

## It's raining records!

Closing the Missouri River to commercial harvest of catfish is paying hefty dividends.

MOKANE, Mo.—When it rains, it pours, according to the old saying, and July has produced a cloudburst of fishing records in Missouri. The Missouri Department of Conservation has certified three new fishing records so far this month. Two could be world records.



John West, of Republic, caught this state-record striped bass at Bull Shoals Lake July 8, using a swim bait. The fish weighed 58 pounds, 10.4 ounces, and measured a little more than 48 inches from nose to tail. The fish could qualify for a 30-pound line-class record from the International Game Fish Association

The first record catch came in early July, when John West, of Republic, caught a 58-pound, 10.4-ounce striped bass at Bull Shoals Lake in Taney County. The monster striper measured just a shade over 48 inches from nose to tail and had a girth of 34.25 inches. The fish inhaled a 6-inch swim bait that West, 37, was casting from the bank with a spinning rod and reel. A swim bait is a soft-bodied lure rigged with a weighted hook.

Friends introduced West to striper fishing three years ago. They were fishing together on the rainy evening of July 8. West was tired from casting the big, heavy lure and decided to make two or three more casts before starting the long trek back to his vehicle when the big striper struck. The fish felt bigger than any he had caught before. He assumed it was in the 30- to 40-pound range. His friends had caught several fish that size in recent weeks.

“He basically was fighting from the moment he hit my swim bait,” said West. “He pulled half the line off my spool before I started gaining on him.” He said his reel held 190 yards of 30-pound-test line.

“It was so foggy I couldn’t even tell where I was casting,” said West, “so I couldn’t see how big the fish was until I tried to land it and it wouldn’t fit in the net. We had to roll it up the bank to get it in, and then we all knew it was big.”

He and a friend took turns carrying the hefty fish, and when they put it in a 45-gallon cooler, it touched all four sides. That is when they knew it was “time to wake somebody up.”

They contacted Conservation Agent

Quenten Fronterhouse. He and Shepherd of the Hills Fish Hatchery Manager Clint Hale certified the record.

“It took awhile for it all to soak in,” said West. “I was kind of in awe. I told my dad, if I caught a big one, I was going to grill it. But a state record, that’s a mounting trophy.”

The striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*) is an anadromous species, spending its adulthood in saltwater but returning to fresh water to spawn. They are not native to Missouri, but have adapted well to fresh-water reservoirs and streams. Ocean-run striped bass can grow to 6 feet long and 125 pounds.

The International Game Fish Association (IGFA) all-tackle record striped bass came from the Atlantic Ocean and weighed 78 pounds, 8 ounces. The current IGFA 30-pound line-class record for inland waters is 47 pounds, 11 ounces. That makes West’s fish a shoo-in for a world record if his catch meets the IGFA’s stringent requirements.

The second record catch – a blue catfish – came in the early hours of July 20 on the Missouri River near Columbia Bottom Conservation Area, just north of St. Louis. Greg Bernal, of Florissant, and his friend, Janet Momphard, of St. Charles, started fishing just after sunset. They fished one place until 12:30 a.m. Nothing much was happening, so they moved to another spot and anchored about 100 feet from shore. Bernal, 47, noticed that the weather was turning ugly.

“There was a serious storm blowing in, with lightning all over the place. I was ready to call it a night, but I figured I would troll around behind this dike, and see what shows up on the sonar. I spotted a couple of really big fish on the bottom in like 27 feet of water. So I decided to give it a shot until the storm got closer. I mean, who knows what could happen, and there it was! I set the hook on him at 12:45 a.m., and that reel just absolutely started screaming. He swam right under the boat, so I just kept reeling down and pulling him up. When he broke water I couldn’t believe it.”

It took Bernal only about 15 minutes to maneuver the huge fish up to the side of his 22-foot johnboat, but it took both him and Momphard another 30 minutes to hoist the fish over the gunwale.

“The first net was not deep enough,” said Bernal, “because the fish was almost 5 feet long. I finally told Janet I was not going to get it in this net. She was going to have to get the other deep net out of the front of the boat.”

Momphard lost precious moments untangling the second net from the boat’s trolling motor and other gear.

“All the time, I’ve got this big fish on the end of my line without even being in a net. So I got him in the first net and he tore a big hole in it and so I had to get the second one and come at him from his head before we could actually get him wrapped up and try and get him in the boat.”

Bernal’s 40-pound monofilament line held, and with the nets in place, Bernal and Momphard tried repeatedly to lift the fish. They succeeded on the fourth try.

It was 10:30 a.m. before Bernal got his fish to a certified scale to verify his catch. Fisheries Management Biologist Sarah Peper certified the record.

“We get a lot of calls from people who think they have a record,” said Peper, “but it always seems to turn out to be a different species than they thought, or it doesn’t weigh as much as they thought. As soon as we saw this fish, we were thinking it would be a state record probably and who knows, it might even be the world record. When we got it down to the feed store, Mr. (Jim) Blair was the weighmaster for our official weighing. When he kept sliding those weights over and he just kept going and going and going and going, and it finally balanced out at 130 pounds, we were all in shock. I weigh 109 pounds, so that fish was 21 pounds heavier than me.”

