Welcome to the interactive edition of

Fishing the Lower Mississippi River

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The Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee is a coalition of 12 state natural resources conservation and environmental quality agencies representing Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee. It provides the only regional forum dedicated to conserving the natural resources of the Lower Mississippi River floodplain and focuses on habitat restoration, long-term conservation planning and nature-based economic development.

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Checklist</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactics for Fishing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black and White Crappie</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluegill</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catfish</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Carp</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshwater Drum</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largemouth Bass</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Bass and Striped Bass</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Bait</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Species of Fish</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maps</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Lower Mississippi River extends 954 miles (41 percent of the entire river’s length) from the confluence of the Ohio River at Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico. It borders Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee.
Introduction

Whether you are experienced at fishing the Lower Mississippi River or have never fished this impressive waterway before, *Fishing the Lower Mississippi River* is for you. Our desire is for you to have many safe and rewarding experiences on America’s Greatest River.

Many people contributed information for this guide, including fisheries biologists, anglers and people who live along the river. Their firsthand experience with the river has been an invaluable resource for designing, organizing, and providing information and recommendations.

We included important information on safety, boating and fishing regulations, river habitats, fish identification, and fishing tactics. A complete set of maps is linked to this guide. They should help you locate boat launches, find good fishing spots and navigate the river.

Several important themes run through this guide:

- The Mississippi River is a dynamic system. It is constantly changing.
- Safety cannot be stressed enough.
- State fishing and boating laws, regulations, and reciprocal agreements vary between states and change frequently. Check with the appropriate agencies regularly.
There are many resources available to help make boating and fishing the Mississippi River as safe as possible. The U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and all state fish and wildlife conservation agencies have excellent publications on boating and fishing safety. Some offer boating safety training courses and you are encouraged to take a course either in person or online. You may also be eligible for a boat insurance discount for taking a National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) certified course. Agency contact information is located in the Boating and Fishing Regulations section and the References section of this Fishing Guide.

A good approach to safely fishing the Mississippi River is to think of it in five consecutive steps: preparing for your fishing trip, launching your boat, navigating the river, fishing, and taking your boat out of the water.
LAUNCH

- Make sure your boat’s drain plug is installed
- Make sure your boat’s tie-down straps are disconnected.
- Check the boat ramp for sand, mud and debris.
- Do not launch your boat when a towboat is passing. Wait for waves to subside.
- Back your trailer into the water no farther than necessary.
- Start your boat’s motor before entering the current.
- If the river is predicted to rise, park your vehicle where the water will not reach it.

NAVIGATE

- Stay in the channel to avoid dikes, sandbars, old pilings and sunken trees.
- The channel is marked with red and green buoys. Red will be on your right side when navigating upriver and green will be on your right when navigating downriver.
- Navigate slowly when not in the river channel. Use a depth finder to prevent running aground.
- Always connect the kill switch to the life jacket you are wearing when navigating.
- Everyone in the boat should wear a life jacket at all times.
- Boats moving upriver must yield to boats moving down river.
- Do not navigate at night.
- Be aware of jumping carp (Asian carp). They can damage boats and hurt people.
- Pass other boats slowly, without leaving a wake.
- Never consume alcohol or drugs while operating a boat.

Click to watch video
When setting trotlines, one person should handle the lines and another person should handle the boat.

To reduce the potential for a trotline to be a navigation or safety hazard, be aware of falling water conditions.

Be mindful of hooks when setting or running trotlines.

Keep a knife within reach to cut lines when necessary.

Never drop anchor in the river channel or swift current.

Do not fish under steep cut banks. They frequently collapse.

Never enter the water to retrieve a snagged line. It’s always safer to cut a line and re-tie it.

When tying a boat to structure or pulling it up onto the bank or sandbar, consider waves that may be created by towboats and changes in river level. Boats left unattended can drift free or become swamped by waves.

When fishing from the river bank, watch for unstable ground. River currents can undermine the bank (especially sandbars) and cause them to cave in under very little weight.

- Slowly back the trailer into the water only as far as necessary.
- Do not attempt to take a boat out of the water as a towboat is passing. Wait for waves to subside.
- Drive the boat onto the trailer if possible rather than pulling it on. It’s easy to slip off the trailer and fall into the river.
- Wear a life jacket until you are completely out of the water.
Regulations

Regulations, laws, public notices, and reciprocal agreements related to fishing the river may occasionally change. When fishing the Mississippi River, you will likely cross at least one state line and regulations often differ from one state to another. It is also very important to know of reciprocal agreements between adjoining states. You are legally responsible for knowing and following current fishing and boating regulations so don’t spoil a great outing by not knowing the law. To keep abreast of current fishing and boating regulations, contact the state authority in which you will be fishing.

Contact information:

Arkansas Game and Fish Commission
2 Natural Resources Dr.
Little Rock, AR 72205
800-364-4263
askAGFC@agfc.state.ar.us
http://agfc.com/

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources
#1 Sportsman’s Lane
Frankfort, KY 40601
800-858-1549
E-Mail: info.center@ky.gov
http://kdfwr.state.ky.us/

Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks
1505 Eastover Dr.
Jackson, MS 39211-6322
601-432-2400
http://www.mdwfp.com/

Missouri Department of Conservation
2901 W. Truman Blvd.
Jefferson City, MO, 65102
573-522-4115
http://mdc.mo.gov

Missouri State Highway Patrol
Water Patrol Division
1510 East Elm Street
Jefferson City, MO 65102
573-751-3313 (information)
800-525-5555 or *55 cellular (emergency)
boatinfo@mshp.dps.mo.gov

Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
5107 Edmondson Pike
Nashville, TN 37211
615-781-6500
http://www.tn.gov/twra/
The U.S. Coast Guard provides excellent information on navigation regulations. This website has current information:

http://www.uscgboating.org/regulations/navigation_rules.aspx

**Coast Guard contacts:**

Memphis, Tennessee
U.S. Coast Guard
2 Auction Avenue
Memphis, TN 38105
901-544-3987

Natchez, Mississippi
U.S. Coast Guard
44 L. E. Barry Road
Natchez, MS 39120
601-446-5104

New Orleans, Louisiana
U.S. Coast Guard
Eighth Coast Guard District
Hale Boggs Federal Building
500 Poydras Street
New Orleans, LA 70130
504-671-2241

**To report violations:**

Arkansas Game and Fish Commission
1-800-482-9262
Cellular phone #TIP

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources
1-800-25-ALERT

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
1-800-442-2511

Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks
1-800-BE SMART

Missouri Department of Conservation
1-800-392-1111

Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
1-800-831-1173

Practice good stewardship by respecting trespassing laws and removing all your litter, as well as removing your trotlines, limb lines, and throw lines.
This guide does not address every species of fish found in the Lower Mississippi River system. It does, however, focus on those species that attract the widest range of anglers. Anglers who frequent the Mississippi River use similar tactics. We cover many of these basic tactics in this guide. But as you gain experience and learn from other anglers, you will quickly develop techniques that work best for you. Knowing how to catch fish is only part of the process. If you don’t know where the fish live, tactics are not likely to do you much good. So, become familiar with these river habitats:

**River Channel**: the main channel is marked by red and green buoys, and is usually characterized by deeper water and the fastest current. It is also where commercial navigation occurs.

**Sandbar**: sand deposits along the inside bends of the river and downstream of un-notched dikes. Bottom slope is usually gradually shallower and current is progressively slower as the river bank is approached.

**Reef**: constantly changing, shallow submerged sand and gravel dunes formed along the margins of sandbars; typically perpendicular (T-shape) to the current; formed during steady to falling river stages; disappearing on a fast rise.

**Cut Bank**: a natural eroding bank; characterized by a steep bank and deep-scoured areas often along the outside of channel bends, islands, and banks not protected by riprap or concrete mats.
Stabilized Bank: banks fitted with erosion protection; most common materials used are concrete mattresses (blocks connected with corrosion resistant wires) or large limestone rocks (riprap) covering the banks.

Dikes (wing dike or rock dike): man-made, linear berms of rock stretching from river bank to the channel. They may be notched (V-shaped opening) and are generally perpendicular to the river bank and angled slightly upstream.

Embayment (eddy): indentation (pocket or pool) in the riverbank, typically along the cut bank side; current moves upriver along the bank in a circular motion, not unlike a whirlpool (eddy current); sandbar often forms along bank.

Plunge Pool (scour hole): deep holes (drop-offs) created by strong current; often downriver of dikes, especially below dike notches, and drop-offs near the end of dikes.

Outlet (tributary mouth): where rivers, creeks or oxbow lakes enter the Mississippi River; there may be a visible contrast in water clarity. Water temperature may also be different than the river.

Secondary (side) Channel: channel flowing adjacent to the main channel; typically flows around islands and rejoins river channel downriver. Navigation can be hazardous in side channels due to shallow water, fallen trees, debris, and bank sloughing. Typically, the upper end of a secondary channel will be blocked by a dike to limit flow into the channel.

Island Point: downriver end of island where currents merge; sand settles out to form a V-shape sandbar extending downriver from island.

Oxbow Lake: horseshoe-shaped lake formed from an abandoned river channel; no river current flowing through it, except during high river stages; may be shallow due to siltation and may have abundant aquatic vegetation.
Habitats and fishing conditions change as the river fluctuates. Select a river gauge close to where you will be fishing and monitor the habitat conditions at various stages. River stage is a key indicator of where certain fish species can be located.

