

Florida's Fisheries are the Destination of Choice

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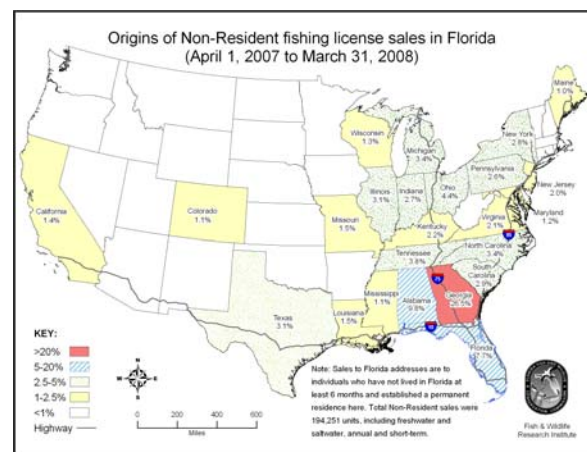
The living is easy in Florida this summer, and the catfish are abundant in the state's fresh waters.

Anglers from throughout the United States and from numerous countries around the world flock to Florida, and many freshwater catfish species are attracting anglers to Florida's diverse

fisheries as well this summer. With vacations in full swing (or cast, as the case

may be), and gas prices restricting long-distance travel, more than ever we will likely see anglers from neighboring states coming to wet a line in our prolific waters. Moreover, more Floridians are likely to stay within the state borders to conserve fuel and avoid nonresident fishing license fees.

Top largemouth bass and bream destinations remain plenty hot, but the heat changes the fishing patterns. So, fish for bass early or late in the day, look for structure in deep water and check out areas that have shading such as around piers or under overhanging trees. Topwater lures on a moonlit night, especially with a



Map depicting origins of fishermen buying nonresident fishing licenses in Florida. Click to enlarge.

little noise or scent thrown in, create some alternative action to attract the ole “bucketmouths.”

But most of all this summer, consider the variety of catfish species and the best places to catch this often misjudged fish in Florida to increase your chances for coming home with a stringer full of fish.



This blue catfish was taken on the Choctawhatchee River in the Panhandle.

Channel cats (Florida’s record 44.5 pounds) with their deeply forked tails, whiskered faces and spotted sides are the most common of our catfish and found everywhere except the Keys, in rivers, ponds or lakes that are often stocked by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Channel catfish

typically school where the bottom drops off sharply to deeper water. They usually do not hide within vegetation but can be found outside on the deepwater side of weed beds. Stink baits fished on the bottom are popular for channels.

White catfish (Florida’s record 18.9 pounds) share some similarities. However, the tail isn’t as deeply forked and the lobes of the tail fin are more rounded. White catfish prefer live bait, such as a minnow or worm.

Blue catfish (Florida’s record 61.5 pounds) are bigger than either channels or whites. Not only does their coloring distinguish them, but also the long flat anal fin on their belly and hump in front of the back fin give them a distinct look. Blues are river fish found in Northwest Florida and among the strongest of our freshwater

fishes. Typically, they are taken with cut or live fish baits by using heavy sinkers and bottom rigs.

Flathead catfish (Florida's record 49.4 pounds), like blues, are not native to Florida. As a result, intense harvest of them is encouraged. It is important that they not be moved and live released into other waters. They are solitary fish that are more difficult to catch than the others but are taken with similar equipment to blues.



Fowler holds a 49.4 pound flathead - the current official state record - he caught on the Apalachicola River in 2004.

Bullheads are the smallest of the targeted catfish and have more squared-off tails that are not as deeply forked, and with a heavier skull than other catfish, which is the source of their common name. The yellow bullhead's barbels (whiskers) are pale; on brown bullhead, the barbels are dark. Bullheads aren't the toughest fish to catch and are caught generally at night on doughballs, or on worms or crickets during daylight hours. They are very frequently taken for food, and there is no bag limit on them.

Catfish angling shines during the warmer months, but these fish can be caught year-round. While fishing can be good throughout the day, catfish are usually most active in the morning and evening. Fishing at night can reward anglers with outstanding fishing. Fish on the bottom using a wide variety of baits, from chicken livers to commercial stink baits, to catch most catfish. Catfish can also be caught on live baits such as small shiners and minnows fished near the bottom. Catfish in lakes and ponds that have been enhanced with automatic fish feeders

concentrate near these feeders and can be caught on small pieces of dog food, bread and hot dogs.

The best sites for catching catfish occur all over the state.

The Apalachicola River offers excellent fishing for channel, flathead, and blue catfish. Angling for big channel cats is best from April into early July; flathead fishing picks up in April and runs into the summer months. Small catfish can be caught year-round, but the spring and summer months are best. For all species, anglers should try the area from the Jim Woodruff Dam south to Owl Creek. Target deep holes with structure, old creek channels and the mouths of tributaries. Live bream fished on the bottom work well for big flatheads, while stink baits or night crawlers (also fished on the bottom) should do the trick for channels. Try fresh cut bait, such as mullet, if pursuing blue catfish.

