

Tips for Catching Catfish in the Fall/Winter

By Chase Brown

There are many different species of catfish that are native to the waters of Fairfax County, including the brown bullhead, yellow bullhead and white catfish. Some nonnative species that inhabit county bodies of water are the channel, clue, and flathead catfish. No matter what species you're after, the tricks and tips to catching them are all the same. This article will talk about what you need to know to land your next trophy catfish this fall and winter.

Bait Choice

The most popular way to catch catfish by far is using bait, such as worms or liver, that produce pungent smells in the water. Catfish rely heavily on their sense of smell to find food, so the smelliest baits generally produce good results. However, during the fall and winter, the water gets colder and your smelly catfish baits don't travel through the water as much as they did in the warmer months of spring and summer. If you find yourself in a similar situation such as this one, the best bait I can recommend is live or cut baitfish such as bluegills or shad. The smell of the fish will travel much better in the colder water; and since baitfish aren't as prevalent in the colder months, the catfish will be more willing to take your bait. Using live bait increases your chances of success even further, as the scent and frantic movement of the bait will bring in predators from all around to check it out.

Tackle and Rigs

When fishing for catfish in the fall and winter, you should change up your tackle and rigs depending on the time of the day. During the morning and afternoon, you can find success on either fishing the bottom or using a float rig. As far as your hook goes, I find that anywhere from size 2/0 to 6/0 does the trick. Catfish can be found all along the water column during the day in the fall, so it's best to try each method until you can determine whether you're getting more bites on the bottom or having your bait suspended in the water. As it gets darker and the temperature starts dropping, catfish will typically move into deeper parts of the lake or pond, while occasionally coming up into the shallows to feed. At night, your best bet is to fish the bottom since that is primarily where the catfish are located, and you may have issues with seeing your float in the dark. If you're using a bottom rig, make sure you attach a weight about a foot above the hook to ensure that your bait stays on the bottom.

Location and Time of Day

The best areas to target catfish in the fall are rocky bottoms and shallow flats. The rocky bottoms provide areas for crayfish to hide, which is what a lot of catfish are feeding on in the fall and winter months. Wherever you have an area of rocky bottom, you can be sure to find a few catfish around, as well. Baitfish, such as bluegill or shad, are usually held up in the shallower areas, because of the decreasing levels of oxygen in deeper parts. You should be able to find catfish in these areas, as well, as they are coming up into the shallows to feed.

Contrary to popular belief, catfish will feed at almost any time of the day. Although most people find more success at night, catfish are active feeders throughout the entire day and your odds of catching one doesn't heavily depend on the time you go fishing.

Some of the best areas to target big catfish in Fairfax County are Burke Lake, Lake Mercer or along the George Washington Parkway around Alexandria and Mount Vernon.