Helpful websites to determine river stages include:

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Weather Service Lower Mississippi River Forecast Center. Current gauge reading, change from previous day, 5-day and 28-day forecasts:

http://www.srh.noaa.gov/lmrfc/

U.S. Corps of Engineers
River Summary and Forecasts
Key gauge stations. Current gauge reading, change from day before, 5-day forecast:

http://www.mvk.usace.army.mil/offices/ed/edh/docs/bullet.txt

U.S. Geological Survey
National Water Information System: Web Interface Daily stream flow conditions for each state:

http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/rt

TIPS

- Keep a diary of your fishing trips. Record the date, river gauge reading, whether the river is rising, falling or steady, rate of rise or fall, water clarity, water temperature, where you fished, what you caught, and your fishing tactics, including the bait(s) used. Use your diary as a reference for future fishing trips.

- States keep records of trophy fish. Ask your state fish and wildlife agency for information about how to register your trophy.

- Species of fish have specific habitats that they prefer but that does not mean they won’t be occasionally found where they aren’t expected. River habitats are constantly changing. Fish respond to changes in the river by searching for better habitat.
Black and White Crappie

Black and White Crappie are known by several names including calico bass, newlight, papermouth, and sac-a-lait. Black Crappie are also known more descriptively as speckled perch and speck.

Description:
Crappie are silvery, deep, and slab-sided sunfish. Both species look similar in appearance but the White Crappie’s dorsal fin has five to six spines whereas the Black Crappie’s dorsal fin has seven to eight spines. White Crappie will have faint vertical bars (alternating lighter and darker) of black spots on its sides. A typical Black Crappie’s sides will have irregularly arranged black spots, speckles, and blotches but no vertical lines.

Habitats:
Their primary habitats throughout the year are oxbows, backwaters, and tributaries. Crappie may occasionally be found during low water stages in secondary channels and near dikes.

White Crappie prefer oxbow lakes and tributaries that are directly influenced by the changing water levels of the river. Black Crappie prefer waters less affected by the changing water levels. In other words, Black Crappie prefer clearer water which may result in areas with less influence from changing water levels while White Crappie are more tolerant of turbid conditions and can live in areas with greater influence of changing water levels.

In early spring as the water warms, crappie move into the shallow areas to spawn. This occurs when the water temperature is between 58 to 68 degrees. Black Crappie usually begin spawning before White Crappie.

Crappie will seek shallow areas with flooded willow trees and vegetation. The spawning period is the best time to catch them. Good record keeping of river levels, water temperature, and dates will help predict the best times for crappie fishing in your area.

Crappie seek deeper areas following the spawn. The trick is to find the thermocline because they tend to be close to the thermocline where they have cooler temperatures and still have plenty of oxygen. Fish can’t survive below the thermocline because there is very little oxygen in the lower layer of water. See the “Definitions” section for the thermocline.

As the water begins to cool in the fall, crappie move back to the shallows. Fishing at this time is almost as good as during the spring spawn. A slow rising river often improves crappie fishing this time of year. Winter fishing can also be quite productive. Even on the cold overcast days with enough wind to put ripples on the water’s surface, crappie can be caught in depths of 10 to 15 feet around most structure.

Baits and equipment:
Two rules of thumb should be remembered when selecting artificial lures for crappie fishing: Color matters and size matters. Every crappie angler has a favorite color. Chartreuse is a universal color. Jigs with black, brown, red, blue, lime green, or white bodies with a chartreuse tail are all good options. A well-stocked sporting goods store or bait shop will have an endless selection of colors. Small lead-head jigs ranging from 1/100 to 1/8 ounce are probably the most commonly used crappie lure. Finding the right color and size combination can often be challenging.

Many anglers prefer to use 1 ½ inch or 2 inch plastic tails on the jigs. Others prefer jigs made of chenille for the body and marabou for the tail. Small spinners, crankbaits, crappie bites, and flies are also local or personal favorites. Live minnows should never be overlooked, because crappie will eat a live minnow when nothing else works.

Light action crappie poles or cane poles 9 to 14 feet in length, light or ultralight action spinning and spin-cast rods, and fly rods are commonly used in crappie fishing. Some people prefer fishing with bobbers while others prefer casting or the tight-line method.
Fishing the Lower Mississippi River

Monofilament line works great, but you should consider using fluorocarbon in clear water. Fluorocarbon is almost invisible in water and is more abrasion resistant and sinks faster. Lines in the 4- to 12-pound range work well for crappie. The only reason to use heavier line is to dislodge a jig from an underwater snag.

Jig fishing:
Prime crappie fishing is in spring and fall. You’ll only need to fish a few feet deep because crappie will be in shallow water or near the surface along the edges of deeper water. When they are spawning, they can be caught within inches of the pole tip.

There are three basic methods for tight-line fishing: 1) jigging, which is lowering the jig straight down into the water and then raising it up a few inches and letting it settle down again; 2) swimming, which is casting the jig out or swinging it out and letting it down into the water and then swimming it back to you or around structure; 3) casting a jig or minnow under a bobber 1 to 2 feet deep then reeling it back slowly, often letting it sit motionlessly for several seconds.

As with other fish, look for patterns when catching crappie. Sometimes fish can be found only by logs tilted a certain angle, or along the outside row of willows, or along the inside row of willows, or around willows with roots just under the water’s surface, or around single willows in deeper water. Once you see a pattern, stick with it.

TIPS

- Bobbers work better in choppy water.
- Crappie frequently strike when the jig is falling. If the line goes slack as the jig sinks, set the hook.
- Water flowing through culverts provides an increase in oxygen which attracts baitfish and crappie.
- Crappie can sometimes be found by jigging along structures in secondary channels and by drifting a jig or minnow under a bobber in the calmer waters against dikes.
- A crappie pole or fly rod rigged with an automatic fly reel loaded with monofilament can be quickly adjusted to fish any depth.
- If you are not catching fish change jig color, size, and consider using a minnow. Sometimes a minnow hooked on the jig will improve your luck.
- There’s a good reason why crappie are also called papermouth. Don’t be too rough landing a crappie because you’ll often pull the hook out of its mouth.
- You’ll save a lot of fishing time by asking locals what they are using to catch crappie or check fishing reports.

Fishing spider rigs where permitted:
This can be described best as a boat with numerous fishing poles extending out all around resembling a spider, hence the term “spider rig.”

There are many versions of the spider rig differing in how many rods and where they are positioned, but the principle remains the same. This method is used primarily in spring into early fall to locate schools of crappie in open water. By using several poles fished at different depths with different lures/baits, crappie can usually be quickly located. Once crappie are located, all poles can be rigged with the same lure/bait and fished the same depth.

Bass boats and flat-bottom jon boats are most commonly used. Individual rod holders can be placed around the perimeter of the boat or a special multi-rod holder can be placed on either the bow platform or stern platform. You should be able to reach all the rods quickly.

A typical rig consists of a multi-rod holder on the bow platform directly in front of one or two seats. This works best with two people to split the duties between setting the hook, landing a fish, netting a fish, unhooking the fish, putting the fish in a cooler or live well, re-baiting, and managing the trolling motor.

There are several commercial rod holders available. Select the type that works best with your boat. A trolling motor is imperative and will help make drifting and slow trolling manageable especially against the wind. A depth finder will inform you of your current depth, structure and fish. A GPS unit is useful for marking hotspots and structure so you can return to them later.
Light action crappie poles in the 12 to 14 foot range are typically used. Long poles can manage more weight, extend far enough from the boat to not spook fish, increase the space between pole tips, and you can often pick up the line without using the reel. Spinning, casting, and automatic fly reels are most commonly used.

There are many ways to rig poles for trolling. The simplest method is to place several jigs of different sizes and colors at 1 1/2 to 2 foot intervals. More complex rigs involve placing 3-way swivels at intervals and then placing a jig on a dropper tied off the side of the swivel. Sometimes it helps to place a bell sinker on the end of the line. It takes some experimenting to find the right combination of jigs (or baited hooks) and sinkers to match the action of a fishing pole. You don’t want the pole to be bent to the point where you can’t detect a bite.

**Fly fishing:**
Any light to medium action 3 to 5 weight fly rod will work well for crappie. You can fish with or without a bobber depending on depth and structure. Jigs, streamers, and various nymphs are typically used. Some experimentation might be required to match the weight of the lure with the rod to ensure smooth casting.

In vegetation and around submerged tree tops, a bobber will help prevent snagging. Use a small but highly visible bobber that can be attached so that it won’t slide on the line. Jigs 1/32 ounce or less will work best with most fly rods. You’ll only need to fish a couple of feet deep in most situations.

Fly fishing without a bobber requires open water. During the summer, crappie are often found in deep water over submerged structure or on clean banks where casting jigs or streamers won’t snag often. The fly line takes the place of a bobber. So watch the line for the slightest indication of a bite. A short leader and a colorful fly line tip will help in detecting strikes.

**TIPS**

- Micro jigs of 1/80 to 1/125 ounce are best for crappie, but the hooks are easy to pull out of their mouths.
- During the spawn and especially in the fall, try weighted crayfish patterns with very slow retrieves. Detecting strikes won’t be a problem because crappie aggressively attack crayfish.
- Try flies with weed guards to avoid snagging around structure.
- Small streamers like clouser minnows work well in shallow water around structure. Vary the retrieve to determine what works best.
- Trolling or drifting slowly with jigs often works well in open water.

- Trolling into the wind will help keep lines from crossing and tangling with each other.
- Tie flagging on the tip of each pole or paint the tips so they can be seen easier.
- Tips of poles should be just a foot or so off the surface of the water to prevent lines from tangling, especially in wind.
- Experiment by rigging each line at a different depth.
- Be sure to check local regulations. There might be a limit to the number of poles or hooks an individual may use.
Bluegill

Bluegill are known by a wide variety of names including bream, copperbelly, copperhead, coppernosed bream, and yellow belly.

