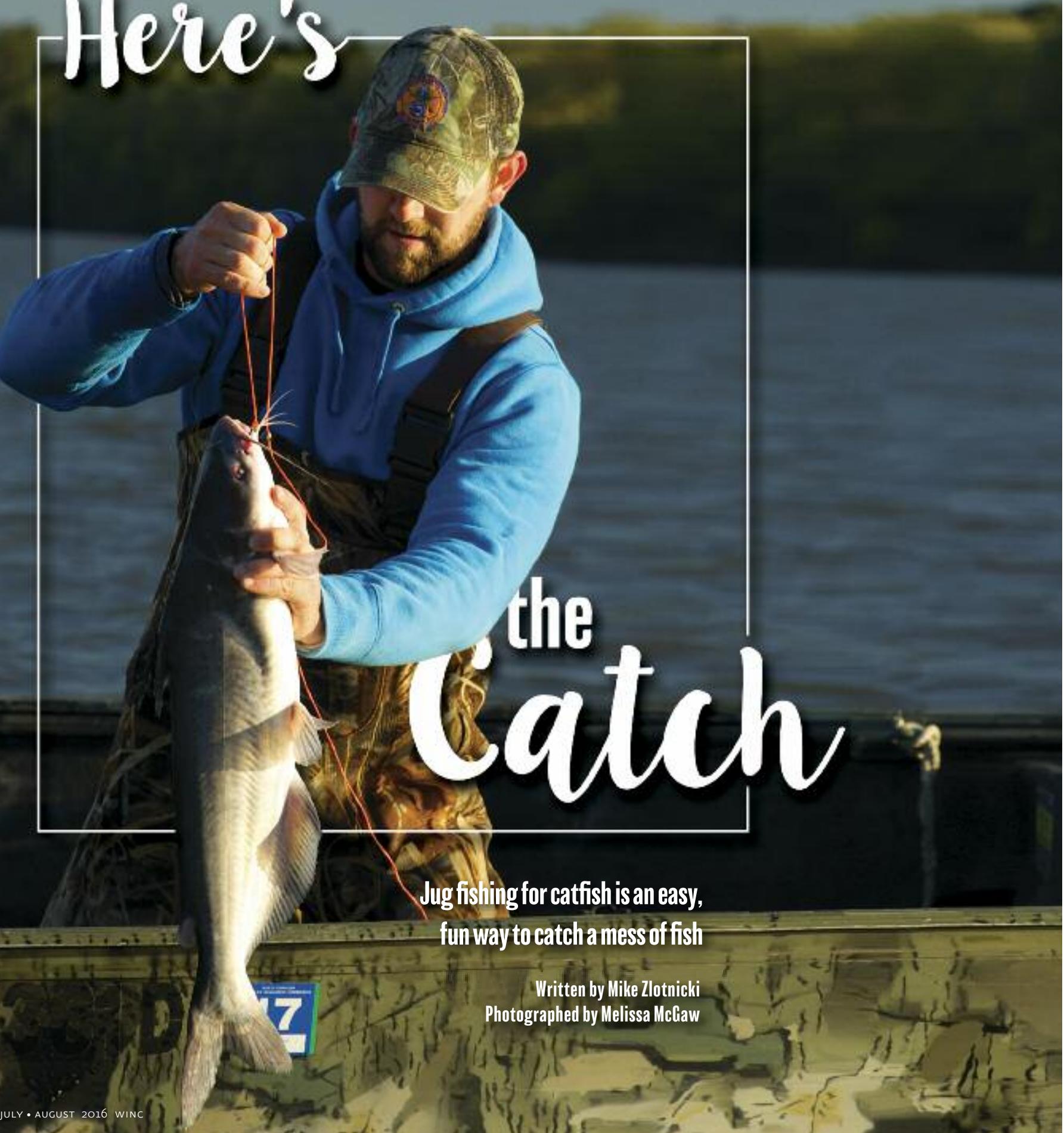


Here's the Catch



Jug fishing for catfish is an easy, fun way to catch a mess of fish

Written by Mike Zlotnicki

Photographed by Melissa McCaw

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ax Mullins eases his deck boat, barely above idle, between two buoys on Lake Gaston during a sultry June afternoon. On the bow deck, Charlie

