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Reading Article G2

Article #3: Catfish Bigger Than Kids

By Homer Circle

Can you imagine a catfish bigger than a boy? Some bewhiskered giants bigger than several boys lurk in South America's jungle rivers. Weighing in at 300 pounds, one of them can feed a lot of hungry catfish lovers.

I encountered one of these whoppers at a remote airstrip in Colombia a few years back. Just as I got off the plane, I saw a man offering a giant catfish for sale. It drooped over a wheelbarrow, head and tail almost touching the ground. I figured it weighed more than 150 pounds.

Locals told me about seeing huge catfish gobble down many things. I can believe it. The mouth of a 300-pound catfish must be as large as a washtub.

There are more than 1,000 kinds of catfish; 28 species are found in the United States' lakes and rivers. This huge family has some mighty peculiar members. Let's meet a few.

Walking catfish. Nature equipped this feisty little catfish, found in southern Florida, with an extra lung for breathing on dry land. When its swimming hole dries up, the walking catfish waddles on stiff forward fins in search of another lake or stream. If an enemy attacks, the fish flares its top and front fins like sabers and leaps at the attacker to scare it off.

Armored catfish. This cat has heavy, bony plates protecting its body. The armor makes the fish difficult to fillet. To cook it, toss the fish whole into a fire. When it is done, crack it open for eating. Some armored catfish are found in Florida, but the 100-pounders live in South America.

Rounding out the family of odd catfish are talking catfish, which make guttural sounds when you pull them from the water; climbing catfish, which scramble up shore brush in search of food; electric catfish, which can deliver a mild

shock; and blind catfish, which dwell in the inky blackness of underwater caves. Blind catfish find food through taste buds in their eight whiskers.

Most catfish have four whiskers on the upper jaw and four on the lower jaw. Sensory pores on these whiskers help the fish smell and taste food even in the muddiest of water.

The United States does not have catfish anywhere near the size of those in South America. But in some large U.S. rivers, blue and flathead catties do top 100 pounds.

Most of the catfish you are likely to catch will be much smaller, about frying-pan size. All 28 kinds of catfish found in the United States are good to eat. When you catch one, remember that the dorsal, or top, fin and the two forward, or pectoral, fins have poison glands at their bases. They can give you painful puncture wounds.

The safest way to handle an average-size catfish is to wear a glove and grab it by the lower jaw. Then use wire cutters to clip off these dangerous fins.

To cook catfish, skin and slice them into fillets or steaks. Flour them and fry in oil until golden brown. You will see how easy it is to overeat these tasty fish.