

# FISHING FOR CHAINSAWS!

*James Therrell is all smiles after catching this nice Grand River "chainsaw."*

*Photo by Keith Sutton.*



Just east of Tulsa, Oklahoma, only a four-hour drive from Little Rock, the beautiful Grand River flows past the little town of Chouteau. It was here on a cold spring morning I met my friends James Therrell, Joe Davis, Josh Denton and Jerry Kropff for what turned out to be an incredible fishing trip.

The fish we were hoping to catch was the unusual, long-nosed paddlefish. Hooking one of these brutes is like lassoing a submarine passing at 20 knots.

That latter thought flashed through my mind when a big Grand River paddlefish decided she didn't like the hook I snagged her tail with. She reacted furiously. I was standing on the rear deck of James' bass boat when this happened, and in an instant, the she-devil yanked me from the boat's stern to the console.

"Whoa!" I screamed. "That son-of-a-gun darn near pulled me in!"

If you want to know what it felt like as I was reeling in that paddlefish, do this. Go to a river. Carry a big rod and reel spooled with 100-pound-test line. Tie the line to the bail of a 5-gallon bucket to which you've added 5 pounds of lead sinkers. Then throw the bucket as far from shore as you can, let it sink and start cranking.

A paddlefish, you see, has a mouth like that bucket. It swims through the water with this gigantic maw gaping open, and as it does, gallons of water are siphoned through. The water passes over comb-like gill rakers, which filter little animals called plankton from the water. These microscopic critters apparently are high in calories because, even though you can barely see them, they enable paddlefish to pack on the pounds. An average Grand River paddlefish, for example, weighs 30 to 40 pounds. Specimens exceeding 70 sometimes are caught.

The paddlefish I was struggling to land was just your run-of-the-mill 30-pounder. But with that enormous mouth creating resistance in the heavy



current, and the muscular fish doing an imitation of a harpooned whale, it required all the energy I could muster to bring the spoonbill close enough for James to grab. When finally I had it near and it brought its long paddle out of the water, James seized the appendage like a handle and quickly boated the fish. A handy thing, that snoot.

Now laying before us was a most amazing fish. The smooth scaleless skin and elongated nose left no doubt how it got the common nickname “spoonbill catfish.” But the paddlefish is unrelated to the whiskered cats. Its only relative, the endangered Chinese paddlefish, lives a world away in China’s Yangtze River.

The fish’s Pinocchio nose was covered with clusters of tiny black spots. These specialized cells detect tiny electrical charges emitted by the plankton on which the fish feeds. By swinging this living antenna back and forth in the water, the paddlefish can zero in on clouds of plankton.

Oklahoma’s Grand/Neosho river system is considered one of the best places in the world to catch paddlefish. Anglers also can try for the species in various waters in Arkansas. Natural State anglers fish primarily below dams on the Arkansas River, particularly during April and May when spoonbills are most plentiful in the tailwaters. But paddlefish also are found in the Ouachita, White, Mississippi, St. Francis, Little, Sulphur and Red rivers and their larger tributaries.

Because they feed only on plankton, paddlefish rarely are caught using baits or lures, and then only by accident. Instead, snagging is the tactic of choice. The angler casts a huge weighted treble hook as far as possible and then snatches it through the water with hard jerks. Cast. Reel. Snatch. Reel. Snatch. Reel. Snatch.



*Paddlefish must be caught by snagging—casting a weighted treble hook and yanking it blindly through the water. James Therrell of Tulsa, Okla. demonstrates.*

*Photo by Keith Sutton.*



*Tulsa angler Joe Davis with a big-mouthed Grand River “spoonbill.” Swimming with mouth wide open, the paddlefish siphons microscopic plankton, its only food, from the water.*

*Photo by Keith Sutton.*

The angler cannot see that which he hopes to catch. His quarry cannot be enticed with bait. But on a good day, if Lady Luck shines upon him, maybe, just maybe, he’ll have a few paddlefish to show for his labor at the end of the day.

During the five hours we fished that day, our party caught 23 paddlefish from 20 to 40 pounds. (James has caught some here exceeding 60.) We might have caught more had I not given out from pure exhaustion. I can’t remember a time when I was catching fish this size and decided to say, “I quit.” But the labor intensive work of snagging proved too much for my old bones.

Despite the pains that racked my body afterward, I enjoyed this fishing trip more than any in years. If you haven’t tried fishing for paddlefish, and you think you’re tough enough for the challenge, I recommend you give it a whirl. Few freshwater fishing sports are as demanding, exhilarating and fun.

When I returned home and showed my wife Theresa a photo of James holding one of the big paddlefish we caught, she said, “It looks like he’s holding a chainsaw.”

That description is appropriate. Paddlefish are power machines that can cut even the toughest anglers down to size. Catching them is a challenge that’s never forgotten. ❖