**Description:**
Bluegill are typically hand size and smaller. Its name is derived from the obvious dark flap on the rear edge of its gill cover. Bluegill usually have several vertical bands extending down their sides to the belly. The overall coloration varies according to size, sex, spawning, and water quality. The male Bluegill color becomes more intense during the spawn, especially showing off its bright reddish-rusty to orange or yellow breast. Females are much less colorful and more yellowish in overall appearance.

**Habitats:**
Some Bluegill can be found near where a dike joins the river bank and around structure in secondary channels during very low water stages. But the best chance to catch them is in the warmer waters of oxbows and small tributaries, especially where vegetation is more plentiful. The best time to catch Bluegill is during the spawn. Bluegill spawn during the spring and summer when water temperature ranges from 65 and 72 degrees. The pie-shaped spawning beds can often be seen in shallow water.

**Baits:**
Bluegill can be taken on a wide variety of baits and lures. Favorite live baits include crickets, grasshoppers, wasp larva, grass shrimp, inch worms, maggots, caterpillars, wax worms, catalpa worms, grubs, beetles, and earthworms (red wigglers). Fly rod enthusiasts use surface flies such as popping bugs, slow sinking flies such as bream killers, and fast sinking flies such as micro jigs. Ultralight spinning tackle often includes beetle spins, and 1/64 ounce jigs or smaller.

**Pole fishing:**
Cane poles and crappie poles work well for Bluegill fishing. Poles of bamboo, graphite, or fiberglass in one piece or multi-piece sections are easily obtainable. Most anglers prefer using light line (2-6 pound test) a small bobber, a size 6-10 long-shank hook, and a split shot for weight.

Pole fishing is especially effective in and around brush, logs, and vegetation. During spawning season, look for their spawning beds described above.

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**TIPS**

- Small bobbers work better than large bobbers because they provide less resistance.
- Long shank hooks are easier to remove from Bluegill than those with short shanks.
- Forceps, hemostats and even needle nose pliers are very handy tools for removing hooks from Bluegill.
- In the dog-days of summer, oxbow Bluegill will move to deeper water. In fall, they will move toward shallow water. In the winter they will again move back to deeper water.
During the summer months try fishing in the duckweed usually found around willow trees in oxbows. Slowly drop a cricket in any opening you find. If you can’t find many openings, try a small jig to break through the duckweed.

Fly rod and rod and reel fishing:
Light to medium action fly rods and ultralight rods and reels preform best for Bluegill fishing. The primary advantage of a fly rod over a rod and reel is that the fly rod can cast smaller and lighter lures. When fishing bream beds during the spawn, both types of rods have advantages over poles because you can position yourself further from the bream beds and decrease your chances of spooking the fish. A rod and reel has advantage over a fly rod when fishing among trees where a back cast with a fly rod is practically impossible or where accurate casting is needed.

The following is a first-hand account of fly fishing for Bluegill in an oxbow.

“When the river finally settles in late June, I begin fly fishing the oxbows. I prefer fishing along willows or dead trees that form a single line just a few feet from the bank. I start by tying on a size 10 black or chartreuse popping bug trailed by a size 16 black bream killer. The popping bug will attract a Bluegill but he will usually take the bream killer. Basically, the popper only acts as a bobber but occasionally I’ll catch two Bluegill at the same time. If that doesn’t produce, I’ll fish deeper by tying on a brown or black micro jig. Bluegill will usually hit the jig while it is sinking. Sometimes they don’t want the jig to move horizontally and other times they strike when I’m stripping it pretty fast. I use 4 to 6 pound leaders of 6 to 8 feet in length. I always keep a tight line so I can see it twitch when a Bluegill strikes.”
**Habits:**
Blue and Channel Catfish are often found together, but Channel Catfish generally prefer areas with slow currents such as between dikes, oxbows, and side channels. Blue Catfish prefer areas with substantial flow such as the upstream side of dikes, off dike tips, and in or near the main channel. Blue Catfish are not common in backwater habitats with little or no flow.

Blue and Channel Catfish spawn in mid-summer at 70 to 84 degrees Fahrenheit. The exact time of the year for spawning varies north to south. Choice spawning areas include the river bank, rocks (riprap), logs, tree roots, and plunge pools near any structure as well as in the gaps, cracks, and holes in concrete mats on stabilized banks.

In mid- to late summer Blue, Channel, and Flathead Catfish can be found in the drop-offs along cut and stabilized banks as well as along the upstream side of dikes. During winter they move to plunge pools below dike notches and the ends of dikes and in drop-offs where outlets enter the river. At night they feed along shallow sandbars. During high water they can be found in backwater areas among the trees.

Flathead Catfish prefer cut banks that have cavities and are lined with dislodged trees, roots, and log jams. In spring as water temperatures reach 66 to 75 degrees, the male seeks cavities in the cut banks and hollow logs to make a nest. They will also use manmade structures such as culverts, old tires, car bodies, and metal/plastic drums.

Later in the summer as the water temperature increases, Flathead Catfish prefer deep pools where current is slow. They are bottom feeders and mostly feed at night. Best times to fish for Flathead Catfish as well as for Blue and Channel Catfish are during the warmer months from late spring through late summer.

**Baits:**
Each state has rules and regulations concerning baits. The following suggestions may not be permissible in all states so check current regulations prior to fishing.

Catfish bait is typically divided into three basic categories:

- Store-bought baits such as shrimp and chicken livers and various stink baits, even artificial bass lures can be used.

- Live baits such as crayfish, Skipjack Herring, shad, sunfish, night crawlers (large earthworms), large minnows, small suckers and carp are popular where permissible.

- Bait cut from any live fish works well but Skipjack Herring and shad are highly preferred because of their oil content.

Generally speaking, catfish will eat just about anything. However, each species has its own preferences. Being an omnivore, Channel Catfish will consume both plant and animal matter. Therefore, baits from any of the store-bought, live, and cut categories will be effective. Blue and Flathead Catfish are predators and therefore have a different food preference. Try baits from the live category for blues and flatheads. And a good rule of thumb for Flathead Catfish is the bigger the live bait, the better.
Tactics:
Each state has rules and regulations concerning methods of fishing. The following suggestions may not be permissible in all states.

Fishing with rods and reel from the bank, dike or boat:
If you are targeting Blue Catfish, consider using at least a medium to heavy action rod or rods specifically designed for catfish.

Rig with line weights of 30 pound or heavier, a sliding sinker matched to the current velocity and depth, an 8 to 12 inch tippet of 20 pound or heavier line tied to a barrel swivel, and a 2/0 or 3/0 hook for small catfish or 4/0 to 9/0 hook for larger catfish. Place the barrel swivel at the junction of the line and tippet. This will keep the weight from sliding down the tippet to the hook. The reel should have a line capacity of at least 125 yards and a working drag system. Position yourself upriver of a plunge pool or along the edge of the main river channel so that the bait will be on the river bottom at the upriver edge of the drop-off. If there are no bites within 20 to 30 minutes, let out more line (cast further out) or move to another hole.

Any bass fishing rod and reel will work for Channel Catfish when fishing from the bank. A line from 10 to 20 pound test should be strong enough. Hooks from 1/0 to 3/0 should be big enough. A sinker heavy enough to keep the bait on the bottom should be placed 18 to 20 inches above the hook. A swivel or a line stop tied in the line will keep the sinker from sliding to the hook. A forked stick stuck firmly into the sand within a yard or so from the water’s edge makes a good rod holder. Commercial rod holders are available that have bells that sound off when a catfish strikes.

TIPS
- Live bait can be hooked through the eyes or mouth so it will be facing the current. But, many prefer hooking the fish through the back to imitate an injured fish.
- A boat paddle or short dowel can be used to wrap line around when the hook is snagged or sinker is wedged between rocks. Pull on the paddle or dowel to dislodge the hook/sinker so as to not damage the rod or reel.
- Depth finders are useful not only to keep you in navigable water but also to locate deep holes where catfish may be found.
- A sharp hook catches more fish.
- Small catfish will often give the rod tip several light, quick twitches in succession. The larger fish will generally give a hard, solid yank followed by slack line.
- Fishing for catfish usually means fishing in fast current so be extra careful when dropping anchor or tying a boat to dikes or trees. Always point the bow (front) into the current and never let the bow dip into the water. Fast currents are very difficult and sometimes dangerous to fish from a boat.
- Watch out for cottonmouth and copperhead snakes, especially where dikes meet land.
- If using a rod holder, be sure the reel is on free spool or that you can grab the rod quickly or tie a safety line to it. Many rods have been dragged into the river by large fish.

Almost any area will work when fishing from the bank. Look for banks which have a fairly large embayment (indentation/pocket) with a point on the upriver end. The current frequently flows upriver along the bank inside these pockets. Cast a line from the upriver point into the area where the pocket current meets the downriver current. Or cast from the bank towards but not into the downriver current. Watch or feel for rapid taps of a Channel Catfish. Keep the line tight but don’t set the hook until he takes the bait, indicated by a solid steady pull. A large fish will usually
just take it. If you are having trouble snagging and losing tackle, switch to a bobber and drift-fish the pocket. Experiment by adjusting the line for different depths.

Another option might be to cast an artificial worm that has been dipped in stink bait. Experiment with the size weight to match the current and depth. Fish the rubber worm tight-lined on the river bottom.

Fishing dikes can be very rewarding, especially in summer low water conditions. But, it’s difficult to walk on the rocks so care should be taken. Channel Catfish prefer the downstream side of dikes with less current. Blues and Flathead Catfish can be found above and below dikes and off dike tips where there’s stronger current. Position your bait along the base of the rocks or in the scour area that runs parallel and below dikes. Stink baits work well where there’s very little to no current and when the water temperature is in the 80s. Getting snagged on rocks, logs, and debris is to be expected so be ready to replace leaders, hooks, and weights.

