkinseed, sheepshead, yellow bass. See the DNR fish consumption guide.

EMERGENCY

Call 911. Say "Lake Kegonsa, Dane County" and the nearest launch (Lake Kegonsa State Park Boat Access).

FISHING MORE THAN ONE DAY?
The Lake Kegonsa Report: where, when and how for each fish you pick, every day of your trip. $19.
lakesheet.com/reports

NEAREST BAIT SHOP FROM LAKE KEGONSA STATE PARK BOAT ACCESS

HIGHWAY 51 LIQUOR AND BAIT

5714 US-51, McFarland, WI 53558 · (608) 838-1424

7.8 mi · about 17 min drive

1. Head northwest toward Park Rd
2. Slight right onto Park Rd (1.4 mi)
3. Turn left onto Door Creek Rd (2.5 mi)
4. Turn left onto County Hwy MN (1.7 mi)
5. Continue straight to stay on County Hwy MN (0.5 mi)
6. Continue onto Broadhead St (0.6 mi)
7. Then follow your phone's map.

Scan for directions

1. **This lake's rules** for every fish, from the DNR
2. **What the lake is best for,** rated by fish
3. **Trip log** and a true-size **ruler**
4. **Invasive species** and eating advice
5. **Nearest bait shop** we know of, with turn-by-turn directions
6. Scan to post your catch

lakesheet.com

Find your lake, print it, take it in the boat

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Wisconsin has two big catfish, the **channel catfish** and the **flathead catfish**, and three small cousins, the **bullheads**. Channel cats are the fish most people catch: they bite day and night, eat almost anything, and taste great fried. Flatheads are the trophies: they grow past 70 pounds here, eat almost only live fish, and feed after dark. This book covers both, and shows you how to tell them from the bullheads, because the rules for each are different.

IF YOU WANT A MESS OF CHANNEL CATS THIS WEEK

1. Chapter 4.4: the five baits that work, and a homemade stink bait.
2. Chapter 5.1–5.3: the slip-sinker and Santee rigs, from the bank.
3. Chapter 6.2: where catfish sit in a river.
4. Chapter 9: skinning, filleting and the fish fry, plus the eating advice for your water.

IF YOU WANT A BIG FLATHEAD

1. Chapter 1.2: how flatheads live and what they eat.
2. Chapter 4.5: live bait, and the rules for using bluegill and bullheads.
3. Chapter 5.5: the live-bait rig, fished at night.
4. Chapter 8: the Winnebago flathead season and its 36–42 inch protected slot.

Rivers first. The best catfish water in Wisconsin is river: the Mississippi, Wisconsin, Rock, Fox, Wolf, St. Croix, Chippewa, Black and Pecatonica. **Rivers are not Lake Sheet lakes**, so there is no Lake Sheet for the Mississippi or the Rock. The lakes, flowages and river lakes on those rivers often do have one, like Lake Winnebago, Petenwell, Lake Wisconsin and Lake Koshkonong. Chapter 7 lists the 15 best catfish lakes on Lake Sheet; Chapter 2 covers the rivers.

The QR codes. Most lakes named in this book have a code. Scan it to open that lake's free Lake Sheet, with its launches, wind, best times, bait shop, rules and DNR eating advice.

The rules change by county and river. They're for the 2026–27 season, checked October 8, 2026.



CHAPTER 1

MEET THE CATFISH

Catfish get their name from their whiskers, but the DNR points out they share a cat's habits too: they rest by day, prowl at night, and pick secluded hiding spots. Wisconsin has two big ones worth chasing, the channel catfish and the flathead, plus three bullheads and a few tiny madtoms. Knowing which one you have matters, because each has different habits, baits and rules.

1.1 The channel catfish · **1.2** The flathead catfish · **1.3** Channel or flathead? · **1.4** The bullheads · **1.5** Size, age and growth · **1.6** The records · **1.7** Whiskers, smell and spines · **1.8** Spawning · **1.9** What catfish eat

1.1
THE CHANNEL CATFISH

CHANNEL CATFISH

Ictalurus punctatus



TELL IT BY	A deeply forked tail, scattered black spots on silvery sides (they fade on big fish), an upper jaw that sticks out past the lower one, and eight whiskers (barbels).
LOOKS LIKE	Flathead catfish: square tail, wide flat head, lower jaw sticks out, mottled yellow-brown. Bullheads: square or rounded tail, small (most 6 to 12 inches).
COLOR	Blue-gray to olive back, silvery sides, white belly. Big males can turn almost black.
SIZE	Most are 20 to 25 inches. The DNR puts the top end at about 30 inches and 15 lb; the state record is much bigger.
WISCONSIN RECORD	44 lb 0 oz, Larry Volenec, Wisconsin River, Columbia County, 1962
EATS	Almost anything: insects, crayfish, snails, small fish, dead fish, even plants. It finds food by smell and taste.

The channel catfish is the catfish most Wisconsin anglers catch. It lives in big rivers across the southern half of the state, in the Winnebago lakes, in many flowages and in some lakes where the DNR stocked it. Check four things:

1. **A deeply forked tail**, like a swallow's. No other Wisconsin catfish has one.
2. **Black spots** scattered on silvery sides. The DNR says the channel cat is the only member of its family with such spots. They fade on big fish, and old males can turn almost black.