Overton and Hunter Smith stand amid a pile of polyethylene floats, better known to many as swimming pool noodles, each about a foot-and-a-half long with a length of nylon twine, a lead weight and a circle hook attached to the business end. The day, which had started before sun up with Marcus Belote and Mullins using a cast net to catch gizzard shad in the shadows of bridge pilings, is winding toward dusk as a cooler fills with catfish.

Overton baits each hook with a piece of shad and Smith tosses the noodle, line and all, overboard. Before they could finish the pile, Belote glances behind the boat and sees a noodle skating across the surface. Mullins wheels the boat around and heads toward the float about 100 yards in the distance. Overton leans over and grabs the twine, patiently playing the fish until Belote scoops it up in an oversized landing net. Hunter's father, Dan, grabs the 10-pound blue catfish and unceremoniously drops it in a cooler. Mullins points the boat to the next dancing float and soon the process begins again.

Jug fishing for catfish has been around for years but seems to be seeing a resurgence in popularity. A hobby that started with earthenware jugs evolved into plastic jugs and now is dominated by polyethylene noodles, leading many to refer to the hobby as noodling (not to



be mistaken for the pursuit of catching catfish with your hands).

"It's a pretty efficient way to catch a mess of fish," says Terry Wells, who was hosting his fellow members of Outdoors Unanimous, a Garner-based group of about 20 outdoorsmen, for a weekend of jug fishing at his Lake Gaston home. "You can go out and throw the noodles out and have plenty of fish for that night and put some in the freezer. Ever since this trip has become more about noodling, it's become more and more popular. I've been amazed at how many times I've left them out all night, came back to find nothing on them, take my wife back to the house and return to find most of them with fish on them."

Wells' catfish experience on Gaston started almost 40 years ago, when the lake was much less developed. He and his late father, George, would run trotlines across from their house, which is near the mouth of Six Pound Creek. When he started jug fishing it was with half-gallon and gallon milk jugs. He didn't begin using noodles until about three years ago.

My own introduction to jug fishing came in the mid-1990s when I edited "Carolina Adventure" magazine. I met a man and his girlfriend at Buckhorn Reservoir near Wilson, where we put out jugs, cooked steaks over a fire and collected catfish until the wee



Opposite: Floats made of polyethelene foam, the same material used for swimming pool "noodles," have become popular for jug fishing. Clockwise: An "eating-size" blue catfish is ready to be netted. Max Mullins reaches for a noodle as Marcus Belote stands ready with a net. Belote and Mullins admire this 30-pounder, caught with a gizzard shad head on a circle hook, before releasing it.

hours of the morning. I went on to make some jugs out of half-gallon milk containers with screw-on tops and had some success, but not like the success Outdoors Unanimous has had at Lake Gaston.

Overton has been pulling catfish out of lakes with these converted noodles for more than 10 years. He's been hooked on jug fishing ever since his first outing, when he and his then 10-year-old grandson caught eight catfish on 10 lines, the biggest one weighing in at 32 pounds.

"First time I went out it was like Christmas morning trying to see what was under the tree," Overton said.

Tricks of the Trade

Marcus Belote is one of those sportsmen —like most of the Outdoors Unanimous club members —who prides himself on preparation and execution, whether he's hunting bears and ducks in Hyde County or catfish at Gaston. He's been jug fishing for about seven years after seeing it done on an outdoors television

show. He and Mullins have since come up with a blueprint for jug fishing success.

"In the morning before the sun comes up, we normally catch shad around bridges and riprap," he says. "Then, we put it on ice. The bait sits on a strainer with ice on top so the water drips through and the shad don't sit in water and get soggy."

