Flathead catfish have been spotted with increasing frequency in the Delaware River. The non-native species is damaging native fish populations.

By John A. Punola

Alert! Flatheads in the Delaware

If you've watching some of these outdoor shows on TV, you've probably seen fishermen in the Midwest doing what's called noodling - up to their chests in water, seeking out, wrestling with and finally dragging to shore mammoth flathead catfish.

The massive predaceous fish, native to western Pennsylvania, the Ohio, Mississippi and Missouri river basins, has been introduced to other areas and not with good results.

Now, these massive carnivores have become firmly established in the lower Delaware River.

The flathead catfish is native to western Pennsylvania and the Ohio River, and has thrived there. The slow-moving and deep waters of the Ohio, Allegheny and Monongahela rivers offer excellent habitat and food supply to these always-hungry cats.

They have been introduced to other areas as non-native species, and the results haven't been good. Now, these massive carnivores are showing up in the lower Delaware River, and the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife is urging anglers to be alert and remove these fish from the river.

ABOUT FLATHEADS

Flathead catfish were first identified in the Delaware & Raritan Canal in New Jersey in 1999, and since that time the state has recorded three more official sightings. No one knows for certain how they migrated to the lower Delaware, but it's believed they entered the river from Pennsylvania via the Schuylkill River.

Presently, the flatheads seem to be settled in the river from about Lambertville downstream into the tidal waters. I received first-hand data and photos from John Pascoe of New Hope, PA. John and his fishing friends have targeted the flatheads for several years and are killing them as fast as they can catch them. Pascoe says this year they have caught more than 20 of these eating machines, ranging in size from 5 to 20 pounds.

They prefer deep, slow-moving waters, and this part of the Delaware offers them plenty of good habitat. In previous years, the flatheads would move back down-river once the spring waters began to recede. However, with the unusual amount of rainfall this year, the river has remained higher than usual and the flatheads are still in their usual places.

Pascoe told me the current holding area for these big fish is right at the area of the Lambertville-New Hope wing dam and downriver to about the area of the big, outdoor flea market, or as locals call it, Fireman's Hole. There is no reason for the big cats to leave, and Pascoe and friends will continue their efforts to keep their population under control.

The flatheads are voracious feeders and will eat anything that moves in the river. Flatheads of 40 to 75 pounds are common in states where noodling is permit
ted, and they have been recorded up to 123 pounds.

Mark Boriek, a biologist with the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, says he heard reports of a huge cat being opened and inside was a snapping turtle. Apparently they have no fear or natural enemies in the Delaware. Other anglers have reports finding a good number of smallmouth bass, sunfish, eels and other prey in the stomachs of caught flatheads, which are identified by their large, wide mouths and flat tails.

With a big appetite, nothing is safe from their pursuit; even the muskies that rule the river are not safe. Flathead catfish have been documented to eat substantial numbers of American shad during their spawning run.

In the southeastern United States, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has it listed as its highest priority among invasive animal species. We should be concerned about the population growth and upriver movement of these carnivores. Anyone who happens to catch one should kill it. Incidentally, they are good eating, so the meat is not wasted.

**HARD TO CATCH**

The flathead catfish is a big, powerful and formidable catch. However, despite their status as a member of the catfish family, they are very wary and difficult to catch. They will only take live bait and among their favorites are chubs, eels, sunfish and suckers. They show little interest in cut bait or chicken livers. The bait should average from 6 to 12 inches.

I understand that lures are not productive for flatheads. Bear in mind that such delicacies to the flathead such as trout, small and largemouth bass, striped bass and wall-eys, cannot be used for live bait. These are designated gamefish that are protected.

Your rod, reel and line should be something you would use for saltwater fishing. Use 20-pound test line and a medium heavy reel and rod. The common method is to cast from the top of a deep pool and allow the bait to drift downstream.

Once you hook one and get it close to the net, have no fear, the cats do not have the toothed mouth you would expect, which is why noodling – which is not legal in New Jersey – is a popular method of catching them elsewhere. They can easily be handled from the net to dry land. You will need help because regardless of size, they are very powerful fish.

Based on the appetite of the flathead, and the fact that they can easily grow to 75 pounds or more, they will consume a large quantity of fish from the Delaware. When the food supply is depleted, they will continue to journey upriver. We would not want that to happen, so we need to keep them under close control.

Being an angler who spends a lot of fishing time on the Delaware River, I have great concern of any non-native fish that enters our waters, especially those with fish-eating appetites. I hope we can keep them under control.