If you are targeting Flathead Catfish, consider using heavy tackle designed for catfish or other large fish. If using traditional Largemouth Bass tackle, use the largest line rated for your reel. Heavy tackle is not only necessary for fighting large fish but for keeping them out of structure (log jams, pilings, tree roots, rocks). Whether using a bobber or tightlining, the bait should be on the bottom of the river. The amount of weight depends on the current. Flatheads feed by both sight and smell. Large hooks and live bait are recommended.

Cast into deep pools below dikes and off the dike tips. The bait should sink fast and not drift with the current. When a fish takes the bait and the line begins to move do not set the hook immediately. Catfish tend to move a short distance before swallowing the bait. The general rule is to let the fish take the bait with an open reel then when the fish stops moving set the hook.

**Trotline and throw line fishing:**

Trotlines and throw lines consist of strong cord with hooks on drop lines spaced at intervals. They can be purchased already assembled at various bait and sporting goods stores but can be easily constructed as well. A Web search will produce several methods for constructing them.

Trotlines are normally tied between trees or any stationary structures. They are typically fished on or near the bottom but can also be strung tight to fish at the water’s surface. Weights can be tied on at any place along the line to achieve a desired depth. A common practice is to put a weight in the middle. If the first few hooks at the surface are productive, the weight can be removed to bring all hooks close to the surface.

Place trotlines along and just outside the tree line of the river, secondary channels, or flooded timber. Experiment by placing trotlines in different depth waters. Stretch some lines tight at the surface and put weights on some until you discover the best technique.

Trotlines work well under almost any river condition any time of the year. However if the river is on a fast rise, the places where the ends of the line are tied may be hidden underwater when you return to run the line. And if the river is on a fast fall, the entire line may be high and dry when you return. In either case, the lines should be marked with something highly visible so they can be easily located.
The following is an angler’s instruction for placing a trotline in a choice location lacking stationary structures to anchor the ends of the line: “Select a site below a sandbar, an island or dike where there is a noticeable drop-off in water level. This site should be in an area where the current of the river is not too strong. Drop a large weight to the bottom and suspend a float (jug or other substantial float) above the weight using heavy line. Leave enough slack in the line so that you can pull the line up several feet. Make a loop in the heavy line so that you can tie your trotline to the heavy-vertical line. Place your drop lines approximately 3 feet apart. I usually use a 5/0 stainless steel hook. This is small enough that relatively small catfish (1 to 2 pounds) can get the hook in their mouths but big and strong enough to hold much larger fish. Continue putting out the trotline placing a small weight, depending on the current, every 10 to 15 hooks for up to 100 yards. At this point drop another heavy weight and suspend another large float and tie that end of the trotline to the heavy line that holds the float. You will then be fishing from 80 to 100 hooks between the floats. Bait the hooks with cut shad or Skipjack Herring or live bait. This gives the fish a choice of bait. Upon running the line, observe the level at which you are catching the most fish. Then adjust the trotline for depth by adding or subtracting small weights. This method has worked well for me over the years and has resulted in catching all species and sizes of catfish.”

Throw lines typically extend from the bank towards the river channel. Throw lines are assembled the same as trotlines but only shorter (20 to 30 feet) with fewer hooks. The throw line is tied to a stationary object (tree limb or rock) and the opposite end is weighted with a heavy object (weight, brick, railroad spike). Tie one end to a strong limb or an object on the bank, stretch the line straight out into the river and drop the weighted end. This method works well because it covers the slope of the river bottom rather than just one horizontal zone. This tactic is especially effective when used on a dike tip to fish the plunge pool (on the bottom) along the current seam with live bait. Note that plunge pools are often 50 to 70 feet deep and will require a very long line to adequately fish it.

Live bait and cut bait work well on trotlines as well as on throw lines. Check with a local bait shop for their recommendation and for what other anglers are using.

Great care should be taken when handling lines. A sudden change in current can easily pull the line from the hand and embed a hook in a leg or arm. One person controlling the boat while the other manages the line is the safest method. Have a sharp knife handy but in a safe location in case you need to cut the line quickly.

The following is an angler’s firsthand account of throw line fishing for Flathead Catfish: “Prime time is around the first week of May. We look for a big rise or fall in water level and we fish the first night that it fluctuates less than 1 foot. If the water is high enough we fish in the big willows on a cut bank. If not, we fish from a willow to a pretty substantial tail weight. We average about 8 hooks per line. We use #48 twine for our main line and #18 (doubled) for our drops. Our weights (use more if on rise, less if on fall) are tied with #9 twine. We try to use green sunfish at least 4 inches long but would use all 8 inchers if available. We use 6/0 to 8/0 stainless steel hooks and hand tie big swivels to each hook.”
TIPS

- Check fishing regulations for requirements on type of line, number of hooks, placement of hooks, permissible bait, placement of trotlines, and tags (labeling), and other regulations.
- Scout the area during low water. Look for cavities in cut banks. Note the drop-offs along structured banks and dikes. Mark those spots on your maps or GPS unit for future reference.
- Wear gloves when running lines.
- Always pay attention to the river level forecasts. A slight rise or fall is usually more productive than a steady water level.
- When fishing oxbows or other areas without flow, it is likely that the water will be stratified. If you fish below the thermocline you may find dead fish on your lines. Re-set your lines in shallower areas.
- Attach barrel swivels above the hooks to prevent twisting.
- There are several ways to organize trotlines to avoid tangles and dangling hooks. 1) Wrap the line around a block of Styrofoam and stick the hooks into it. 2) Coil the line inside a 5 gallon bucket and place the hooks over the top edge. Holes can be drilled in the top of the bucket’s lip to place hooks. 3) Build a wooden box with notches in the top edge for the hooks. 4) Wrap each individual drop line around the main line creating a continuous line that can then be wrapped around a piece of wood (dowel, scrap lumber, tree limb).
- A notch in a boat paddle blade makes the ideal tool for grabbing a line underwater. Some boat paddles come with a hook at the end for grabbing lines.
- A roll of brightly colored surveyor’s flagging tape is great for marking trotlines and throw lines.
- Don’t place trotlines near boat traffic. Propellers and trotlines don’t mix. Lines on or near the surface should be well marked with floats.
- Throw lines are prone to snag debris on the bottom of the river. Use very strong line and have a boat paddle, dowel, or strong piece of wood to wrap the line around when you try to dislodge it. Be sure to get hooks out of the way when attempting to free your line.

Advanced sandbar trotline fishing:
This is labeled as an advanced tactic because it is not recommended for the novice angler. This method requires experience in handling a boat in turbulent flows. It requires at least two people.

This is only one of many variations to sandbar trotlines. The trotline will run parallel to the current, not across it. Start upriver and set the line downriver.

Begin by dropping an anchor with up to 100 feet of rope. At the upper end of the rope, attach a large float (jug) with an additional 100 feet of buoy line (without hooks), attach a large brick weight, and then add the trotline. Lower the trotline (weighted by the brick) as each hook is baited. The hooks can be baited prior to setting the trotline or use droppers that are separate from the trotline. The droppers can be baited prior to setting the trotline or use droppers that are separate from the trotline. The droppers can be baited prior to setting the trotline or use droppers that are separate from the trotline. The droppers can be baited prior to setting the trotline or use droppers that are separate from the trotline. The droppers can be baited prior to setting the trotline or use droppers that are separate from the trotline. The droppers can be baited prior to setting the trotline or use droppers that are separate from the trotline.

Place the line over sandbars, eddies, or along channel borders. Look for moderate currents. Sandbars work best because they contain fewer snags. Dealing with snagged trotlines in currents is very dangerous.

Trotlines over sandbars work best when the river is on a slow rise or fall, or is stable. This tactic will work in any season, but catfish feed more readily during warmer months at almost any river stage.
Limb line (drop line) fishing: Setting a limb line is quite simple. Tie a short, strong line to a limber tree limb above the surface of the water. One or more hooks can be attached to the weighted line. Check the lines by watching for the limb’s jerking motion of a hooked catfish.

Position your limb lines along the outside edge of the trees (river and secondary channels) and throughout flooded timber. Bait them with either live or cut bait. They don’t typically need to be fished very deep but you’ll need to experiment with various depths to determine which is the most productive. Don’t set all the limb lines to the same depth until you’ve determined what works best.

Slow but gradual changes in water levels seem to produce more bites than stable river levels. Spring, summer and fall are great times for running limb lines.

Jug fishing: The name “jug” is generic for anything that will serve as a flotation device. Blocks of Styrofoam, laundry detergent bottles and 2-liter soft drink bottles are typical homemade jugs. Even swimming pool noodles can be used. Most sporting goods store carry jugs specifically designed for catfish. The best jugs have a highly visible indicator to let you know when a catfish has taken the bait.

Jug fishing for catfish is exactly what it implies. Take a jug, attach about 6 feet of nylon cord to the handle, attach a weight and hook to the end of the cord, bait it and throw it overboard. Fifteen to twenty jugs will keep you pretty busy.

A simple jug rig consists of about 6 feet of strong nylon cord line, a 6/0 or 7/0 hook, and 1/4 ounce buckshot lead weight. Normally, the weight is placed above the hook. More elaborate jug rigs contain several hooks attached in the same manner in which trotlines are constructed with the weight attached to the end of the main line.

Cut bait from fish such as Skipjack Herring or shad work well. Night crawlers are also effective but generally attract small fish.

Jugging is best during the low water stages that generally occur in late summer or early fall. Distribute the jugs about 20 feet apart in water from 4 to 8 feet deep. Drift the boat downriver near the jugs so they can all be seen. Look for one to either dip up and down or slowly move off from the rest of the jugs.

When the jugs finally drift into deep water or close to the main channel, take them up and re-run the original area or move to a different location.

