

By Michael A. Kallok

Photography by Tom Thulen

Whiskered

Giants

of the North

Colossal **Channel catfish** have proven worthy ambassadors for the Red River of the North.

AT A GAS STATION just outside of East Grand Forks, a truck with Nebraska plates is parked at the pump next to me. I have a hunch its owner didn't haul a boat and trailer 450 miles to fish for walleye, but I ask anyway: "You here for the channel catfish?"

"Uh, yeah," Doug Redding, of Lyons, Neb., responds with hesitation, as if he's waiting for a punch line.

His wife is casually resting an arm on the boat's gunwale. The smirk evident below her dark sunglasses suggests the joke is on me.

"That's right, you people think catfish are bottom-feeding trash fish, don't you?" she asks playfully.

"No, I'm here to fish for them," I say, and they let down their guard.

I learn the Reddings have been making the trip to northwestern

Bruce Nelson pauses for a photo before releasing a hefty Red River channel catfish he boated near East Grand Forks.





Minnesota for seven years. As they share some of their experiences on the river, the motivation behind their annual sojourn comes to the surface. They are chasing the fish of a lifetime—a channel catfish over 20 pounds.

“Those aren’t uncommon at all in the Red River,” says DNR assistant area fisheries manager Dennis Topp. “It is the premier trophy channel cat fishery in North America. People come from all over the world to fish the Red.”

From Fargo to Manitoba, the north-flowing Red River began luring nonresident anglers in the late 1980s when its monstrous cats started getting ink and airtime from national outdoors media. But local residents largely ignored or avoided the increasingly famous fishery. Communities from Breckenridge to Pembina, N.D., have an uneasy relationship with the flood-prone Red River. Lowhead dams, built in the 1930s, were the sites of many drowning deaths—further entrenching local public perception of the river as a dangerous place.

Since the 1990s, the DNR has removed or converted five of the eight lowhead dams on the Red River’s main stem into sloping rapids to eliminate deadly hydraulics and allow fish passage. In 2001 the DNR designated the river as a state water trail, and now kayakers play in the turbulent water that cascades over the retrofitted dams. This work has been part of concerted efforts by the DNR, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, the Fargo-based

nonprofit River Keepers, and local chambers of commerce to reintroduce residents of the Red River valley to the area’s dominant geographical feature. And, as I was about to discover, the river’s trophy channel catfish are worthy ambassadors.

Local Enthusiasts. On this sunny Friday afternoon in September, there are only two boat trailers at the LaFave Park boat landing in East Grand Forks. One belongs to Brad Nelson, a local farmer who admits that he should be harvesting pinto beans. But Brad and his brother Bruce have agreed to spend a few days showing me the river. Bruce, an assistant principal at East Grand Forks Senior High School, arrives at the dock looking eager to get on the river after weathering the first week of school. The brothers greet one another with a volley of coltish insults. Where catfishing is concerned, they don’t seem to agree on much or to take anything too seriously, except bait.

“Did you get frogs?” Bruce asks.

Brad opens lids of bait buckets to reveal frogs, salamanders, and sucker minnows.

“Did you remember the cut bait?” Brad asks.

“What do you think, genius?” Bruce retorts as he opens the lid on his cooler so Brad can see bags of goldeye, an oily native fish that is abundant in the river and a prime source of forage for large channel catfish.

“These fish are carnivores,” Bruce says, as we back out into the main channel and motor downstream.

Brad Nelson (below) keeps an eye out for deadheads as he motors to a favorite fishing hole (bottom left) on the Red River. Brad fashions his anchors from worn farm implements (opposite page). A pair of these sturdy anchors secure the boat crosscurrent (bottom right).



Circle hooks (below) effectively hook catfish and reduce hooking mortality by catching in the corner of a fish's mouth as it swims away with the bait. Live frogs (facing page), salamanders, sucker minnows, and chunks of fresh goldeye, a native rough fish, are the baits of choice for pursuing channel cats on the Red River. Using parts of game fish, carp, or goldfish for bait is not legal.

Grow Slow, Live Long. Perhaps Mark Twain's tales of life along the Mississippi are responsible for weaving common notions of catfish into the tapestry of the American imagination: Whiskered fish, especially large ones, ply muddy waters below the Mason-Dixon Line. But the idea that catfish thrive down South isn't necessarily based on fiction, according to



Topp. "Channel catfish in the Red River are at the northern edge of their range," he says. "They do prefer warm water."

So why does the nation's best fishery for trophy channel catfish exist so far north?

