

"WHISKERS"

(Catfish)

"Shabbona Lake's Untold Secret"

By Denny Sands

Shabbona Lake, located in Southern DeKalb County, has a secret that not too many Catfish fishermen know about. It is one of Illinois' premier catfish lake. Shabbona Lake is located in Southern DeKalb County about halfway between Chicago & Rockford. It is known as the "Muskie Capitol of Illinois", based on the 4 State Of Illinois Record Muskie caught at Shabbona Lake.

It is also well known as a brood stock Walleye lake, supplying other Northern Illinois' lakes with Shabbona Lake Walleye offspring. Large Mouth Bass fishing is phenomenal, with several 20+ inch LMB caught every year. In addition, during the last 4 years 15,601, 4"-5" Small Mouth Bass have been stocked into Shabbona Lake, creating another trophy fish. Limits of Crappie, 9"-10", are commonplace.

But, word is getting out that there is another locally popular fish that has quietly taken center stage. Those who know about this secret, are happy to keep "WHISKERS" (Catfish) fishing to themselves. In the last three years, we have seen more and bigger Catfish caught at Shabbona Lake, than ever before. Limits of 6 Catfish weighing between 5-10 pounds apiece are caught with regularity. Close you eyes for a minute, take a deep breath, imagine yourself holding a 60 pound stringer of Catfish. GOT THE PICTURE!!! IS IT HEAVY?

In this article, I will talk about specific catfish locations, give you tips on baits and throw in some presentations used by local catfish experts. Let me say up front, that I do not pursue old whiskers with the same drive that I fish for Bass, Crappie or Walleye. But, I like many fishermen these last three years, have caught several while fishing for other species. I have literally seen hundreds come through our bait shop, Shabbona's Lakeside Bait, Tackle & Boat Rental located on the shores of Shabbona Lake. And yes, I instinctively ask where and on what were they caught.

Stink bait or dip baits, have the foulest odor known to fishermen. Yet, it is the leading Catfish bait at Shabbona Lake. The smellier it is, the better the Catfish fishermen like it. Sonny' Blood is by far the most popular stink bait, followed by G & S Dip Bait. Many dedicated catfish fishermen make their own concoction. I politely ask them not to open the jars in the bait shop because of the foul odor. They just smile, give me a wink or a nod of the head and open it anyhow! It is almost a taste test for them, with their noses.

Chicken Liver rates a close second, as far as the most popular bait. It tends to work even better as the water temperatures get warmer in the Summer. Other popular baits include

dough baits. These are "dough" flavored with liver, blood, cheese or fish. Berkley and Magic Baits are the two top brands.

I can hear you asking "How do they fish with stink baits, dough baits or chicken liver?". There are several hooks and rigs designed just for catfishing. Treble hooks, with sponge on them, are the most popular. You just simply take a stick, not your finger, and push the do-bait sponge hook down into the jar of stink bait. The dough adheres to the sponge and hooks. You can buy the hooks already rigged to the sponge, or you can attach your own hooks to a piece of sponge.

One of our favorite local Catfishermen, Jim, simply would buy a kitchen sponge and cuts off pieces in about an inch square to place treble hooks into. Two years ago he became so popular and his technique was duplicated by so many fishermen, that the Supermarket in town was consistently running out of sponges. We had to start stocking kitchen sponges in our baitshop.

Other hooks used to dip into the stink baits include Zipper Hooks, Doby Hooks, J & N Dip Worms and Doc's Super Catfish Worms. All work on the same principle of pushing them down with a stick (remember do not use your fingers or that hamburger you eat later just won't smell right!) to adhere the bait to the hooks.

The dough baits are attached to plain treble hooks, Doby hooks (which have a spring added for extra holding power) or on a single large hook.

Chicken liver is attached in a special way of its own. Believe it or not, there are hooks designed just for liver. The liver usually comes frozen in a package, but you can use fresh uncooked chicken liver left over from Sunday dinner. Using a chunk of liver, it is placed on the special hook. The hook is about 2 ½ inches long and has a number 2, 4 or 6 hook end on it. It also has a long shaft on it, the length of the hook, which snaps into the hook end. You slide the liver on the long shaft and lock the shaft into place, pushing the liver down toward the hook end.

These various hooks with any of the above baits are then cast out with either a three way swivel or a Catfish rig attached. A heavy weight is attached to one of the swivels to help get the bait out farther from shore and to take it directly to the bottom. The line is then tightened up. The pole is placed in a rod holder stuck into the ground or laid sideways on the shoreline to detect a bite. Many catfishermen attach a bell to the end of a pole to help alert them of a strike.

The strike is usually indicated by a bouncing of the rod tip as the Catfish mouths the bait. Then as the Catfish starts to swim away and swallow the bait, a more solid strike occurs. **SET THE HOOK!** But be careful. Sometimes it is all one motion, and off goes your pole into the water if you are not paying attention.

We had that happen off of Pier #4 last year. A woman was catfishing and all of the sudden her pole took off into the water. An alert Bass fisherman in a nearby boat made a

long cast and snagged her line. He then gave the line to the woman on shore, who retrieved her pole by pulling in the line. She then calmly reeled in a nice 6 pound Catfish to the applause of other nearby fishermen.

Top locations for catfish at Shabbona Lake are Pier #4 behind Pokanoka's Restaurant, Somonauk Point, the Campground shoreline, Area 25 the old barn foundations, Area 11 the old homestead, the Handicap Pier, Area 3 in the No Motor Zone, Area 14 Indian Roadbed, Area 30 the Spillway and of course all along the ½ mile dam face. Catfish do like to congregate on the concrete slabs left on the lake bottom from the old farm yards. If you can find them, it can be a magical time.

We have also experienced Catfish attacking lures, such as Shad Raps trolled around the deep trees. Now that was unheard of before! Trolling for Catfish!!! Another angler last year had a vicious strike on a top water Devil's Horse lure cast out along a weed bed. Thinking he had a huge, huge Bass he masterfully played the fish back to the boat to find out it was an 8 pound catfish! Many Catfish are caught yearly on nightcrawlers, and even a tiny wax worm. Red worms globbed on a hook set on the bottom also catch quite a few.

I guess what I am telling you, is if you want to have some fun catching some much larger than average fish, GO CATFISHING AT SHABBONA LAKE!!! It can be a thrill of a lifetime for youngsters, adults and "Whisker Hunters". WATCH OUT!!! Move over "Muskie Hunters", there may soon be a new sheriff in town wearing the proud badge of "Whisker Hunter".