Long drifts over sandbars where depths are 7 to 8 feet are generally considered optimum. A depth finder will help locate dropoffs (deeper water parallel to the sand bar) and reefs where Blue Catfish normally lie. If sandbars prove unproductive, try long (1/2 mile or more) stretches of swift water next to a shallow bank or island near deep water.

The trick to jug fishing specifically for Flathead Catfish is to let the live bait do the work for you. Using as large a float (jug) as possible, tie on a strong line long enough to reach the bottom. Attach live bait on your hook. Use the appropriate weight to match current conditions. There should be about 18 inches of play between the hook and weight to allow the live bait to move freely. Lower the bait into structure along cut banks. With an additional line, tie the jug to structure above the waterline. Set out as many jugs as you can manage. Watch the jugs closely. If left unattended, the catfish will have more time to wrap around structure.
Drift fishing:
This method closely resembles jug fishing. Attach a bell sinker (experiment with different weights) to the end of the line. Attach one or more 2/0 or 3/0 hooks starting about 18 inches above the weight. Attach a medium size balloon 5 to 10 feet above the lowest hook. The depth can be easily adjusted by sliding the balloon along the line. With rod holders, several rods (where permissible) can be used at a time. Drift over sandbars. Depth will vary, but about 8 feet is typical. Sandbars will contain drop-offs and reefs where catfish are usually found.

The balloon serves the same purpose as a bobber, so strikes will be obvious. When reeling, the balloon will slide down the line when it hits the tip of the rod.

TIPS

- Check state regulations.
- Occasionally a catfish won’t pull the jug hard enough to set the hook so when you grab the jug give it a good tug to make sure the hook is set. If it is a really large fish, let go and follow until it you can safely net the fish. If you are losing many fish, try circle hooks.
- Jugging can produce large fish so have a large net handy. Occasionally, you’ll need to net the fish under water and cut the line in order to free it from structure.
- Jug fishing is usually less productive on windy days.
- Always keep pliers and sharp knife handy but in a safe location in case you need to cut the line quickly.
- Don’t leave jugs in the river. Take them home to use another day.

TIPS

- Use a trolling motor to prevent the boat from turning circles as it drifts downriver.
- When you start catching fish use the depth finder to help keep you in the same depth zone.
- Live and cut bait work well for this method.
- White Bass often strike (bump) the balloons so have a rod rigged and ready to cast for them.
- A very slow rise or fall or steady river stage are ideal for this method. The lower the river stage, the better.
- Mid and late summer are good times for drift fishing.
Common Carp

The Common Carp is known as buglemouth bass, carp, English, European and German carp.

Description:
The Common Carp can be easily identified by two distinct features: 1) two barbels, whisker-like appendage, on each side of the mouth and 2) serrated spines at the front edge of the dorsal and anal fins. Carp range in color from bronze or gold to golden yellow. Some may be fully scaled, partially scaled, or even lacking scales. They can reach weights exceeding 80 pounds.

Habitats:
Common Carp live in all Mississippi River habitats. They are primarily bottom feeders preferring areas with lots of aquatic insects and organic matter. They can also be found near drift piles, logs, and other submerged cover. They most often found during early morning and evening, and often muddy the water. Spawning usually occurs in aquatic vegetation and occurs in late spring through mid-summer.

Baits:
Common Carp have a keen sense of smell and taste. Live earthworms are good bait but various dough baits are typically the angler’s choice. Dough baits can be purchased or can be made from flour, cornmeal, crushed cereals, crackers or bread. Some anglers fish with whole kernel corn and often chum (emptying cans of corn into the water) the area to attract carp. Carp can be exceptionally challenging when using a fly rod.

Flies imitating pupal stages of aquatic insects, worms, small crayfish, and leeches work well.

Tactics:
Medium action bait casting, spinning, and fly rods typically used for Largemouth Bass fishing are adequate. But, slightly heavier (stronger) tackle may be required to turn a carp when fishing around structure. Tackle designed for catfish is also appropriate for carp. Bottom fishing requires weights to match the currents, like fishing for catfish. When fishing shallow water, watch for puffs of silt created by feeding carp. Try a small crayfish crankbait. Bump it along the bottom, creating small puffs of silt to attract carp. If you can see carp, it’s a good time to try a fly rod that calls for a delicate presentation. Carp are easily spooked by the splash of a lure or fly so the angler should exercise considerable stealth.

The best time of the year for carp fishing is late June through September.

Tips
- Common Carp have small mouths, so use hooks in the No. 6 to No. 10 range.
- When using artificial lures, consider masking your scent by rubbing the lure in mud or apply artificial scents (where permissible).
The Freshwater Drum is closely related to the saltwater red drum (redfish). The white, flaky flesh of Freshwater Drum makes excellent table fare. Freshwater Drum is known as croaker, gaspergou, gou, grunt, and sheepshead.

**Description:**
Drum differs from other fish by having two thick anal spines, the second being significantly longer than the first. The dorsal fin is divided on this deep bodied grey fish. Its weight usually ranges from 5 to 15 pounds.

**Habitats:**
Freshwater Drum prefer currents of the main channel, side channels and along dikes but can be found in oxbows, tributaries, and backwaters where they feed on snails, mussels, small fish, crayfish, and aquatic insects. Drum spawn in open water at 65 degrees, which usually occurs early to mid-summer.

**Baits:**
Grubs (whitish beetle that feed on grass roots of lawns), crayfish tails, nightcrawlers, minnows, Skipjack Herring, Threadfin Shad and Gizzard Shad are good bait options.

Small crayfish crankbaits fished on a slow retrieve are worth a try. Crankbaits imitating minnows and shad also work well. Crappie jigs (curly tail grubs) are very effective.

**Tactics:**
The same heavy tackle as used for carp and catfish wok great when using bait. Otherwise, medium action bait casting, spinning, and fly rods will work. Even lighter action tackle is appropriate when using curly tail grubs and other jigs.

Bottom fishing using nightcrawlers may be the most effective method for targeting drum. Nightcrawlers also attract carp, catfish, and Bluegill. Although drum can be caught almost any time of the year, spring is particularly productive.

Often casting a 1/8- to 1/4-ounce curly tail grub along riprap and dikes can be effective. Also bouncing it along the bottom at the mouths of tributaries will produce strikes.

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**TIPS**
- As the name implies, Freshwater Drum make low rumble noises. Some sound distinctly different from others. If you hear it, you’re in the right place to fish for them.
Largemouth Bass are known by a wide variety of names such as bass, bayou bass, bigmouth, bucketmouth, cypress trout, hog, lineside, and mossback.

**Description:**
The back and upper side of the Largemouth Bass are olive green or dark brown. The sides show some mottling with a single dark lateral stripe extending from the gill plate to the tail. In muddy or cold water the color can be faint or drab. It has an obvious big mouth with its jaw reaching far behind the real margin of the eye.

**Habitats:**
Largemouth Bass are found in the same habitats as Bluegill and crappie. They prefer habitats with little to no current and fairly clear water such as oxbows and tributaries. An occasional Largemouth can be caught in the calmer waters of dikes and secondary channels. They prefer areas with structure such as standing trees, fallen trees, submerged logs, root wads and any riprap structures.

Bass move into the shallow areas to spawn in waters of 59-75 degrees. Unlike Bluegill, Largemouth Bass nests are solitary and not associated with other bass nests when spawning. In spring, bass move into shallow areas which are usually accompanied by high water. Look for bass feeding in flooded grass and structure along steep or sloping banks.

As the water warms in the summer, bass will seek the deeper cooler water of a thermocline where oxygen levels are better. During the summer months, bass tend to feed in shaded areas, especially in early morning and late afternoon. Fishing at night in midsummer can be quite productive. As fall arrives and the water temperatures drop, bass increase foraging activity in shallow areas.

**Baits:**
Visit any sporting goods store and you’ll find hundreds, if not thousands, of different bass lures from which to choose. Most bass anglers prefer artificial lures, but bass can also be taken on live shad and minnows. Large bait tends to produce larger fish.

When selecting lures, consideration should be given to the depths you’ll be fishing. Topwater lures such as chuggers or buzz baits are meant to be fished on the surface. Spinner baits and shallow running crankbaits are good choices for just under the surface. Deep running crankbaits are effective in water at least ten feet deep. Plastic worms and bass jigs can be fished shallow or deep.

Lure colors and patterns are numerous. Every bass angler has his or her own favorites. Lures that resemble shad, including silver or white, are always good choices, especially in fairly clear water. Firetiger is a good color pattern for murky or muddy water. Lures that mimic crayfish, especially fished around rocky banks, can be very effective. Bass jigs that are a combination of black and blue work well as jigs that mimic crayfish.

The general rule of thumb is to use light colors in clear water and dark colors in murky or muddy water. Water clarity in oxbows and tributaries will change according to local runoff and the rise and fall of the Mississippi River. It is advisable to have a section of light and dark colored lures.
Casting and fly fishing:
Fast to medium action casting, spinning, and fly rods are probably the most popular tackle for bass fishing. When fishing heavy cover, 14-20 pound test line is recommended for bait casting reels. Spinning tackle generally requires lighter line such as 6 to ten pound test. Monofilament, fluorocarbon, or braided fishing lines are equally appropriate.

Early morning and late afternoon are prime times for bass fishing regardless of the season. In early spring, bass jigs and crankbaits are the baits of choice. As the water warms during spring, spinner baits, crankbaits, top water lures, and plastic worms become more effective. Cast lures and flies in and around structure close to the bank in oxbows and tributaries. Look for fallen tree tops, sunken logs, and standing timber. Rocky points, riprap, banks, and structures near boat ramps shouldn’t be overlooked. Be sure to begin fishing all types of cover and depths until you determine a pattern, then focus fishing on those spots. As the temperature warms, switch to deep running lures and cast near structure in deeper water.

