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SPORTS

Lake Texoma for two kinds of cats

By Luke Clayton

Feb 15, 2016

In today's era of political correctness, which definitely spills over into the outdoor press, we seldom read about going fishing when the primary goal is to catch fish to eat. It's all about catch and release.

I'm a firm believer in releasing all the big fish of any species I'm targeting, even when out on a quest for fillets for a big fish fry. To me, a big fish fry is a tradition that is the ultimate end to a great fishing trip.

A blue catfish weighing much over fifteen pounds is definitely not nearly as tasty as those smaller.

Meetings have been in the works with those that make our game and fish laws to discuss ways to protect trophy size blue catfish. This is a good thing, those jumbo blues are great sport and the big female spawners insure the propagation of the species.

So, should those of us that enjoy eating fish feel guilty when we keep our full limit? Most definitely not, at least to my way of thinking, assuming the fresh fish will become the focus of a great family meal or, several meals!

Lake Texoma guide Larry Sparks, owner of Sparky's Guide Service, is of like mind. Sparks and his team of guides are currently running combo jug line/ rod and reel trips with the end result a great day on the water and several gallon zip lock bags of freshly caught catfish fillets.

"We tailor our trips to suit our customer's desires," says Sparks. "Most folks want to enjoy a great day of fishing and go home with some tasty fillets for the frying pan. We understand this and cater to their wishes. We do ask that they release the bigger, breeder fish. "

Early this week, I joined Sparks for a midday of catfishing; after all, as I've said many times during my outdoor writing career, "It's hard to tell the story if you weren't there to experience it!"

The day was perfect for winter fishing with just enough wind to put a ripple on the water and temperatures in the sixties. As always, Sparks had baited several jug lines with freshly caught shad the evening before. He likes to take advantage of the "night bite" when fishing with jug lines. We began our trip "chasing down" the jugs. The round floaters, made of closed-cell polyethylene, are easy to spot. Sparks says these "jug lines" called "Catfish Donuts" www.catfishdonuts.com made by Henry Miller are the best he has found for not only storing in the boat but also catching catfish.

"The Donuts have a built in water drag that slows a big catfish's speed when he grabs the bait. It's very uncommon to find them very far from where they were initially set," says Large as he eases back on the throttle of his big 30-foot striper boat in a big flat not far from the submerged Washita River channel.

We used binoculars to scan the water's surface, looking for the circular floaters. As we were scanning the nearby water, we spotted one of the floaters moving along the surface just a few yards from the boat. Within a 50-yard radius, we spotted several of the white donuts, dotting the water's surface. Some were stationary but some were being tugged along slowly by catfish. When "jug line" fishing, you never know...one of the stationary donuts could have a tired, 50-pound blue catfish resting 30 feet below the surface!

If you've never chased down a jug line zipping along the surface, propelled by a big catfish, you have missed one of the outdoors adrenaline packed moments. A good bit can be determined by just how fast the floater is moving. This one was flying but no match for the outboard running on slow throttle.

We soon approached within "pole reach" of the floater. Sparks was running the boat and I was instructed to use the 10-foot pole with a hook attached to grab the line just below the float and pull it up to the boat. I could tell it was a solid fish the moment the line went taut. With line in hand, I hoisted up a lively blue catfish that weighted about 18 pounds. Sparks had the net waiting and the fish was soon in the cooler. After running the remaining donuts, we proceeded to boat several more nice blues ranging from five to fifteen pounds, just right for their appointment in the frying pan with hot cooking oil! Then we were off to round two, this time with channel catfish.

Is it accepted among catfish anglers that nothing beats fresh, bloody, oily shad for blue catfish. Although I've caught many nice blues while rod and reel fishing with punch bait, I believe there is absolutely no better bait for channel catfish than a good, stinky punch bait that stays on the hook. I've fished with all sorts of catfish baits through the years but can honestly say I've never used one that is more productive, day in and day out, than Danny King's Catfish Punch Bait. Sparks feels the same way and I was not surprised when he broke out a fresh container of Danny Kings.

We pulled up to a "hole" Sparks had baited with soured grain and proceeded to bait the # 4 treble hooks with a hefty servings of punch bait. While blue catfish will often suspend, channel catfish will usually be found on or near bottom. I glanced at the boat's sonar and noted we were fishing in water 26-feet deep.

"Bait em' up and drop em' to bottom and reel up a crank or two until you can feel the weight," tipped Sparks. "That's where we've been catching them."

In cold water, the bite of a good-sized channel cat often feels much like a crappie tapping on the bait, especially when fishing in deep water. Other times, the channels will try to jerk the rod out of your hand. Such was the case this day. Within a minute of my Danny King's reaching bottom, I felt a slight "tap, tap" that telegraphed up through my line. When the hook was set, I knew I was hooked solidly with a good size fish. Out first "rod and reel" fish was a chunky 6-pound channel, followed by many more. Some were taking the bait hard, hitting it on the run but others only mouthed our offerings. We kept the drags set lightly so that the bigger fish could strip line rather than break off.



Guide Larry Sparks (center) and his guides are putting their clients on some red-hot fishing for blue and channel catfish. *photo courtesy Sparkys Guide Service www.sparkysguideservice.com*

If you might be getting a bit of cabin fever and have a “hankering” for a big mid winter fish fry, contact guide Larry Sparks online at www.sparkysguideservice.com or call 580-916-2293. For more information on the Catfish Donuts, visit www.catfishdonuts.com.

Listen to Outdoors with Luke Clayton and Friends on weekends on radio stations from Nebraska to Texas or anytime at www.catfishradio.com.

Luke’s new book, *Kill to Grill, the Ultimate Guide to Wild Hog Hunting... and Cooking* is available via the web site www.catfishradio.com.

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