Belote and Mullins use commercially-made noodle jugs like the Little Stinker Pop-Up Fish-a-Noodle or Rod-N-Bobb's Fish'n Noodle. Each unit has 12 to 14 feet of line with a half-ounce weight about one foot above an 8/0 to 10/0 circle hook. They prefer to deploy their noodles in close proximity to each other.

"I want to be able to see them all and it concentrates the scent of the bait in one area," Belote says. "One thing we do different with our jugs is we use bow fishing line (nylon twine). It doesn't tear up your hands like braid does."

Shad is the bait of choice on big reservoirs because blue cats feed on them. Overton says that crappie heads are also one of his top baits and he's used



Part of the allure of jug fishing, and one reason Marcus Belote (left) and Max Mullins are drawn to Lake Gaston, is the simple anticipation of what's on the other end of the line. It can be a 3-pounder or, in this case, a 30-pound catfish.

leftover ham rind with good results. Wells says that chicken livers and gizzards work well for him. Shad can be caught in nets but panfish must be caught on hook and line if they are going to be used for bait.

Belote is drawn to jug fishing for many of the same reasons as his fellow club members.

"We like doing it because you are going to catch an abundance of fish," he says. "We don't really go after the big ones, we're there to go after the eaters. Five to 10 pounds is ideal. It's simple. You can do it with beginners and children. And you never know what you're going to get. Could be 5 pounds, could be 50, could be 80. There's no telling what's on the end of it."

Fish Tales

Overton hasn't let too many catfish escape his grasp during his decade of jug fishing, literally hand-lining in hundreds at various bodies of water throughout North Carolina. But like with most outdoor endeavors, the ones that got away can make for the best stories, and Overton has a doozy of a fish tale, complete with video from a cellphone that serves as an aquatic sasquatch sighting.

A few years ago, Overton and his buddy Bill Williams were finishing up a jug fishing trip on Gaston and were on their way back to the dock when their friend, Bob Wright, pulled alongside in his bass boat and pointed out a missing noodle with a catfish on the line. Overton tracked it down and began pulling up the line — and that's when things got interesting.

"I got the line in my hands and played him for a minute, but then he made a big lunge and pulled it out of my hands and we could not catch back up with it when it went under the water," said Overton, a natural story teller who recalls the experience with a twinkle in his eye. "It was just like that barrel in 'Jaws.' It stayed under for 10 minutes. That's the only time it's happened to me."

Eventually, again with Wright's assistance, they tracked down the noodle, and Overton began fighting with it again.

"We had two nets," Overton says. "My philosophy was to use two nets, one on each end and get him on the boat like that. Bill wanted to use one net. We finally got the fish on the front of the pontoon boat and it was 6-to-7 foot long, like a baby calf it was so big. Absolutely. We figured a good 100 pounds." ♦

And what happened next? It slipped off the boat deck and got away.

Good Eating

The weekend haul of catfish ends up being about 40 blue cats between 5 and 20 pounds. Anything smaller or larger was returned to the water. Some fish are dressed out and cooked that Friday night in peanut oil, along with hushpuppies and fries. The rest are filleted, bagged and put on ice for vacuum packing later.

Bill Williams is tapped as chef du jour. While waiting for his oil to heat in a propane fish fryer, he talks about preparing and cooking the cats.

"First of all, you have to dress the catfish. I use an electric fillet knife to cut the fillet and then a regular fillet knife to cut the skin off," Williams says. "Then I wash the fillets off in ice water, which cleans them and keeps them firm. I like to cut them into chunks the size of a chicken nugget and also to cut off the excess red meat that occurs next to the skin. It can impart a bit of a muddy flavor."

After cutting into 1-inch-by-2-inch chunks, Williams rolls the chunks in yellow cornmeal. Sometimes, he'll use a commercial seafood breader. Normally he simply salts and peppers the chunks and rolls them in the fine-ground yellow cornmeal.

"Then I cook them in canola or peanut oil — peanut is preferable — at about 375 degrees. Peanut holds a better heat value," he says. "With canola you go about 350 degrees. You want the fillet slightly damp so the cornmeal will stick to it. Some people use milk and do a double dredge and get a heavy coating on it, but I prefer a simple light coating of cornmeal.