In the spring when the river is falling, look for bass in canals or ditches connecting oxbows and those canals connecting the river with oxbows. Bass will aggressively feed on baitfish and can easily be taken on shallow running lures. As the summer progresses, night fishing in oxbows for bass can be very productive.

There are varying opinions about whether a dark night or a full moon night is the best. If you can see where you are casting, it’s just right. Try large, dark lures that either float or ride just below the surface.

Trolling:
Trolling is an often forgotten tactic since the invention of the bass boat and the increased popularity of casting for Largemouth Bass. The object is to slowly motor the boat parallel to the bank, usually in water 8 to 10 feet deep. One or more casting or spinning rods should be rigged with crankbaits. Run the lures close to the bottom. Occasionally bumping the bottom to cause an erratic action should attract bass. White or Striped Bass and an occasional Flathead or Blue Catfish could also be caught while trolling for Largemouth Bass.

Mid to late summer seems to be the most productive time to troll for bass. Some experimenting is required to determine the correct speed, how much line to let out, and the correct depth to troll.
White Bass and Striped Bass

White Bass are commonly called sand bass, silver bass, stripe, and Striped Bass. Striped Bass are sometimes referred to as linesider, rockfish, and striper. Hybrid Striped Bass are also called wipers.

White Bass are native to the Mississippi River. Striped Bass and Hybrid Striped Bass have been stocked in the Mississippi River and in various tributaries. The hybrid is a cross between White and Striped Bass.

Description:
Identifying the species can be confusing. White and Striped Bass, along with their hybrids, are silver in color; have several horizontal lines along their sides, and have at least one rough patch (feels like sandpaper) on their tongue. These identifying features should help tell them apart:

- White Bass have a single rounded patch of teeth on the tongue. The body is deeper than the Striped Bass. Typical weight ranges from one to four pounds.

- Striped Bass have two distinct parallel tooth patches on the tongue. The body is more slender and streamlined than White Bass and is often referred to as torpedo shaped. Side stripes are also distinct (unbroken) with several reaching the tail. Typical weight in the Mississippi River is four to eight pounds with rare reports exceeding 30 pounds.

- Hybrid Striped Bass resemble White Bass in body shape but have two patches of teeth like Striped Bass. The body is deep like a White Bass and often referred to as football shaped. Side stripes are usually broken with several reaching the tail. Typical weights are similar to or slightly exceeding the Striped Bass.

- A similar species, yellow bass, are a silvery-yellow fish with several dark horizontal stripes but the stripes are sharply broken and offset above the front of the anal fin. There are no teeth on the upper surface of the tongue. They are rarely longer than 12 inches.

Habitats
White, Striped, and Hybrid Striped Bass are open-water fish. They seek moving water in the river channel and secondary channels. Current moving through dike notches, around dike tips, and rocky points, and over gravel and sandbars are prime areas for locating these fish. Although they prefer current, they normally avoid, if possible, more turbid waters. They school together and are constantly on the move.

Dikes are attractive to these predatory fish because the water that passes around them and through breaks and notches provide prime holding spots for ambushing unsuspecting prey. The edges of the current (to the sides and underneath) provide conditions where the bass don’t have to expend as much energy to stay in place. Such areas attract large numbers of baitfish. High current areas usually produce Striped and Hybrid Striped Bass, while eddies generally provide good habitat for White Bass.

During the spring, White Bass enter tributaries to spawn when the water reaches 45 to 55 degrees. The actual spawn occurs from 54 to 68 degrees. Spawning occurs in open water over gravel or sand bottoms often in current but without nests.
Baits:
An overview of bait and tackle is included in each tactics section.

Fishing oxbows, tributaries and outlets:
In early spring when the willows are beginning to leaf and the dogwood are blooming, look for White Bass to make spawning runs into the oxbows and tributaries. During this time of the year, White Bass are very predictable. Schools of White Bass search for sand and gravel bottoms to lay their eggs. Those places are easy to find in most tributaries but in oxbows, during high water, look for flooded gravel roads and boat ramps.

As the river falls, the currents become constricted at outlets. Tributary outlets are usually distinct and easy to find. However oxbow outlets may be canals, chutes, and even ditches that are barely navigable. The currents in the outlets are great places to find White Bass. The constricted portions of the outlets can be fished as well as where the waters of the outlets and river mix. Look for fallen trees, log jams, and any structure that provides refuge from the current. Another prime spot is just outside the outlet on the downriver side where the water rushes around a rocky point. White Bass may be found on the sides of those points, usually very close to the bank and rock, but don’t overlook the drop-offs near the points.

As the spawn ends and water levels stabilize, try trolling the banks of oxbows. Once a school of White Bass is located, stop and begin casting for them. When the school moves, begin trolling and repeat the process. Give special attention to rock points and places where freshwater is entering the oxbow.

Striped Bass

Tackle selection is based on different philosophies. Is your objective to catch as many fish as possible in the shortest amount of time or to play the fish longer and probably catch fewer? In other words, almost any ultralight to medium-heavy tackle will do. There is a wide range of tackle to choose from:

- Crappie poles with jigs and minnows.
- Ultralight to light action spinning rods with in-line spinners and small jigs.
- Medium action casting rods, 14 pound or less monofilament with jigs, spinners, and practically any small to medium size Largemouth Bass lure.
- Fly rods in the 2 to 5 weight range with brightly colored streamers, clousers, small jigs, and even medium size poppers.

Fishing dikes:
A medium to heavy casting or spinning rod typically used for Largemouth Bass will work well. Monofilament line of 12 to 17 pound test is adequate for casting and spinning rods. Some avid anglers even use 30 to 50 pound braided line to make retrieving snagged lures easier.

The most productive fishing for White, Striped, and Hybrid Striped Bass is within a few feet of a dike’s rocks along the edge of the current. These fish feed primarily by sight so fishing success increases in clearer water, which for the Mississippi River means 4 inches or more of visibility below the surface. Artificial lures include crank baits, lipless crank baits, 1/4- to 3/8-ounce curly tail grubs, and tail spinners.
Best lure colors are those that resemble shad (same as for Largemouth Bass) and chartreuse. In more turbid or muddy water, using crank baits (vibrating lures) or brighter colors will prove more effective.

Late summer through early fall generally provide clearer water than during the spring and anglers can catch fish as deep as 20 feet or more. Although fishing is good from early June through early November, late September through October are generally considered the best months.

The following is one angler’s instructions for fishing for White, Striped, and Hybrid Striped Bass around dikes:

“When you find little waterfalls running over the dikes, cast a 3-inch pearl curly-tail 3/8ths ounce jig to the base of each waterfall. As soon as the jig hits the water start a pumping retrieve making sure the jig is moving by your reeling, not by the sweep of the current. Continue to other waterfalls until you have exhausted the area. Then change tactics by selecting a mid-range white or chartreuse crankbait. Fish the same areas, but only a little deeper. Try a steady retrieve or stop-and-go motion. Next, pull the bow of your boat to the dike and make parallel casts past and under the waterfalls. Once this tactic has been exhausted, change tactics again. Move out from the dike and tie on a tail spinner (little George type) lure and bottom-bounce the slope of the dike back to the boat and under the current line. Fish the tail spinner like a plastic worm, thumping the bottom with every pull. Before leaving, try deep running crankbaits cast upriver past and around the ends of the dikes.”

A great alternative is a five to six weight fast action fly rod with floating line or an eight weight rod with a sinking tip line.

Fly fishing the dikes for White, Striped, and Hybrid Striped Bass is quite simple. Begin with a single small white and chartreuse clouser minnow and a 5 to 6 weight rod. A 4 foot leader of 16 pound monofilament with a 2 foot tippet of 12 pound test should be sufficient. Either from a boat or from a standing position on the dike, the first cast should be in the slack water that makes a V-shape next to the current rushing through the rocks. If fish are there, they’ll hit the fly almost immediately. The next area to cast into is directly on top of the dike into the current. The fly line should be tight to prevent the fly from snagging on the rocks. If fish are there, they’ll hit the fly immediately. If a single clouser proves unproductive, tie on a trailing clouser with 12 to 16 inches of monofilament. It should be tied to the bend of the hook of the first clouser. This will add a little weight which sometimes makes a difference. If casting from a boat, continue casting along the entire dike.

As with fishing a casting or spinning rod, the next tactic is to fish deeper. Switch to the 8 weight fly rod. Shorten the leader to 3 feet and the tippet to 1 foot. Attach two larger clouser minnows. Cast within inches of the rocks along the seams of the current and let the flies sink quickly. Keep the line as tight as you can. This can be difficult because fly line has more drag in the current than
monofilament. This method is easier when casting from the dike but avoiding snagging rocks will be difficult.

**Fishing sandbars:**
Drifting along sandbars, you’ll often see schools of White Bass pushing shad almost out of the water along the banks. These fish can be spooked easily so you’ll have to quickly make long casts. Cast to the outside edge rather than the middle of activity to avoid spooking them. Use the same tackle as described above. You could use lighter tackle but you never know when you will hook into a large striped or hybrid. You’ll be glad you have the heavier tackle if this happens.

Also look for downriver sandbar points that create eddies below them. Behind those points you should see a current line with calm water. Striped Bass are often found behind those current lines. Cast a crankbait or an in-line spinner, curly tail grub, or a small to medium size clouser minnow into the eddy and retrieve it through the change in current. A tail spinner can be successfully bumped along the bottom through this area as well. Also look for rock or concrete points that create the same type of eddies and current lines.

