

CATFISH CRAZY

BY
ANDREW MCKEAN
PHOTOS BY
JOHN WARNER



FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS, **GLASGOW** HAS STAYED UP LATE THE FIRST SATURDAY IN JUNE TO CELEBRATE THE **CATFISH CLASSIC** AND THE MILK RIVER'S REMARKABLE CHANNEL CAT FISHERY.

T Tyler George checks his stopwatch. In eight more minutes he'll reel in his line, run 100 yards downstream, and flip his bait into the next hole, a spot no larger than a sectional sofa, where a submerged cottonwood tree temporarily quickens the Milk River.

"You soaking shrimp?" Tyler yells upstream to his brother, Ryan George, who shouts back his confirmation.

In their pickup, parked above the river next to an alfalfa field, the brothers have a cooler also stocked with cut-up goldeye, a jar of leopard frogs, a bag of chicken livers, and a secret bait Tyler won't reveal to me. "Great!" Tyler yells back, checking the stopwatch. "You've got 2 minutes, 20 seconds to your next hole!"

During this riverside quarterbacking, Tyler never takes his eye off the tip of his rod, which pulses rhythmically as the current pulls on his submerged bait and lead weight. Wearing a Montana Catfish Association (MCA) shirt, camouflage pants, and Muck boots, he crouches on the muddy bank of the Milk River, ready to grab his rod the instant it registers a bite.

The George brothers are one of 80 teams in the Catfish Classic fishing tournament, and they need a few big fish to have a shot at winning the event, as they did in 2015 and 2016. Their strategy, Tyler says, is to "hole-hop," spending a defined amount of time (confirmed by the stopwatch) at each of a dozen

spots that hold the promise of a five-pound or larger channel catfish.

HOME HOLES

The brothers grew up in Glasgow. While Tyler now teaches middle school in Sheridan, Wyoming, and Ryan works for Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad outside Billings, they return to their hometown every June to fish the Classic, and the river of their youth.

"We both went to college in Missoula, and fished trout on the Clark Fork and Bitterroot

nearly 12 pounds, back when he was in junior high. That fish, plus the promise of others like it, galvanized his interest in catfishing and learning the Milk River, which typically has a barely perceptible current as it bends and twists back on itself. During high water, though, the Milk churns and claws at its gumbo banks with ferocity, tipping cottonwoods into the current and flooding riverside alfalfa fields. In all seasons, it's home to channel catfish, a native species found throughout the lower Missouri River, Yellowstone River, and their tributaries.

Tonight, as the light lingers long into the lazy June evening, the Milk is relatively tame, making it fishable for the Georges and 79 other teams spread up and down the river hoping for a double-digit fish that would put them in the money. The tournament ends at midnight, when all teams present their five-fish "basket" at the weigh-in downtown. The heaviest basket of the tournament wins \$2,000, but even runners-up win cash, fishing rods, and jackets sporting the MCA logo—a surly channel cat swimming through the outline of the state—embroidered on the back. The evening's single biggest catfish wins the lucky angler \$200.

About half the teams in the Classic use boats small enough to navigate the Milk's tight turns and shallow stretches. The rest fish from the bank, spending their entire evening on one stretch of river or hopping from one spot to the next.

every chance we had," Tyler says. "The hydrology of a river is the same, no matter if it's a clear-water trout stream or a catfish river. Riffle, run, hole. We hit the holes, but only if they have tasty riffles and runs above them."

The Georges aim to finish this evening in a series of what they call "home holes," broad bends of the muddy river behind their late grandfather's farm just outside Glasgow. That's where Tyler caught his biggest Milk River channel cat, a fish weighing

“
The fishing turns
on when the
lights go out!”



CAN'T KEEP CALM Glasgow chief of police Brien Gault and his daughter Autumn Gault, of Bozeman, pose with a channel catfish that Autumn pulled from the Milk River during the 2019 Catfish Classic fishing tournament.

“We’re hard core, from the shore!” Tyler George shouts after me as I leave the brothers’ spot to check on other anglers.

CATFISH CARNIVAL

First, though, I swing through downtown Glasgow. It’s still eight hours until the raucous traditional midnight weigh-in, but already spectators have begun gathering in front of a stage set up in the empty lot across from D&G Sports & Western. Country western music plays from speakers under party lights strung between poles. Spectators line up at food trucks for tacos and cold beer, awaiting reports from the river. Last night, a street dance kept the bars hopping. The downtown party—Glasgow’s biggest of the year—continued earlier this morning with a pancake breakfast, kids’ carnival, cornhole tournament, and 5k fun run. Some Montana

towns have their summer rodeos, others sponsor art fairs. Glasgow turns out for the Cat Classic, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2019.

