



## Fathead Cat

An urgent call is coming over the line and Ron Gehrke strains to take in the message. A weighted blue gill hooked just behind the dorsal fin, quiet until now in the Mississippi River bottom murk near the tangle of fallen timber that just might hold a giant flathead cat, now shimmers in distress. The 911 call is unmistakable.

This “telegraph” line is 63-pound braided nylon. If the predator cat, which will only stalk and eat live forage, strikes the gill, Gehrke is counting on a strong enough leash to wrestle the fish out to open water before it battles its way back to the snags. A lifetime of taking cats up to 56 pounds in this beautiful slough country of pool #8 near Lacrosse, and the belief that 100 pound flatheads work these waters will make a man prepare properly for a heavy weight bout.

“You’ve got to get em out of the wood, get em out in the open and hope for the best,” he says. “I just tork on them. That’s ripping-lips time. They’re so powerful. A channel cat can fight, but they’re not in the same class as a mud (flathead). The thought of setting the hooks on something that you might have absolutely no control over is intriguing. You don’t know if the next cat is going to be two pounds or sixty.”

The bluegill flutters again, and Gehrke tunes in to the “tick” “tick” “tick” traveling up the line. “Something chasing you buddy?” he whispers, a question soon answered as bluegill becomes cat-nip.

Gehrke narrates the story of the cat finding its “comfort spot” where it will sit and eat the gill. “This is a small cat, a gar, or a snapping turtle but it’s not our big cat,” he says, standing to bury the hook. Soon, a four-pound flathead surrenders.

Ron Gehrke talks the talk with the Mississippi cats. And he’s walked the walk on these Mississippi sloughs for four decades, since his father, “Catfish Carl” Gehrke, introduced his son to his own love of shore fishing for channel cats. By age 18, Gehrke had purchased an old aluminum boat for \$25.00 with a 5 horsepower Sea King outboard. Without the aid and comfort of a map, he set out to learn the sloughs, solo.

“I got lost often,” he said. “That was awesome. A tour will give you a better perspective of just how lost a person can get.”

During his ongoing river education, Gehrke discovered the joys of picking a catfight with a flathead. With literally hundreds of flatheads to his credit, he met this reporter Friday afternoon to launch our own cat attack from Goose Island near Lacrosse, a wildlife area Catfish Carl had maintained in employment years before. .

Following a winding journey through these beautiful sloughs teeming with wildlife, we settled into two of Gehrke’s special, timber-shrouded bluegill hotspots. With icefishing teardrop jigs dressed with worms, we pulled gills and a lone crappie to be used as bait. Pannies caught for live bait must be counted as part of the daily panfish bag.

We traveled and stopped to hunt flatheads at a number of time-proven snags or new, similar-looking wooden mazes preferred by cats within this often-changing river

environment. With the skiff anchored, for example, in shallow, brown-running current, the gill is lowered into a seven foot hole on a home-molded two-ounce sinker upstream from the targeted logs or snags. The presentation makes easy pickins' for kitty.

"The mud cats are lying in these snags in the current breaks facing upstream," he said. "We're lowering these gills ahead of the snags which are hooked behind the dorsal fin to keep them facing downstream. The cat feels the gill, hears it and smells it. If he wants it, he can hit it head-on and never have to turn it in its mouth. These predators take live bait only. We catch flatheads here trolling for walleyes with crankbaits."

When a cat does hit, Gehrke knows generally the size of the predator by its feeding technique. A small cat will run with the bait, moving to a location where it can turn the gill in its smaller mouth; a haven safe from larger flatheads that could make a meal of him. A big cat will annihilate the gill immediately and never move until it's ready.

Eventually, we anchor near the protruding branches and root system of a fallen tree. Cats will hold here for specific reasons. Shallow water with vegetation housing a good bluegill forage base is adjacent to the deep water current breaks, shade and snags allowing easy transition for the flatheads moving in to feed. A big cat, Gehrke said, will move through shallow vegetation and suck gills in from a foot away.

With difficulty, we finesse our bluegills through the tangle of wood in a deep hole until the sinker hitting bottom tells us our diner is open for business. And we wait. When the cat answers the dinner bell, there is no time to think. I only react, literally catching the heavy-duty rod by the end of its handle in flight before it is ripped out of the boat, to the obvious delight of my host. After a great fight, a flathead cat just shy of 20 pounds is invited in for photos and release.

"A big cat is a vicious eater," Gehrke says. "They're an unforgiving predator when they hit. If they want that gill, it's coming home. You had your hands full at 19 pounds. I believe there are flatheads in here weighing triple digits."

"Think of the heavy current, the 40 feet of water and the great food source by the dams where these fish can just lay. We've all heard the old wives tales of the divers going down by the dams and being frightened by the size of the cats they see. Well I believe it. And I'm sure a 100 cat will be caught here."

Gehrke congratulates me on "my" cat. But we both know exactly whose fish this really is. In fact, without expert catman Ron Gehrke on these Mississippi River, beautiful pool 8 sloughs, one reporter would have been lost 100 yards from the landing.

PRIMARY COLUMN END

#### CONTACT INFORMATION

Ron Gehrke films hunting and fishing adventures for Outland Sports and Drury Outdoors Hunting Videos, programs aired on cable television's outdoor channel. A lifelong resident of Lacrosse, married to Susan, father of three and grandfather of six, he also works for Ace Sportsland of Lacrosse, guides for catfish on the rivers of Wisconsin's west-central region, and offers musky float trips with a flyrod in the north country. Reach him at 608-784-2948.

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