The Choctawhatchee River provides outstanding fishing for channel and flathead catfish. Channel catfishing is best from late May through early July and October into November, if the water remains warm. Small catfish can be caught year-round. Concentrate on the Alabama line south to West Bay and around the mouth of Holmes Creek and other tributaries. Most of the larger catfish are found in the northern portion of the river within deep bends and holes or where large woody debris is present. Try live bream on the bottom for flatheads up to 30 pounds. Stink baits or night crawlers fished on the bottom will do the trick for channels.

The Escambia River generates quality opportunities for blue, channel and flathead catfish. Fishing for channel catfish and big flatheads peaks from April through October. The best stretch lies from the Alabama line to the I-10 Bridge.

Savvy anglers will fish live bream on the bottom for big flatheads and stink baits or night crawlers for channel cats.

The St. Johns River and Dunn's Creek yield superior bullhead, channel catfish and white catfish. Prime locations include Dunn's Creek to Lake Crescent, Murphy's Creek from the St. Johns River to Dunn's Creek, and the river from Palatka to Little Lake George. Try the hole on the north side of Buffalo Bluff Bridge, but bring plenty of hooks and weights because there are many snags.

The Ochlocknee River offers excellent fishing for bullhead, channel, flathead and white catfish. The best angling begins in April for flathead catfish and mid-May into early summer for channel cats. Both channels and flatheads will continue to bite until the water turns cold in October or November. Small catfish can be readily caught throughout the year, but fishing slows down in colder months. Catfishing is good throughout the entire river but especially in the Talquin tail race area for whites and flatheads. Try deep rivers bends with structure further downstream for flatheads as well.

Clermont Chain of Lakes offers anglers superb opportunities for channel and white catfish. Anglers should concentrate on offshore open-water areas, particularly near drop-offs or around bottom structure. Canals and channels may also be attractive to catfish during times of flow. Cut baits or stink baits should work well for both species.

Haines Creek, near Leesburg, provides good angling for bullheads, channel catfish and white catfish. Most of the larger channel catfish are landed from mid-April through June and October and November as water temperatures begin to

drop. However, small catfish of all species are readily available year-round, in flowing water. The creek between Eustis and Griffin lakes offers the best catfishing on the system, particularly below the lock and dam.

Upper Kissimmee Chain of Lakes affords great bullhead, channel catfish and white catfish angling opportunities. Big channel catfish experience peak spawning periods between April and June and are hungry right afterwards. Bullheads primarily spawn from October into November but may spawn year-round. Water flow will concentrate catfish and make them easier to locate and catch. The best sites include C-31 (East Lake Canal), C-35 (Southport Canal), C-36 (canal between Lake Cypress and Lake Hatchineha), C-37 (canal between lakes Hatchineha and Kissimmee), below the Kissimmee River structure (S-65), around the mouth of and in Shingle Creek, and in the lake proper around fish attractors. Catfish are often found near drop-offs or around bottom structure in the canals.

Southwest Florida Lakes offer many excellent opportunities for channel catfish and bullhead angling, including: lakes 2-5, B and Picnic at Tenoroc Fish Management Area (Polk County); lakes LP2 West, Haul Road Pit and Pine East at Mosaic Fish Management Area (Polk County); lakes 1 and 3 at Hardee Lakes Park (Hardee County); Lake Manatee (Manatee County); and ponds managed under the Tampa Bay Urban Fishery Program, particularly Dover District Park and Stephen J. Wortham Park.

Joe Budd Pond (Gadsden County), a 20-acre impoundment provides excellent channel catfishing. Fish can be found throughout the lake, particularly around the fishing fingers and along the dam. This site is only open to the public on

weekends, beginning the first Saturday in July through the Labor Day weekend (including the Labor Day holiday). Fishing worms or night crawlers on the bottom are all that is needed for great catches. Fish can be caught from shore or from a boat. Gasoline motors are not permitted. Fish are typically nine to 14 inches. A harvest limit of six channel catfish per person, per day is strictly enforced.

Florida earned the title “Fishing Capital of the World” by coupling its great resources with responsible management of those resources by the FWC. Anglers will be coming to test their skills, but now you have some insider knowledge to expand your horizons and try out some new fishing opportunities. Help keep Florida the Fishing Capital by following sound conservation practices.

*Instant licenses are available at MyFWC.com/License or by calling 1-888-FISH-FLORIDA (347-4356). Report violators by calling *FWC or #FWC on your cell, or 1888-404-3922. Visit MyFWC.com/Fishing/Updates for more Fish Busters' columns.*