"It's ideal with a cold beverage, either alcohol or non-alcohol. Also goes well with some good slaw and some good homemade recipe hushpuppies. Normally we include french fries with it and make the meal as unhealthy as possible," he adds with a chuckle.

These same catfish fillets are also excellent on the grill or broiled with some lemon pepper or Greek seasoning.

Jug fishing is a pretty pedestrian form of angling, but pretty effective when harvest precludes pure sport. Not as haughty as fly-fishing for trout or as brazen as pounding the bank for bass, but more a means to an end. It's easy, cheap and sociable, a summer angling opportunity when sweat is optional. And, at the end of the day, just make sure your grease is hot. ♦

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HERE IS HOW TO Make it Happen:

SCOUT THE AREA

SCOUT THE AREA TO DETERMINE FISH ARE THERE AND LIKELY TO BE CAUGHT. THROWING BREAD CRUMBS WILL LIKELY REVEAL IF BLUEGILLS OR OTHER FISH ARE PRESENT AND READY FOR FISHING.

01

SIMPLIFY EQUIPMENT

A SHORT POLE WITH LINE, A BOBBER AND HOOK WORKS FINE. I ONCE SAW KIDS FISHING WITH ONLY A STICK, STRING AND BENT SAFETY PIN HAVING A GREAT TIME CATCHING SMALL BLUEGILLS. EXPENSIVE EQUIPMENT IS NOT REQUIRED.

02

HOW TO TAKE A Kid Fishing

BY F. EUGENE HESTER

Don't leave a first fishing experience to chance. Careful preparation can make the difference between a great adventure and a disappointment.

Kids enjoy outdoor activities and fishing can become one of their favorites. But there are important things to consider before the outing. Make that first experience a memorable one and start a lifetime of excitement.



RAPID ACTION

ACTION IS IMPORTANT, AND IS MORE EXCITING THAN THE SIZE OF THE FISH. RAPID ACTION MAINTAINS INTEREST AND EXCITEMENT FOR KIDS.

03

LET THE KID CATCH

LET THE KID CATCH OR HANDLE THE BAITS. HE IS LIKELY TO BE EXCITED BY LIVE AND SQUIRMING MINNOWS, GRASSHOPPERS, CRICKETS OR EARTHWORMS. CATCHING THEM CAN BE HALF THE FUN AND MIGHT BE AS EXCITING AS CATCHING THE FISH.

04

BRING DISTRACTIONS

TAKE A BUCKET OF ROCKS. IF ACTION IS TOO SLOW, LET HIM THROW ROCKS IN THE WATER. EVERY KID ENJOYS THAT AND FINDS IT EXCITING.

07

Bring Snacks

TAKE ALONG SOME SNACKS—CRACKERS, COOKIES AND A DRINK.

06

Take Pictures

TAKE PICTURES OF THE KID WITH HER FISH AND SEND HER PHOTOS OF BOTH CATCHING THE BAIT AND THE FISH.

08

MAKE MEMORIES

PLACE THE FISH ON A PIECE OF STIFF PAPER OR CARDBOARD AND TRACE IT WITH A PENCIL OR PEN. DO THIS WHILE THE FISH HAS ITS FINS ERECT, AND LATER SKETCH ITS EYES AND GILL COVER. WRITE THE KID'S NAME AND DATE ON IT AND GIVE IT TO THE KID TO TAKE HOME.

09

TAKE SOME HOME

IF THE PARENTS AGREE, CLEAN SOME OF THE FISH FOR THE KID TO TAKE HOME SO HE CAN EAT SOME OF WHAT HE CAUGHT. SUCH A TRIP REQUIRES EXTRA EFFORT, BUT IT CAN RESULT IN MORE THAN A SUCCESSFUL FISHING TRIP. IT JUST MIGHT INSPIRE A KID TO BECOME YOUR LIFE-TIME FISHING COMPANION.

10