The catfish of the Red River have evolved to grow more slowly than their southern relatives do, but they have the potential to live much longer. Whereas a channel catfish in warmer climates can grow to weigh 20 pounds in as few as eight years, a Red River catfish might take more than twice

as long to reach that size. In more southern climates, however, the typical lifespan of a channel catfish doesn't extend much beyond a decade. Some of the Red River's large channel catfish have been aged at over 20 years old.

Because it takes so long for Red River channel catfish to attain their large size, the fishery is extremely vulnerable to overharvest. "It doesn't take long for anglers who really know how to catch big catfish to harvest most of those big fish from a river," Topp says.

When the popularity of Red River channel catfish began to grow in the late 1980s, Topp says DNR fisheries managers were concerned that liberal bag limits and a lack of length restrictions for catfish posed a threat to this unique trophy fishery. Other Red River neighbors agreed, and in 1989 fisheries professionals from Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Manitoba formed the Red River Fisheries Technical Committee. By 1991 Minnesota, South Dakota, and North Dakota had established an identical five fish possession limit for channel catfish on the Red River and its tributaries: Only one fish may be over 24 inches. Manitoba does not allow any harvest of trophy channel catfish, but anglers may keep four fish less than 60 centimeters (about 24 inches).

Choice of Bait. Today, the river gauge reads 16 feet, a healthy flow for September and within the optimal range for fishing the



river. When the river is higher than 20 feet, the current makes anchoring difficult.

As we pass beneath the Sorlie Memorial Bridge, which connects Grand Forks and East Grand Forks, I find it hard to imagine water washing over the bridge deck as it did when the river crested at a record 54 feet in 1997. On the banks above us, people stroll and bike along the Greenway—a 2,200-acre open space created after that monumental flood. (The Greenway, part of the neighboring cities' flood control system, helped prevent property damage when the river crested at nearly 50 feet this past spring.)

A half-mile downstream, Brad brings the boat off plane. Here, stout cottonwood trees bear deep scars. The notches, cut by north-flowing slabs of ice, distinguish these trees as sturdy survivors of dramatic spring breakups.

"Now!" Brad hollers as he braces the tiller handle of the idling outboard with his knee to keep the boat in place. The brothers drop heavy anchors, fabricated from worn-out chisel-plow shovels. The anchor ropes go taut, and the silt-laden water gurgles as it drags across the hull of the boat, now securely anchored crosscurrent.

We bait our hooks, two lines each—legal on Minnesota–North Dakota border waters—cast downstream, and place our rods in holders. We are just upstream from a gentle outside bend that has gathered an impressive jumble of woody debris. The goal is to tempt catfish out of

this snag-filled cover with our fresh frogs, salamanders, sucker minnows, and chunks of goldeye.

"Some days it's frogs," Bruce says. "Next day, you can't buy a fish on a frog; all they want is a goldeye."

The brisk rhythm of the current washing over our bait is telegraphed as a flutter to our rod tips, but this cadence is quickly broken.

"Looks like this one wants the salamander," Brad calls out, our attention now riveted on the rod in the back of the boat. It is bent halfway to the water, bowing slowly at the whim of something powerful.

"Pick it up," Bruce hollers as the rod bends violently, its tip nearly touching the river.

"Fish on!" Brad says, straining to change the direction of this fish, which seems intent on heading back to the safety of its timber-strewn abode.

The drag on the heavy baitcasting reel is tight, but it appears to slip effortlessly several times before the odds start to move in Brad's favor. At the end of his line, the battleship-gray brute comes frustratingly close to the surface twice, but each time it surges powerfully back to the muddy depths. The next time it surfaces, Bruce slides the net under what turns out to be a respectable 10-pound channel catfish.

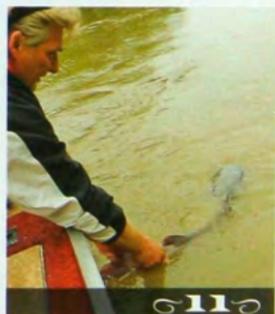
"Now imagine adding 10 pounds to that," Brad says.

Providing Passage. A few hundred yards downstream, we hear the sound of water





On the Red River, just north of East Grand Forks, local catfish enthusiast Brad Nelson lands a 37-inch, 20-pound channel catfish and releases it back to this trophy fishery.





rushing over the terraced ledges of what was once Riverside Dam.

“That dam was a real killer,” Bruce says, recalling the names of several drowning victims. “It’s a lot safer now, and upstream everyone has definitely seen more fish and bigger fish since they fixed it.”

