

# BLUE CATFISH

NATIONAL INVASIVE SPECIES AWARENESS WEEK 2017



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The blue catfish (top) can be differentiated from channel catfish (lower) by spreading out the anal fin and looking for a straight rather than lobed appearance

Blue catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*), a native of the Mississippi, Missouri and Ohio River drainages, were introduced into 20 states to provide recreational angling. Virginia stocked them during the 1970s and 1980s and they have since spread to surrounding waters, including Delaware. The first confirmed report of a Blue Catfish in Delaware was from the Christina River in 2013, but they have now been confirmed in the Nanticoke River system as well. Blue catfish are heavy bodied with a wide head and a 'dorsal hump'. They have four pairs of dark whisker-like barbels around their mouth and are scaleless like most catfish species. They are bluish-gray fading to white on the ventral side. They do not have spots but are often confused with large Channel Catfish, *Ictalurus punctatus*. The easiest way to differentiate the two species in the field is to look at the margin or edge of the anal fin. Blue cats have a very straight edged anal fin whereas Channel Cats have a rounded edge.

Their growing numbers and rapid expansion throughout the region have raised concern. Blue Catfish are voracious and forage on a variety of food items including plant matter, insects, crustaceans, worms and other fish like menhaden, shad and river herring. They grow rapidly and can quickly become abundant displacing native species and impacting the aquatic food web. There are several reasons why this species is such a successful invader, including:

- Both the male and female protect their eggs and fry while in the nest
- They grow rapidly, have a high survival rate and are long lived
- They can tolerate a wider range of salinity than most freshwater species
- Foraging behavior is opportunistic
- Adult Blue Catfish have few natural predators

Despite concerns about invasiveness, this species supports a trophy fishery in some of the areas it was stocked or invaded. The large size they can attain (100 lbs. or more) provides an incentive for anglers to catch and release rather than kill them and remove them from the river system. In Delaware, anglers are encouraged to kill any Blue Catfish that are caught and report the catch to the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife at (302) 739-9914 or [Edna.Stetzar@state.de.us](mailto:Edna.Stetzar@state.de.us). A state regulation (7 DE Admin. Code §3545: Invasive Finfish) passed in 2013 prohibits the transport, purchase, sale, and possession of live Blue Catfish in Delaware. Like most invasive fish species, this hardy fish has proven difficult to eradicate, making preventative measures crucial.

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