

A Red River Tail

A fishing adventure on the Chief Peguis Trail

It's very early on a July morning. We sit quietly in a fishing boat watching the mist hovering over the Red River. It's cloudy today and there's a crisp breeze, but near the horizon is the Manitoba promise of a warm summer day. After a flailing cast my line hangs in the water, waiting flirtatiously for a channel cat to bite. "Wait for a good, firm pull-down and then...hang 'em," advises my fishing guide Todd Longley, who sits nimbly cutting bait, the scaly flesh of frozen sucker fish. So I do. I wait.

Earlier this morning Chuck the Channel Cat, an 11 metre-high fibreglass catfish, had welcomed me to Selkirk, reminding me that I had entered the catfish capital of Manitoba. When I arrived at the dock in Selkirk Park, I was greeted by Longley looking very much like a rock star on vacation with his withered Coca Cola cap covering long, blonde-streaked hair.

Six years ago Travel Manitoba had approached Longley, a master angler, and asked him to start an urban fishing guide service in Winnipeg. City Cats is the result. Its boat can be booked for a full or half day of fishing, with tours in Winnipeg, Selkirk, Lockport or the Whiteshell. A tour will set you back between \$200 and \$350 which almost always guarantees an exciting experience—Longley says he averages about 8-12 cats per day.

On this day, however, despite my patient waiting, my line has been limp in the water for hours. "Okay, it's time to head to my money spot," my trusty guide decides. He baits my hook with a mighty shrimp this time. I cast and watch the line sink into the muddy water. "Okay, keep the line tight and not slack," he tells me, "True catfish usually bite using a 3-tap rule: tap, tap, boom."

A master catfish is 34" long and generally weighs about 15 pounds. To keep the fish, it must be under 24" (anything over is part of the breeding stock). But even a smaller channel cat can be a fighting fish. "I've had times when the rod has bent over and kissed the water," Longley says.

I smile lazily as he talks, looking up at the sun that has pushed out of the clouds. Suddenly, I feel a knocking, a tap, a second tap, and a decisive BOOM. My line goes crazy, zipping out of the reel with a shriek. I pull in, it pulls back, I pull in, it pulls back until finally I see him crashing angrily down on the surface of the waves. Longley nets him and shows me my prize: the ugliest, most prehistoric looking grizzled fish I've ever seen. My fish. Longley deftly pulls it out of the net and measures it. It's a keeper, but at my request he slides it back into the water. I'm still out of breath, thrilled, having just pulled in the biggest fish of my life. "It was a good catch," he says. In all, it was a good day. — By Tara Kaprowy



Fishermen who stop at Selkirk on the Chief Peguis Trail will have a chance to reel in a championship catfish.