More anglers are recognizing the benefits of dam removal or modification on the Red River and its tributaries, according to Luther Aadland, a DNR river ecologist and longtime advocate for improving fish passage. The reintroduction of lake sturgeon to the Red River has been a catalyst for dam removal or modification projects, but Aadland says the benefits extend to all fish communities, including channel catfish.

The Nelsons, like other devoted catfish anglers along the Red River, are anxious to see the Drayton Dam, 90 river miles north of Grand Forks, removed or modified to allow fish passage. North Dakota’s former state-record channel catfish—33-pounds, 4-ounces—was caught downstream of Drayton.

“If they can get rid of that dam, we’ll be catching 30 pounders here,” Bruce says.

The Drayton Dam and the Lockport Dam in Manitoba are the two remaining downstream barriers between Fargo and Lake Winnipeg. South of Fargo, two other lowhead dams sever the Red River’s connection to the Otter Tail River, its primary tributary in Minnesota. While seasonal high-water events

allow some fish passage over these dams and through a fish ladder at Lockport, most seasons the window of opportunity arrives too early for the large, sexually mature catfish of the Red River, Aadland says.

Channel catfish begin their upstream migration when water temperature rises above 60 degrees and spawn when it reaches the low 70s. By that time, the river level is typically too low to allow passage at any of the river’s remaining barriers.

“Depending on water levels, good spawning habitat might be in a different place from one season to the next,” Aadland says. “If allowed to, I believe both catfish and sturgeon would travel hundreds of miles seasonally from Lake Winnipeg to as far as Fergus Falls.”

With access to the vast waters of Lake Winnipeg, channel catfish that reside downstream of the Lockport Dam in Manitoba are some of the river’s largest. Channel catfish over 30 pounds are common north of the Lockport Dam, but these behemoths are effectively blocked from moving upstream into U.S. waters for most of the year. Odds are slim this large dam will ever be removed, but Aadland said discussions for improving the fish ladder at Lockport Dam continue.

Back on the Water. The Nelson brothers were both adults before they discovered this incredible fishing opportunity in their back yard.

The neighboring cities of Grand Forks, N.D., and East Grand Forks, Minn. (below), established an open space along the Red River to aid in flood control. The terraced ledges of what was once the Riverside Dam (bottom) have eliminated deadly currents and now allow fish passage.



VERN WHITTEN



The annual Cats Incredible catfishing tournament, held in late July or early August, draws catfish enthusiasts from across the country to East Grand Forks. Since its inception in 1987, the catch-and-release tournament, which is limited to 150 teams, has become so popular that entry is drawn via a lottery.

“The river used to be a place you shouldn’t go,” Brad says, gazing downstream. “People have a hard time appreciating this river until they’ve been on it.”

It’s the morning of our second day on the Red, and we are fishing downstream of



the Riverside Dam in a cold, intermittent drizzle. The evening before, the largest fish we boated was 12 pounds. The brothers have assured me that the area where we are anchored holds plenty of 20-pound fish.

As if on cue, the tip of the rod in front of Brad bends hard toward the water without hesitation.

“I’ve got a real one here boys,” he says, picking up the rod, groaning as he works to lead the fish off the bottom.

The fish moves out into the heavy current of the main channel like a bulldozer. Muskies may be sleek sprinters and smallmouth bass scrappy acrobats, but the graceful, unyielding strength of a big channel catfish is something to behold. Despite the stout tackle the brothers use, which allows them to play these big fish quickly, five tense minutes pass before the fish is in the boat. It tips the scales at just over 20 pounds, but we don’t have much time to celebrate: Moments after this trophy cat is returned to the water, the rod in front of me is rattling in its holder.

“Pick it up!” Bruce calls out.

Having missed two fish the day before, I’m relieved to feel something on the other end. Three minutes later, my forearm is burning from the strain. What progress I make winding line back onto the spool, the fish erases with startling speed. This is the most relentlessly powerful fish I’ve ever been connected to. My anticipation to see it mingles with the legitimate fear that it might not give me an opportunity.

When Bruce finally gets the net under this 15-pound beauty and lifts it into the boat, I can feel the pounding of my heart in my eardrums.

Seeing my astonishment, Bruce asks, “Kind of makes you wonder why people still fish for walleye, doesn’t it?”

www.mndnr.gov/magazine Watch Bruce and Brad Nelson hook, land, and release a trophy channel catfish from the Red River of the North.