3. **The upper jaw sticks out** past the lower jaw.
4. **Eight whiskers** (barbels) and a slender body compared with a flathead.

A big, dark male is sometimes called a "blue cat", but true blue catfish are almost never caught in Wisconsin; their range ends farther south on the Mississippi.

1.2 THE FLATHEAD CATFISH



FIG 1.1 Flathead catfish. A broad, flat head, a lower jaw that juts out, a square tail and mottled yellow-brown sides. Duane Raver, USFWS.

The flathead is the biggest predator in Wisconsin's rivers. The DNR calls it "the granddaddy of Wisconsin catfish". Look for:

- **A wide, flat head**, flatter than any other catfish.
- **A lower jaw that sticks out** past the upper jaw, like an underbite.
- **A square tail** with only a slight notch. Young flatheads often have a pale patch on the upper tip of the tail that fades with age.
- **Color:** light brown to yellow sides with darker brown or black mottling, and a cream to yellow belly. River folks call it yellow cat, mud cat, shovelhead and Mississippi cat.

Flatheads live in big rivers of the Mississippi basin: the Mississippi, St. Croix, Chippewa, Red Cedar, Black, La Crosse, Trempealeau, Wisconsin, Pecatonica, Sugar and Rock. They also live in the Fox and lower Wolf, and in the Winnebago lakes. The DNR thinks they reached the Fox from the Wisconsin River near Portage within the past 100 years. They were also stocked in Lac LaBelle in Waukesha County to control rough fish and panfish.

1.3
CHANNEL OR FLATHEAD?

	CHANNEL CATFISH	FLATHEAD CATFISH
Tail	Deeply forked	Square, slight notch
Head	Tapered	Very wide and flat
Jaw	Upper jaw sticks out	Lower jaw sticks out
Spots	Black spots on the sides (fade on big fish)	No round spots; mottled brown blotches
Color	Blue-gray to olive, silvery sides, white belly	Yellow to light brown, cream to yellow belly
Eats	Almost anything, alive or dead	Almost only live fish
Typical size	20–25 inches	Most 20–30 inches; 30–40 inches and 20–40 lb is a good one

THE ONE-SECOND CHECK

Look at the tail. **Forked: channel cat. Square: flathead or bullhead.** Then look at the size and head: a square-tailed fish with a flat, wide head and an underbite is a flathead.

1.4
THE BULLHEADS

Bullheads are the catfish's small cousins, and they're everywhere: lakes, ponds, backwaters and slow streams across the state. Most are 6 to 12 inches. Under Wisconsin's rules **bullheads are not catfish**: they have no season, no bag limit and no size limit, while catfish (channel and flathead) count toward the catfish bag.

	BLACK BULLHEAD	BROWN BULLHEAD	YELLOW BULLHEAD
Chin barbels	Dark	Dark	**White or cream**
Sides	Plain dark; often a pale bar at the base of the tail	**Mottled** with dark blotches	Plain yellow-brown

Pectoral spine	Smooth, small barbs on the back edge	Rough, saw-toothed back edge	Rough, saw-toothed back edge
Anal fin rays	15–21	21–24	24–27
Typical size	6–10 in, max about 13 in	8–12 in, max about 15 in	7–11 in, max about 14 in
Wisconsin record	5 lb 8 oz	4 lb 2 oz	4 lb 5 oz

Identification and sizes from the DNR's statewide catfish management plan (2016); records from the DNR record list, September 2026.

Bullhead or small catfish? Any catfish with a **forked tail** is a channel cat, even a 6-incher, and it counts toward your catfish bag. A small flathead has the flat head and jutting lower jaw, and often that pale patch on the tail. A bullhead has a square or slightly rounded tail and a short, chunky body.



FIG 1.2 **Black bullhead.** Duane Raver, USFWS.



FIG 1.3 **Brown bullhead.** Duane Raver, USFWS.



FIG 1.4 **Yellow bullhead.** Duane Raver, USFWS.

1.5 SIZE, AGE AND GROWTH

AGE	CHANNEL CATFISH	FLATHEAD CATFISH
1 year	3 in	7.5 in
3 years	9 in	16 in
5 years	14.5 in	21 in
10 years	26.5 in	24.5 in*
15 years	–	38 in
24 years	–	43 in

*Typical length at age in Wisconsin, from the DNR's catfish leaflet (1998). Growth depends on the water. *The leaflet's number; DNR work on the Wolf River (2016 plan) found flatheads near 30 inches by age 10.*

- **Channel catfish** grow fast when young. The DNR's 1998 leaflet says most Wisconsin channel cats don't live much past 8 years and top out near 30 inches and 15 pounds; its 2016 plan says they can live 20 years or longer. On the Mississippi, DNR hoop nets catch mostly 10- to 14-inch fish, and traps catch more 13- to 18-inch fish.
- **Flatheads** grow slower but keep growing. On the Wolf River, DNR biologists found flatheads near 30 inches by age 10 and near 40 inches by age 20, and aged fish to 30 years. Wisconsin flatheads mature later and bigger than flatheads farther south, and females may not spawn every year. That is why the Winnebago System protects them.
- **A real survey:** in June 2025 the DNR caught 44 flatheads on the Wisconsin River above Petenwell Lake. They averaged 24.1 inches and 11.2 pounds; the biggest was 43.8 inches and the heaviest 55.0 pounds.