Peper took measurements and checked the fish for signs of how it had been taken, ensuring that it was a legitimate pole-and-line catch. The fish measured 57 inches long and had a girth of 45 inches. Then she compared its length, girth and weight against those of blue catfish of similar size to establish that the weight was credible.

Peper noted that the fish had been out of the water for nine hours and had been dead for much of that time.

“Fish lose weight after they die,” she said. “This fish may have weighed more than 130 pounds when it was alive.”

Bernal’s fish topped Missouri’s previous blue catfish record by 27 pounds. The state-record blue catfish



Missouri Department of Conservation Fisheries Biologist Sarah Peper takes girth measurements of the state-record blue catfish caught by Greg Bernal (left) of Florissant, Missouri July 20. The fish measured 45 inches in girth, 57 inches in length and weighed 130 pounds, making it the potential world record blue catfish as well. Bernal was using cut-up silver carp for bait.

caught by means other than pole and line is a 117-pound fish taken from the Osage River in 1964. The current IGFA all-tackle record blue catfish is a 124-pounder taken from the Mississippi River near Alton, Ill.

July's third record fish was a 99-pound flathead catfish caught three days after Bernal's monster blue. Robert Neal Davidson, of Mokane, was with his father, James L. Davidson, and his 9-year-old son, Drake Neal Davidson, when he landed the fish. It was touch and go for a while, however.

Robert, 44, is a construction inspector for the Missouri Department of Transportation. He has been too busy to do much fishing lately, but he took Friday off to fish with dad and son. They took a 47.5-pound blue catfish off a pole first thing in the morning, which got all three of the anglers excited. When they got to their last line, it was under a log, with the pole bent over.

"Dad was running the boat," said Robert, "and when he eased up alongside it, I got ahold of the line and started running my hands down it. I had no idea there was a fish on it. I thought about cutting the line, but instead I pulled the pole out of the bank, and dad backed the boat out into the river. The fish swam out from underneath that log and the fight was on.

"I'm holding onto the pole, fighting him like you would with a rod and reel but all I've got is this big fiberglass pole. We went half a mile downriver before I finally wore him out.

"When he surfaced, I knew I was looking at the biggest flathead I had ever seen. I gaffed him and could not get him in the boat, so I went down on my knees and stuck my arm through his mouth and gills and grabbed the rest of his body and got him over the side and into the boat. It was quite an ordeal. Without dad, we wouldn't have gotten the fish. It was kind of a team effort."

Young Drake watched in wonder while the two older Davidsons worked to land the behemoth. Later he told his father he was so excited he was shaking.

Davidson caught the record flathead using a green sunfish for bait. It had a girth of 35 inches.

Missouri's previous record for a flathead catfish caught by methods other than a hand-held line was a 94-pound fish caught from the St. Francis River in 1971. The pole-and-line record is 77.5 pounds. The IGFA all-tackle flathead catfish record (also for pole-and-line catches) is a 123-pound fish caught at Elk City Reservoir in Kansas.

The Conservation Department stopped commercial harvest of catfish on the Missouri River in 1992. Since then, several catfish in the 80- to 100-pound range have been taken by sport anglers in Missouri's stretch of the river. Today the lower Missouri River is among the nation's top trophy catfish waters.

"Having two state record catfish caught three days apart proves the wisdom of past management decisions," said Conservation Department Fisheries Division Chief Chris Vitello. "The Missouri River is one of several fisheries in Missouri with the potential to produce huge catfish. Given a chance to grow, blue and flathead cats can reach sizes that make even the most experienced angler's heart race."

Striped bass can live 30 years. Catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*) live even longer. Conservation Department fisheries biologists say Bernal's fish probably was between 20 and 30 years old. Fish continue to grow throughout their lives, and some historic accounts record Missouri River catfish as large as 300 pounds.

The Conservation Department keeps records in two categories. The "pole-and-line" category is for fish taken on hand-held lines. "Alternative methods" include trotlines, throw lines, limb lines, bank lines, tree lines, jug lines, spearfishing, snagging, giggering, grabbing (with the use of a hook) and archery.

Entry forms and rules are available at [mdc4.mdc.mo.gov/Documents/72.pdf](http://mdc4.mdc.mo.gov/Documents/72.pdf). A list of Missouri fishing records is available at <http://mdc4.mdc.mo.gov/Documents/69.pdf>. The Conservation Department also has a Master Angler Program to recognize notable catches that fall short of records. For qualifying lengths and



Robert Neal Davidson, center, set a new state record when he caught this 99-pound flathead catfish from the Missouri River near Mokane July 23. With him in this photo are his son, Drake, and father, James L. Davidson, both of whom were with him when he boated the monster fish. The fish took a green sunfish that Robert used to bait a bank line.

weights, visit <http://mdc4.mdc.mo.gov/Documents/71.pdf>.

**-Jim Low-**

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