

Flathead Catfish

BY TERRY B. JOHNSON • ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Pylodictis olivaris*. The genus is Greek for mud fish. The specific epithet is Latin for olive colored.

DESCRIPTION: With their scale-less bodies, barbels (whiskers), and spines, flatheads are clearly catfish. Adults often weigh 20 to 50 pounds, and sometimes much more. The rod-and-reel record is 123 pounds (Kansas); Arizona's record is "just" 71 pounds on inland waters and 74+ pounds on the Colorado River. Adults are creamy/pale yellow to light brown on the back and sides, with black to brown mottling. The belly is pale. Young flatheads may be very dark. The broadly flattened head, protruding lower jaw, and slightly notched (not deeply forked) tail distinguish flatheads from other large catfish in our area.

DISTRIBUTION: Flatheads are native to the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio river basins, but they have been introduced in many waters, from Florida to California. They were introduced in Arizona 50 or so years ago. Now they occur here from the lower Colorado (Yuma) upriver into Lake Havasu, and throughout the Gila River system, including the Verde and Salt rivers and their impoundments. Recently, young flatheads have been observed in the Agua Fria River, above Lake Pleasant.

HABITAT: Flatheads are known as fishes of large rivers and tributaries, but "large" is a relative term. Arizona's Salt and Verde rivers are not large by Eastern standards, but flatheads thrive in them, just as they do in impoundments such as Bartlett and Roosevelt. Access to deep, relatively still water for loafing and wintering, and shallower flats for nocturnal foraging, is a crucial element of high quality habitat. Anglers know

that deep "holes" in river bends are favored by flatheads, but so are the swift tailwaters below dams.

BIOLOGY: In Arizona, flatheads nest in May-June, in underwater caves, depressions under rocks, and beneath undercut banks. The female lays up to 100,000 eggs, which are guarded by a lone adult male. Few eggs survive; even fewer fry reach adulthood. Flatheads are top



carnivores in the aquatic food chain as adults, but a small one is just another morsel waiting to be eaten. Those that survive may live 20 or more years.

Anglers prize flatheads for their predaceous behavior, great strength, and size, but these same features have dire consequences for native fish. Flatheads have become well established in rivers that once harbored 6-foot, 80-pound Colorado pikeminnows and a variety of native suckers, including the now-threatened razorback. Efforts to restore native species have to date been stymied by flathead predation.

In spring to early summer, flatheads move upstream to spawn. The Salt

River from upper Roosevelt Lake to the diversion dam below the Hwy 288 bridge brims with flatheads then. A live fish on a big hook is a good bait; so are waterdogs and fresh cut-baits (Refer to current Arizona fishing regulations for legal live bait where you plan to fish). Use heavy tackle, in case you hook into Granddad (or Grandma). You'll find the big cats at night when they cruise the shallows of lakes near old river channels, on the prowl for sleeping sunfish. Local legend has it that scuba divers at Roosevelt Dam have encountered flatheads "as a big as a car." It's just a fish tale (right?), but the anglers among us can always hope. Well prepared, flathead steaks are tasty.

STATUS: Far from threatened or endangered, flatheads are thriving in Arizona. Take is regulated by Commission Order 40. Methods of take and possession limits are reviewed each year and revised as appropriate.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Management of flatheads in Arizona is simple, at least in terms of sustaining their presence—regulate harvest to promote healthy populations where we want them sustained and to encourage population reductions in areas where other fishery values are emphasized. This species is too significant a predator on native fishes to ignore its impacts in key recovery areas, and too well established and highly prized by anglers to advocate eradicating it statewide. The necessary balance will not be achieved easily, and certainly not without give-and-take on both ends, but achieve it we must. 🐟

Terry B. Johnson is an enthusiastic but woefully pathetic catfisherman. He claims to have been much better (in many ways) as a youthful angler back in Oklahoma, but we doubt it.