1.6

THE RECORDS

RECORD	SIZE	WHO, WHERE, WHEN
Flathead, hook and line	74 lb 5 oz, 53.0 in	Stan Hagensick, Mississippi River, Vernon County, Mar. 30, 2001
Channel cat, hook and line	44 lb 0 oz	Larry Volenec, Wisconsin River, Columbia County, 1962
Flathead, live release	51.5 in	Beau Baxter, St. Croix River, Polk County, June 22, 2021
Channel cat, live release	37.0 in	Maxfield JonasKrueger, Lake Mendota, Dane County, Jan. 15, 2023
Flathead, by hand	55 lb 8 oz, 47.0 in	Greg Sprehn, Black River, La Crosse County, July 20, 2026
Flathead, bow	53 lb 8 oz, 48.75 in	Ryan Tagawa, Mississippi River, La Crosse County, Oct. 8, 2023
Channel cat, bow	25 lb 12 oz, 38.0 in	Isaac Gundlach, Lake Mendota, Dane County, July 13, 2023
Black bullhead	5 lb 8 oz, 21.5 in	William A. Weigus, Big Falls Flowage, Rusk County, Sept. 2, 1989
Brown bullhead	4 lb 2 oz, 17.5 in	Jessica Gales, Little Green Lake, Green Lake County, July 7, 2006

Yellow bullhead	4 lb 5 oz, 19.5 in	Michael Huebsch, White Mound Lake, Sauk County, Aug. 6, 2021

Wisconsin DNR Record Fish List, revised September 2026.

1.7

WHISKERS, SMELL AND SPINES

Eight barbels. A catfish has eight whiskers: one at each corner of the mouth, one by each nostril, and four under the chin. They are fleshy feelers that can **feel and taste**. That's why a catfish can find a smelly bait in muddy water at midnight, and why bait matters more than color or flash.

Eyes. Small. Catfish hunt more by smell and touch than by sight, which is why they feed well at night and in muddy water after rain.

The spines: the part you can't touch. The barbels **don't** sting; that's a myth. The danger is the **three sharp spines**: one at the front of the back fin and one at the front of each side fin. They lock straight out when the fish is scared, and they have glands that coat them with a venom the DNR calls "painful but not dangerous". Bullheads and madtoms have them too.

HOLD A CATFISH LIKE THIS

- Slide your hand over the top of the head from the front, with the back spine between your fingers and your fingers behind the side spines.
- Or grip the lower jaw of a big channel cat or flathead with a glove to control it, and put your other hand under its belly before you lift (8.6).
- Use pliers or a fish gripper on small bullheads.

DON'T

- Grab a catfish from below or around the belly. That's where the side spines are.
- Let a flopping fish slide through your hand.
- Ignore a deep spine puncture that gets red, swollen or hot. See a doctor.

1.8
SPAWNING

Catfish nest in **dark holes**: hollow banks, rock ledges, undercut roots, hollow logs and man-made structures. The male picks the spot and fans it clean.

> **SPAWNING TIME AND THE BITE**
> While males guard nests in late June and July, catfish often bite less, and the biggest flatheads are tied to their holes. Flatheads feed hardest before spawning (May into early June) and again from July to September (DNR leaflet).

	CHANNEL CATFISH	FLATHEAD CATFISH
When	Late May to July	Late June and early July in Wisconsin
Water temperature	About 70–82°F; best near 80°F	About 72–75°F
Age at first spawn	3–5 years, about 13–16 in	4–7 years, about 16–24 in (later and bigger in Wisconsin)
Eggs	About 6,000 per pound of female (Mississippi River study)	Up to 100,000 in a big female
Hatch	5–10 days	6–9 days
Nest guard	Male fans and guards eggs and fry	Male guards eggs and fry

From the DNR's catfish leaflet (1998) and management plan (2016).

1.9
WHAT CATFISH EAT

Channel cats are scavengers and hunters. The DNR leaflet lists insects, snails, crayfish, small fish, dead fish, fish guts, frogs, grasshoppers, clams and plant matter. Large channel cats eat a lot of small fish. They feed hard **after rain**, when muddy water washes food into the river, and at night in clear water. In muddy water they feed all day.

Flatheads eat live fish. Young flatheads eat insects and crayfish; adults are ambush hunters that wait in a log jam or cut bank with their mouths open and lunge at sunfish, bullheads, suckers, shad, carp and even channel catfish. They rarely take dead bait.

In winter both slow way down. Flatheads stop feeding below about 43°F and lie nearly still in deep holes until spring. Channel cats feed little below 50°F, though they're sometimes caught through the ice.