

postcards

Nice catch - and release: Dropping a line in southern Manitoba



The last fish I caught was a sunfish off the dock at Clear Lake, Manitoba. I was 12 at the time, so I'm feeling fairly incompetent today as I step into a fishing boat with four companions and our guide from City Cats. It's a bright and early spring morning on the muddy Red River, and just as our 19-foot Kingfisher aluminum boat picks up speed and starts drumming over the water to the nearest fishing hole, we have to stop for the first catch of the day - my hat. Luckily an air bubble keeps it afloat until our skipper leans over to scoop it up. "Better measure it," he says.

It's all about the big catch today. We're fishing for monster channel catfish in Selkirk with Todd Longley, known in these parts as the Rock 'n' Roll Fisherman. My boat mates are all experienced anglers, but Longley puts me at ease once we reach our first sheltered bend in the river. He shuts off the engine, heaves the anchor overboard, finds the bait and hauls out the rods. The wonderful calm of the river takes over, and, as waves slap softly on its sides, the boat snuggles into the current. With tiger prawns baited on the hooks and the lines tossed out, there's nothing to do but relax and shoot the breeze about catfish.

Longley is an authority. He's been catching every kind of fish including catfish for the past 13 years, first as a tournament fisherman, then as a guide. He spends more than 100 days a year on the water, a rare thing among guides, and of the more than 1,000 catfish that qualify for Master Angler recognition in Manitoba, he proudly claims that "10 per cent came right out of this boat." A giant catfish tattoo on his muscular left arm and his mane of shoulder-length curly hair netted him his rock 'n' roll nickname. When he's not guiding celebrities and world-class athletes, he likes to mentor the next generation of fishers by hosting fish festivals and supporting the Angler & Young Angler program that raises funds to get kids hooked on fishing.

Catfish are found on every continent, from the Mekong Delta to the Amazon where they can grow big enough to eat small



Todd Longley, a.k.a. the Rock 'n' Roll Fisherman, with the author's catch.

children. Red River channel catfish - a catch and release fish only - mainly munch on anything they find on the bottom: insect larvae, worms, fish, frogs and even small animals. Other types of catfish are quite happy living only on commercial feed, which is why catfish from Vietnam are among the tastiest imported fish consumed in Canada. They're called basa here.

We're only out for a few minutes when one of our fishers catches a pretty little white catfish about 30 centimetres long. Longley, clearly not satisfied with this, soon has us on the way to another favourite spot. "Catfish will usually bite within the first 15 minutes," he explains. "They're more aggressive in the spring, after spawning, and they're one of the few fish that will bite when the river is high and flowing fast." Sure enough, within minutes a catfish has rubbed its whiskers, properly called barbels, on my line and with a tug lets me know it's game on.

It quickly becomes clear this is no ordinary catfish. My graphite rod bends almost in half as our tug-of-war begins. My fellow

anglers call out helpful suggestions, and I clearly need them as the rod digs into my hipbone. I pull up and reel down for what seems like an eternity, fuelled by adrenaline and laughing with delight. I can't believe my luck! When the line comes to the surface it looks like I've caught a dark gray pillowcase full of water. A few minutes later Longley nets my fish and it lands in the boat with a thump. Measured with the metal yardstick screwed to the hull, it's a 96.5-cm channel cat that weighs about 16 kilograms. Catfish can live for 25 years or more; this one is an old black fighter called a kicker fish. I'm feeling pretty good about it until Longley tells us he has caught as many as 28 catfish in four hours and 18 to 20 is about normal. Still, it is the catch of the day and our skipper names that bend in the river the "D" spot - and it will stay that way until someone takes my title away. It's a real honour to have a fishing hole named after you on the Red River, even if it's only for a few days. I've decided I like fishing. **✉** -Debra Smith
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