Trolling over sandbars can also be productive especially during the dog days of summer. Several casting or spinning rods can be used at the same time. A large variety of crankbaits will work. See the trolling section under Largemouth Bass for more information.
Live Bait

**Skipjack Herring**

Moving live fish and crayfish from one stream basin to another can have adverse environmental consequences. This is especially true for Asian carp such as silver and Bighead carp. Only catch and use fish and crayfish in the Mississippi River that have been collected from the Mississippi River. Most states have regulations related to these issues. Learn to distinguish between Asian carps and shad; the young look very similar. Catching and using your own bait can be as challenging and rewarding as fishing for target species. And just the same as fishing for your target species, be aware of your state’s live bait regulations. Your state may specify which species you can use, how many of a single species you can use, sizes of the bait, and what methods you may use to catch them.

**Gizzard Shad**

Gizzard Shad are also referred to as golden eyes and hickory shad. This silvery colored herring is deep bodied with a lower jaw that does not protrude beyond the upper jaw. Adults can be up to 14 inches long. It is similar to the Threadfin Shad, which has a forward projecting jaw. The Gizzard Shad is found throughout the Lower Mississippi.

**Threadfin Shad**

Threadfin Shad are also called slicks and yellowfin shad. Threadfin Shad, like Gizzard Shad, are deep-bodied fish, but rarely exceed 7 inches in length. Its coloration is bluish black or dark olive with gold overtones along the back and upper sides. They can be distinguished from Gizzard Shad by their lower jaw extending beyond the tip of the snout and their tail fin is bright yellow. They have a black oval or round spot behind the head. It is found throughout the Lower Mississippi.

**Crayfish**

Crayfish are also known as crawfish, crawdad, and mud bug. They resemble lobsters, but are typically much smaller in size. Crayfish are common throughout the Mississippi River system. Typical foods include algae, insect larvae, snails, tadpoles, and vegetation.

**River and grass shrimp**

River Shrimp are much larger than grass shrimp, and can be distinguished by their opaque color and by their longer and more highly serrated rostral barb. River Shrimp prefer currents, and are usually caught along the border of the flowing river channel. As their name implies, grass shrimp are more readily caught in vegetated and isolated batture waters.

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**Tactics:**
Based on the fish you are targeting, decide what kind of live bait you will need and find the most obvious locations in which to catch that particular species. Then use the most effective method for catching it. If possible, keep it alive until you need it.

Review the “baits” section of the fish you will be targeting to determine the type of live bait you will need.

Shad, along with various small sunfish and minnows, are often found in slack water below dikes, at tributary outlets, small shallow indentations along the bank, as well as along the edges of currents. Cast nets and seines are efficient in those situations. There’s an art to throwing a cast net, so some practice will be needed before going to the river.

Cast in shallow slack-water areas that are free of limbs, rocks, and other debris that may snag your net.

Seines usually require at least two people. One person anchors one end of the seine on or near the bank while the second person carries the other end of the seine into the river and makes a loop back to the bank. Weights along the bottom of the seine drag the bottom and prevent fish from escaping.

Skipjack Herring prefer the currents of the main channel, especially below dikes which makes it difficult to catch them with casting nets or seines. However, they will aggressively hit a small spinner, jig, or wet fly. They fight very well on ultralight spinning rods and fly rods. Baitfish can be kept alive in a boat’s live well, an ice chest, or bucket. You should consider three things to keep your bait alive: 1) water quality, 2) water temperature, and 3) oxygen content. Fill your container with water from the area where you the baitfish. Hot water loses oxygen quickly, so monitor the water’s temperature. Water frozen in a plastic container works well to cool the water in your bait container and won’t pollute the water with chlorine. Aerators should be used to add oxygen to the water and can be purchased at most bait and fishing supply stores.

Crayfish are more likely to be found in backwater sloughs, ditches, and flooded agricultural fields. Specially designed traps are the most efficient way to catch enough for baiting trotlines. Some people wade in shallow creeks, turn over rocks, and catch crayfish by hand.

Although crayfish breathe through gills, they don’t have to be covered with water to survive. A mesh sack, towel, cloth, or burlap bag kept moist and cool is usually all that’s needed to keep crayfish alive for a day or two.

River Shrimp migrate upstream or downstream at night, along the channel border.

This makes them vulnerable to night seining on sandbars. With luck and effort, River Shrimp can also be caught with a cast net. However, the traditional approach to capturing River Shrimp is with baited funnel traps along the edge of the channel. Water flowing through vegetation, such as submerged willows, is a traditional spot to place the traps. Traps are commercially available or easily constructed with fine mesh hardware cloth. Shrimp are scavengers so any...
Fishing the Lower Mississippi River

stink bait will attract them. Rotting dead fish are the traditional bait, but canned cat food is less onerous and messy. There are also accounts of bait trappers using canned sweet potatoes. Trap leads should be long enough for the trap to rest on the river bottom. If currents are too strong for the trap to sink, add weight. River Shrimp stop moving or feeding when water temperatures fall below 60 degrees, so check water temperature before trying to capture them.

The easiest way to catch grass shrimp is to first locate water moving through a culvert. Then drag a mesh net through the current below the culvert. A common tool is a wire frame covered with fine mesh attached to the end of a long rake handle. Grass Shrimp will appear almost invisible on a bream hook, but they make superior bait.

TIPS

■ Instructional videos on the use of cast nests can be found on the Internet. Search for “how to throw a cast net.”

■ An Internet search will produce several suggestions for making and baiting crayfish traps.

■ Quickly moving fish from waters of different temperature may shock and possibly kill them. Water temperature in your holding container should be fairly close to the same temperature as the water where catch baitfish.

■ Skipjack Herring are very difficult to keep alive. They require fast moving, high oxygenated water to survive. Either use them quickly or prepare them as cut bait.

■ Consider matching the size of bait to the fish you are targeting. Big catfish can be caught on all sizes of bait, but small fish or fish with small mouths are more likely to be taken with small bait.

■ Always wear a personal flotation device while seining. Drop-offs, swift currents, and hidden structure can cause accidents. Scout the area with a depth finder, or use a pole to probe the area before seining.

■ When using a cast net, move rods and other items away from the area in the boat where casting. It’s easy to snag a rod and accidently pitch it overboard.

■ Large female River Shrimp can be hooked through the thorax, abdomen, or threaded onto the hook. Multiple smaller males and juvenile shrimp can be put on a single hook. Shrimp are fished as you would with worms or crickets, by using fine hooks and bobbers for crappie or sunfish or with larger hooks on limb lines and trotlines for catfish.
Other Species of Fish

As you spend time on the Mississippi River, you will encounter other species of fish, including some that are caught commercially, such as Smallmouth Buffalo; some that can end up on your line, such as Spotted Gar; and others that are strictly protected, such as Pallid Sturgeon. Please respect all fishing and wildlife regulations and all species that live in and along the Lower Mississippi River.

Top: A Mississippi River researcher holds a Smallmouth Buffalo before releasing it.

Bottom: Spotted Gar have intricate markings.

Above: Pallid Sturgeon and a close relative, Shovelnose Sturgeon, are strictly protected by federal and state law.

Right: Paddlefish are primitive fish that can grow quite large.
Up to 150 species of fish have been found in the Lower Mississippi River. Most of them are freshwater fishes. The Lower Mississippi River is still considered to be a productive river for fish populations, despite a number of changes made to support commercial navigation by barges and to reduce flood risks. Its huge floodplain has been reduced by 90 percent, and what remains is flanked by earthen levees stretching farther than the Great Wall of China. The lower river has also been shortened by about 150 miles to reduce its snaking bends. Two of the species of the species pictured on the previous page - Pallid Sturgeon and Paddlefish - are uncommon and of special concern. Alligator Gar and Shovelnose Sturgeon are in this category as well.
Common throughout the Lower Mississippi River

Bigmouth Buffalo

Grass Carp

Bowfin

Grass or Redfin Pickerel

Silver Carp

Redear Sunfish

Warmouth

American Eel

Yellow Bass

Longnose Gar

Shortnose Gar
Maps

The Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee has produced detailed maps from the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers at Cairo, Illinois, for 954 river miles to the Gulf of Mexico. River miles and access sites are indicated on each map.

Providing a boat ramp on the Mississippi River is challenging because the river is constantly changing. Fluctuation in water level often leave ramps covered with sand and mud. During extremely low water conditions, many ramps don’t reach the water. During high water, many ramps are inaccessible. Ramps can covered with gravel, concrete or asphalt and may or may not be maintained.

Some ramps are free of charge, while others require a launching fee. While most ramps on oxbow lakes are maintained and very reliable, successfully accessing the river from them will usually depend on the water level.

The point to all this is: do your homework. Check with the appropriate state fish and wildlife conservation agency to get the latest information about the boat ramps you intend to use. Contact information is listed in the Fishing and Boating Regulations section of this guide. Questions you may want to ask include:

- Do they charge a fee?
- How is the ramp constructed?
- Is a 4-wheel drive vehicle required to launch a boat?
- Are food, camping facilities, restrooms, fuel, and bait available?
- Is it accessible to the handicapped?
- Is it safe to park there?

You should also consider supplementing the maps in this guide with one or more of the following maps:

- State highway maps can be found at welcome centers and most book stores.
- State Topo maps can be found at most book stores.
- Aerial photos can be found at state department of transportation offices and on the Internet at Google Earth.
- River maps can be found at U.S. Army Corps of Engineers websites.
- Topo maps can be found at state department of transportation offices and through various Geographic Information System (GIS) companies.
- Internet searches for specific sites may also produce maps.

### Maps

This guide is linked to a series of online maps showing boat ramps, dike fields and other important features of the Lower Mississippi River. See the tables in the next few pages to find the map you need for your next trip. The maps are numbered 1 through 38.