The native channel catfish is an unlikely celebrity in a state renowned for its cold-water trout and world-class walleye fishing. Some people think of these larger cousins to the bullhead as “trash fish,” apparently because they feed along the bottom of warm, turbid waters flowing through the state’s eastern prairies.

It’s an uninformed opinion. Catfish are a popular food fish across the United States. And when hooked, their deeply forked tail allows them to power hard against even the stoutest spinning rod.

For more than a dozen years, the MCA has elevated the reputation of channel cats by holding summertime catch-and-release

Outdoor Life *hunting editor and longtime Montana Outdoors contributor Andrew McKean lives on a small ranch outside Glasgow. John Warner is a photojournalist in Billings.*

“
Do we have a strategy? Sure. Have fun and hopefully catch some fish.”

fishing tournaments on the lower Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers. The Super Bowl of the MCA circuit is the Milk River Catfish Classic, and there’s no more enthusiastic booster than Brenner Flaten, founder of the tournament and the evening’s emcee. “The Classic has become a community fixture,” says Flaten, vice principal at Glasgow’s elementary school and the Glasgow Scotties’ athletic director. “It’s not uncommon to have 300 people come out at midnight in downtown Glasgow for the weigh-in.”

They turn out to see fish, of course, but also for the spectacle that’s grown up around

the tournament. Flaten struts across the stage like a televangelist, delivering hyperbolic commentary about each team’s strategy, the fishing conditions, and testimony to the religion of catch-and-release catfishing. Dry-ice fog rolls off the stage, speakers boom, and colored lights give downtown the feel of a dust-country revival. “The fishing turns on when the lights go out!” Flaten bellows to the growing crowd.

In the early years of the Classic, Flaten’s stage was the bed of a pickup parked at the Glasgow Civic Center, and the winning basket of channel cats weighed less than 20 pounds. Now, the 80-team field fills in a couple of days, and the winning basket routinely weighs 35 pounds or more.

Tyler Haddix, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks fisheries biologist in Glasgow and a big channel cat fan himself, appreciates how the tournament highlights the often-disparaged species. “Being so close to Fort Peck Reservoir, walleye is usually king around here, but

not this weekend,” he says.

Flaten attributes the tournament’s success to increasingly better fishing, which he and Haddix believe is the result of 12 years of relatively high water in the Milk. The river heads in Glacier National Park, flows into Alberta before reentering the United States northwest of Havre, then hugs the Hi-Line through Glasgow until joining the Missouri below Fort Peck Dam about 20 miles downstream. “The Milk is the northwesternmost native catfish river in the United States,” says Flaten. Like the George brothers and many of the tournament’s other top anglers, he was a decorated prep wrestler at Glasgow High School. Catfish are pugnacious, hardy, and durable, not unlike the smash-mouth grapplers who fish for them.

Flaten says that Milk River fishing, for channel cats and the dozen or so other game and nongame species—including shovelnose sturgeon, sauger, walleye, and blue suckers—has never been better. “There were summers

when I was a kid when the Milk didn’t flow,” he says. “We’d catch the occasional three- to four-pound cat, and a six-pounder was considered a monster, but the average fish was a little over a pound. Now, the average Milk River cat is around 2½ pounds and a 10-pounder is considered a trophy. We’ve also seen the number of fish you can expect to catch in a night double over the past 15 years.”

GOTTA HAVE SHRIMP

A few miles downstream from Glasgow, as the summer sun slips below the cottonwoods, Brien Gault straps on a headlamp, pounds a rod holder into the bank, and checks the cooler next to his lawn chair. Both bait and drinks are cooling on ice. Gault, Glasgow’s police chief, looks down the bank to his daughter, Autumn, who’s come home from college in Bozeman to fish the Classic with her dad. “You got shrimp on?”

Autumn nods. She tells me that they almost didn’t bring shrimp, but then ran into



SOCIAL HUB Still eight hours before the midnight weigh-in, spectators begin gathering near the stage set up in downtown Glasgow across from D&G Sports & Western. Though catfishing is the carnival’s main draw, many spectators come as much for the food, music, and summer socializing.



READY FOR RETURN Above left: All channel catfish caught during the tournament are kept in an oxygenated tank for later live release back into the Milk River. Above right: Five-time Cat Classic champion Nate Molstad of Havre carries his team’s catch to the weigh-in stage.





