

# Catfish

Catfish are unique looking fish in that they seem to have whiskers coming off their faces. The “whiskers” on catfish that give them their name are actually called barbels. They can have up to four total pairs of barbels: one on either side of their nose, one on each side of their mouth, and two pairs on their chins. Not all fish in the catfish family have them, however. Some have armor plates on their bodies, but none have scales. Catfish are farmed for food and also kept as pets. Catfish live around every continent except Antarctica. They swim in inland water as well as coastal areas of the oceans. Inland they prefer shallow, running water. Some even live in underground or cave waters.

Catfish have heavy, bony heads and small **gas bladders**, or swim bladders, which are the air-filled organ that lets fish control their buoyancy. **Buoyancy** is the way something sinks or floats. This organ allows fish to stay in one place under water without using too much swimming energy. Because of their heavy heads and small swim bladders, catfish are usually bottom feeders. To help with digging on the waters floor, catfish also have flattened heads. They eat by sucking in their food rather than biting. Instead of taste buds only in their mouths, catfish have **chemoreceptors**, or specialized nerve cells that detect chemicals, on their

whole body! This lets them taste and smell everything they touch. Some even breathe through their skin. Catfish also use their barbels to feel out food.

All catfish except electric catfish have spine-like bones on their dorsal (back) and pectoral (side) fins. Some can sting with a protein-based venom and lock these bones into place sticking outwards for protection. The venom is strong enough to put a human in the hospital and in one species it can kill a human if stung. While there are a few reports of some aggressive species of catfish, there are no actual documented deaths from catfish stings, and most are not venomous. Catfish can be from 1 centimeter long to 8½ feet long. The largest caught catfish was a giant Mekong catfish caught in Thailand on May 1, 2005. It weighed 650 pounds.

Catfish are farmed for food in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, and have been caught and eaten for hundreds of years. They are a white fish and high in vitamin D as well as omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, nutrients important to brain and skin health.



1. **New terms:** See how these three terms are used in the text, and write a definition next to each one.

**gas bladder** swim bladder, or the organ that helps fish control buoyancy

**buoyancy** the way something sinks or floats

**chemoreceptors** specialized nerve cells that detect chemicals

2. What are two parts of the catfish’s body that help it stay on the water floor? gas bladder and a heavy, bony head

3. All catfish have barbels, or “whiskers.”

True or **False?**

4. Catfish have huge tastebuds on their tongues.

True or **False?**