### Online maps

Click to view the maps

### Arkansas maps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map No.</th>
<th>Landing Name</th>
<th>Nearest Town/Landmark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Barfield Landing</td>
<td>Blytheville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6, 7</td>
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<td>Osceola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sans Souci Landing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Island 40 Access</td>
<td>Marion</td>
</tr>
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<td>Dacus Lake</td>
<td>West Memphis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Hughes</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mellwood Old River</td>
<td>Elaine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>McCallie Access</td>
<td>Arkansas City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Choctaw Island Access</td>
<td>Arkansas City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Kate Adams Lake</td>
<td>Arkansas City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Panthers Forest Landing</td>
<td>Lake Village</td>
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### Kentucky maps

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wickliffe Boat Ramp</td>
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<td>Doug Travis WMA-Laketon</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Sassafras Ridge</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Bessie's Bend Access</td>
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### Louisiana maps

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<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Bunches Cut-off (Sarahs Cut-off)</td>
<td>L. Providence</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Port of Lake Providence</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bunge Elevator</td>
<td>Transylvania</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Surplus City Landing - Yucatan</td>
<td>Newton</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Police Jury Ramp (Old River)</td>
<td>Ferriday</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>J &amp; J Boat Landing</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Minorca Boat Ramp (Old River)</td>
<td>Vidalia/Ferriday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Old River at Deer Park</td>
<td>Ferriday/Vidalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Knox Landing</td>
<td>Simmesport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Old River Control (downstream)</td>
<td>Simmesport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>New Roads East</td>
<td>St. Francisville</td>
</tr>
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<td>27</td>
<td>New Roads West</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Wilkerson Point Access</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>East Baton Rouge Bridge Landing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Port Allen Lock Landing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Plaquemine Access</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Donaldson Public Landing</td>
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<td>31</td>
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### Missouri maps

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<tr>
<td>2, 3</td>
<td>New Madrid City Access</td>
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<tr>
<td>2, 3</td>
<td>New Madrid Bend Access</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Triangle Boat Club Access</td>
<td>Caruthersville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>S.P. Reynolds Access</td>
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### Mississippi maps

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<td>Walls</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Kingstons Boat Launch</td>
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<td>J.Ts Landing</td>
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</tr>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Delta Landing Boat Ramp</td>
<td>Friars Point</td>
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<td>Quapaw Landing Boat Ramp</td>
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</tr>
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### Mississippi maps continued

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<tr>
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<td>Vicksburg Waterfront</td>
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<tr>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Adams Co. Public Boat Launch Ramp</td>
<td>Natchez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Lake Mary Boat Ramp</td>
<td>Woodville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Artonish Landing</td>
<td>Fort Adams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Tennessee maps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map No.</th>
<th>Landing</th>
<th>Nearest Town/Landmark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tiptonville Ramp</td>
<td>Tiptonville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>W.K. Ford Ramp</td>
<td>Boothspoint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ed Jones Ramp</td>
<td>Halls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jim Fullon Ramp</td>
<td>Ripley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ed Duvall Landing</td>
<td>Covington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sasser Ramp</td>
<td>Meeman-Shelby SP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mud Island Ramp</td>
<td>Mud Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>US Coast Guard Station Access</td>
<td>Memphis, Mud Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Memphis Yacht Club Access</td>
<td>Memphis, Mud Island</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aerator: Equipment designed to add oxygen to water.

Artificial lure: A manufactured or hand-made object equipped with one or more hooks; designed to attract and hook fish.

Barrel swivel: A metal link between two lines that allows free turning/rotating thereby preventing the lines from twisting; barrel describes the shape of the swivel.

Bait casting: The act of using a fishing rod to throw a line with a lure or bait across the water; the weight of the lure or bait carries the line with it; using a level winding reel.

Barbels: A whisker-like tactile organ near the mouth of some fish; has taste buds that aid in searching for food in murky water.

Batture: Land between the Mississippi River and its levees.

Bobber: Fishing float; cork; quill; used to suspend a lure or bait at a predetermined depth from the water’s surface.

Braided fishing line: A line made of woven man-made fibers; highly visible to both man and fish; high knot strength; very strong in relation to its diameter; has very little stretch.

Cane poles: A fishing pole made of natural cane to which a fishing line is tied; typically does not use a reel.

Cast net: Also called a throw net; is circular with small weights distributed along its edge; thrown by hand; effective in catching bait fish.

Chenille: A soft tufted cord of silk or cotton; commonly used for bedspreads, rugs, and tying artificial lures/flies.

Crappie bite: Dough-like substance resembling a small marshmallow; contains flavors and scents to attract fish; often attached to jig hooks.

Crappie poles: Pole specifically made for crappie fishing; typically in 10 to 14 foot lengths; usually has a small reel; lightweight compared to most other poles of equal length.

Culverts: A device used to channel water under a road or railway; typically made of steel or concrete.

Dropper: A short length of line attached to the main line; to which a lure or hook is attached; thereby enabling one main line to carry multiple lures or hooks.

Fluorocarbon: A polymer formed by bonding fluorine and carbon; a single strand line like monofilament; has almost the same refractive index as water making it almost invisible to fish; is more abrasion resistant than monofilament line; is resistant to sun degradation making it last longer than monofilament; sinks faster than monofilament.

Fly fishing tackle: A rod and reel designed to throw a weighted fishing line across the water; makes it possible to cast small delicate lures/flies that could not otherwise be cast by bait casting or spin casting tackle.

Hook sizes: hook sizes followed by a /0 increase in size; 4/0 is larger than 3/0; hook sizes not followed by a /0 decrease in size; 18 is smaller than 16.

Life jacket: A life preserver; personal flotation device (PFD); a sleeveless vest worn to keep a person floating in water; worn to keep a person from drowning; some are filled with buoyant material and others are inflatable.

Marabou: A soft fluffy feather from some birds used for tails of flies; when in water it is streamline when the fly is moving but expands (puffs up) when the fly stops.

Mile marker: Mile markers are not placed regularly on the bank, but can be found on Coast Guard navigation lights located along the top bank; light locations and their river miles are shown on the navigation maps sold by the U.S. Corps of Engineers.

Monofilament: Fishing line made from a single fiber of plastic; has a wide range of tensile strengths commonly referred to as “tests”; weakens when exposed to sunlight; tends to come off reels in coils when stored for a long time.
Rod holder: A commercial or home-made device to keep a fishing rod from being pulled into the water or to keep it safe while traveling.

Seine: A net actively pulled through the water to catch fish; comes in different mesh sizes for catching various sizes of fish; a common method used to catch live bait.

Sinkers: A weight attached to a fishing line or net; typically made of lead; non-toxic alternatives made of tungsten and ceramic are available.

Spin-casting tackle: Also known as a closed face reel; has a push-button release for casting; typically used for small to medium size fish; rods are usually 5 to 6 foot in length.

Spine: A sharp, bony fin ray found on some fishes; a common means of protection; often serrated and sometimes possessing venom.

Stratified: A term used to describe waters that have formed layers at various depths. In waters not subject to mixing; see thermocline below.

Thermocline: A thermocline is a thin transition layer between an upper layer of warm oxygenated water and a denser layer of cool oxygen-poor water. The depth at which the thermocline occurs is dependent on sunlight penetration. The sun provides energy necessary to increase the temperature of the top layer and to produce oxygen through photosynthesis. In the fall, as water temperatures start to cool, the layers will mix together, a process commonly referred to as the “turnover”. To find the depth of the thermocline, tie a white object on your line and lower it into the water. Note the depth at which it disappears and double that number to estimate the depth of the thermocline. Sunlight must travel down through the water and back to your eyes, twice that distance is the depth of sunlight penetration and the depth of the thermocline.

Tippet: The portion of line stationed between the fishing line and a lure/fly; generally of smaller test than the fishing line; allows line to break near the lure/fly, thereby reducing the risk of losing the entire line; in fly casting it proportionally distributes the entire line weight, thus allowing for delicate presentations.

References

Literature
- Habits and Habitats of Fishes in the Upper Mississippi River, The Upper Mississippi River Conservation Committee, 2011.

Additional websites

Fishing tactics:
http://www.youtube.com (e.g., search for trot lines, jug fishing, etc.).

Boating safety:
- U.S. Coast Guard: http://www.uscgboating.org.

River guide

John Ruskey of Clarksdale, Mississippi, provided many of the photos for this fishing guide, including the beautiful image on the cover. John operates Quapaw Canoe Co., which provides guided paddling excursions. He also runs a river-guide apprenticeship program for youth in Mississippi and Arkansas. In a project commissioned by the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee, he produced a website for the Lower Mississippi River Water Trail. The site initially focuses on paddling the 100-plus miles between Helena and Arkansas City, Arkansas.

click to visit rivergator.org
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A n advisory group comprised of Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee members and private citizens guided the development of this fishing guide. Without their experience, insight, and participation this fishing guide would not have been possible.

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Fish artist
Joe Tomelleri

Kansas City Artist Joseph R. Tomelleri graduated with an M.S. in biology from Fort Hays State University (Hays, Kansas) in 1984. After working briefly as a botanist, Joe turned full time to illustration in 1986. Since he has traveled more than 150,000 miles to collect live fishes for his scientific renderings. His 800-plus illustrations have appeared in more than 350 publications, including 30 books, scores of magazines, advertisements, greeting cards, T-shirts, furniture, posters, trading cards, newspapers, and identification guides. One hundred sixty-one illustrations comprise his book, Fishes of the Central United States, co-authored with Mark Eberle. A compilation of Joe’s work on trout and salmon has recently been published in Trout and Salmon of North America, written by Bob Behnke. Joe’s drawings are executed in Berol Prismacolor pencils and are renowned for their precision. They portray the fishes faithfully with accurate life colors, scale and fin ray-counts, and a full spread of the fins in a manner that is impossible photographically. Joe is recognized by many ichthyologists as one of the finest scientific illustrators of fishes in the world.

click to visit his website