BRAGGING RIGHTS

The team of Steve Harris Jr. (Sidney) and Steve Lowrey (Fairview)—struggling to hold their slippery catch on the weigh-in stage in the photo to the right—won the 2019 Catfish Classic with a five-fish basket of 36.42 pounds. Carter Pederson's (Wolf Point) 11.12-pounder was the largest fish of the tournament. Brothers Tyler and Ryan George came in 24th with a combined catch of 21.74 pounds, while the Gaults placed 47th with a basket of 16.9 pounds. The 2020 Milk River Catfish Classic is scheduled to take place June 6. For more information, visit montanacats.com.



THE BIG NIGHT Clockwise from top left: Two-time Cat Classic champion Tyler George sets his rod after a catfish takes his bait; Brien Gault nets a nice catfish caught by his daughter, Autumn; 2019 tournament runners-up Peyton Pederson of Billings and her brother Carter Pederson of Wolf Point display their two largest catfish to a cheering crowd; Jake Aune and Shawn Wersal, both of Glasgow, show off their night's catch; early leader Jake Knaff awaits other teams' official weights while his tired son sits on the lap of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce mascot, Catfish Charlie.



the George brothers at the grocery store earlier in the day.

"We didn't want to be obvious about it, but we checked out their cart, and they had frozen shrimp, so we went back and bought the store out," Brien says. "If the Georges have it, it's got to be working."

Autumn checks the silver bell attached to the tip of a rod 20 yards upstream from her chair. The bell will sound when the rod jiggles, signaling a bite, giving her time to run

up the bank in the dark and set the hook.

For the past 10 years the Gaults have fished this stretch of river, 50 yards of grassy bank on a friend's farm that Brien mows like a golf green the week before the tournament. They've cracked the top 20 teams twice, but Brien says that's not really the point. "This is our weekend," he says. "Neither of us fish much the rest of the year, but we entered the Classic one year and had so much fun that we just kept doing it. Do we have a strategy? Sure.

Have fun and hopefully catch some fish."

Some years the mosquitoes drove them to town early; other times the river's rain-slick banks made it hard to move, even in mud boots. Last year, it was the bats. "They were so bad they knocked my headlamp off if I stood up," says Brien. "And they hit our line so often that our bells were going off pretty much constantly."

"It was miserable," says Autumn, adding, "but tonight's almost perfect." 🐱



BRONZE MEDALISTS Above: Defending champions Cole Plouffe of Glendive and Nevada Jason Flaten finished third in the 2019 tournament.

The Milk River Catfish Fishery

The lower Milk River is packed with 1- to 3-pound channel catfish, but environmental conditions prevent the fishery from producing many larger cats like the ones anglers pick up in the Musselshell or Missouri. "Big fish come up those rivers from Fort Peck Reservoir, where they beef up on abundant forage fish like river carpsuckers, smallmouth and big-mouth buffalo, blue suckers, and shiners," says Tyler Haddix, FWP fisheries biologist in Glasgow. "There's not that forage base in the Milk to grow many catfish over 10 pounds."

Some anglers have called on FWP to lower the Milk River catfish possession limit from 10 daily and 20 in possession, hoping to increase fish size. But Haddix, who notes that the daily limit was already lowered from 20 to 10 in 2010, says there's not enough fishing pressure on the river to justify a further reduction. "This isn't like Nebraska or Arkansas, where catfish get hammered every day and harvest adjustments can make a difference," he says. Though FWP isn't opposed to exploring harvest limit changes on more heavily fished catfish fisheries, "a lower limit on the Milk would simply deny the handful of harvest-oriented anglers opportunities to take home fish," Haddix says. In fact, what would actually help boost average catfish size on the Milk is increased harvest. "The Milk is loaded with small catfish. If we could remove more of those, that would free up food to grow larger cats," Haddix says.

Limits aside, FWP and tournament anglers agree that the fishery benefits from high water. "Everyone recognizes those flows flush silt out of spawning gravel for forage species, increasing reproduction, and providing more fish habitat overall," Haddix says.

Steve Dalbey, FWP regional fisheries manager in Glasgow, says what would most benefit the catfish and other fish populations in the Milk and lower Missouri Rivers would be if Fort Peck Dam began releasing water in ways that mimic historic flows before the dam was built in the 1930s. "Warm-water releases and periodic spring pulses from Fort Peck Dam would benefit catfish and their forage in the Milk River and the nearly 200 miles of the Missouri that have been severely disrupted by the dam," he says.

—Tom Dickson, Editor



Catfish are named for their whiskerlike barbels, which are sensory organs used to smell food.