

DOGWOOD BLOSSOM FLATHEAD CATFISH TOURNAMENT
MARCH 27 & 28, 2009
(by Cathy Simmons, Tournament Staffer)

The start of The Apalachicola Tournament Trail was a very wet one. The 2nd Annual Dogwood Blossom Flathead Catfish Tournament, sponsored by T-Cooper Outdoors, began the Trail series on March 27, 2009 with an Apalachicola river reading of 13.9 feet. Normal river height is from 7 to 9 feet so the river was moving fast and high with the rain falling fairly continuously all day and the wind playing havoc with fishing lines. This did not deter the Trail's avid die-hard fishermen and women, however. They were still game to try hooking that winning flathead catfish. The turnout was 58 anglers, 8 of which were women, in 33 boats. The Trail attracted individuals from all over Florida and Georgia and even as far as Louisiana. By tournament end, 23 people weighed in 59 flatheads for 449.67 pounds and two blue cats for 21.24 pounds.

According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), non-native flathead catfish are predators, unlike the various native species of freshwater catfish. Preferred bait is hand sized bream so many of the participants in the tournament were out in their boats earlier in the week getting bait and becoming familiar with the twists and turns of the Apalachicola and Chipola Rivers.

The tournament runs for 20 hours from Friday afternoon at 4 pm to Saturday at noon. Despite the rain and swiftly moving river, the first fish to make the board was a blue cat at 10.94 pounds around 7 pm Friday night. David Byrd of Westville, Florida was the pleased angler that stayed on the board throughout the tournament in the "largest freshwater catfish other than flathead" category, eventually taking the prize money and trophy at the end. Cynthia Sumner of Blountstown did try to knock him off at the last minute with her 10.30 pound blue cat but, being another Trail regular, she might very well win that competition next time.

The first flathead to make the board was 6.72 pounds brought in by Jimmy Minchew of Wewahitchka. He managed to get on the board for first place at 6.72 pounds, third place for 5.08, and fifth place for 4.06. Kim Walker of Abbeville, Georgia, held the spots for second place at 6.55 and fourth place for 4.59. Keep in mind that the Florida state record for flathead catfish is 49.35 pounds as determined by the FWC so these folks were catching "babies."

Jo Barton weighed in a 7.17 pounder as her contribution to good table fare and Kim Walker (both of Abbeville), intrepid lady anglers that they are, together weighed in 7 fish for a total of 36.73 pounds. Unusual for those new to the Trail and unfamiliar with the rivers, they made the winners board for a short period. Fishing all night, and having never fished the Apalachicola and Chipola Rivers

before in this area, Tommy (“T”) Cooper of T-Cooper Outdoors applauds their efforts and hopes they enjoyed their first time on the Trail.

Jim Riner (Zephyrhills, FL) and David Short (Seffner, FL) couldn’t figure out why the motor wouldn’t start and contacted tournament officials for a tow. However, they said not to hurry since they were still catching fish. Brilliant and seasoned fishermen that they are, they eventually discovered that the kill switch in the proper position is very important for correct motor operation. Coming back to the scales under their own power, Jim made the winners board with a 11.22 pound flathead, fishing the Trail for the very first time. David, a Trail regular, weighed in a 5.18 pound flathead as well.

Tim Ake of Wewahitchka stayed in first place on the board from about 11 pm Friday night replacing Jimmy Minchew’s 6.72 with a 14.89 pound flathead but was knocked down to third place when there was a run of fish on the scales starting about 10:45 Saturday morning. It just goes to show, there are no guarantees in the fishing tournament; almost any weight could be a winner.

A 50/50 raffle netted Bryan Alday from Bainbridge, Georgia, a nice \$57.00 with the other half donated to Wewahitchka Search and Rescue from T. Cooper Outdoors. Several fisherman were generous with their catch and donated about 100 pounds of fish to Turkey Creek Masonic Lodge #248 in Dover, Florida for their fish fry. Tournament regular Ray Manus will transport the cleaned fish to Dover at the end of the tournament.

Together with the support of corporate sponsors, American Premier/American Spirit rods and reels, Thermocell Mosquito Repellant, and Tru-Turn Hooks, who graciously donated their products for door prizes and angler hospitality packs, T Cooper Outdoors is happy to announce the following winners:

Flathead:

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| 1 st place \$1,000 | Tiff Thompson | Americus, GA | 29.13 pounds |
| 2 nd place \$500 | Gene Smith | Leary, GA | 25.00 pounds |
| 3 rd place \$400 | Tim Ake | Wewahitchka, FL | 14.89 pounds |
| 4 th place \$300 | Ernie Tanner | Americus, GA | 12.54 pounds |
| 5 th place \$200 | Ken Sumner | Blountstown, FL | 12.36 pounds |

Largest freshwater catfish other than flathead:

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| \$200 | David Byrd | Westville, FL | 10.94 pounds |
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The Dink Award for the smallest catfish weighed in went to long-time Trail series fisherman Carlton Champion of Blountstown, FL, for a whopping 1.77 pounder. Tommy Cooper awarded him a light weight (very light weight) American Spirit rod and Zebco bait casting reel for his little flathead. The other regulars will be sure to give him plenty of ribbing as he has won tournaments on the Trail in the past with very respectably sized fish.

Total weights for individuals from this tournament will be combined with the rest of their Trail weights to determine the winner of the \$1,200 prize money for "most poundage caught" awarded at the last tournament of the series, Florida Catfish Classic held September 25 & 26. Participants for this prize must have registered and fished in 5 of the 6 tournaments to be eligible for the prize. At the moment Tiff Thompson holds that possible honor with 66.10 pounds, Ernie Tanner follows with 59.35 pounds and Gene Smith with 46.81 pounds.

The next tournament in this series of six for The 2009 Apalachicola Tournament Trail is the Liberty County Senior Citizens Flathead Catfish Tournament on April 24 and 25 in Bristol, Florida. Contact Rudy Sumner 850-566-0812 for more information. Applications are also available at Wewahitchka City Hall, 109 South 2 Street, Wewahitchka, Florida (850-639-2605). Tournaments are usually the last weekend of each month from March through September. Exceptions are none in August and the May tournament is the weekend before Memorial Day for 2009.

Trail schedules and other information are available on the following websites: Florida Sportsman magazine at www.floridasportsman.com under "tournaments" Florida Catfish Classic at www.floridacatfishclassic.com and Gulf Coast Tourist Development Council at www.vistgulf.com . Funds raised at these tournaments benefit scholarship awards and other non-profit groups. Tournament officials invite you to bring the kids and participate in a great fishing experience that results in some excellent ingredients for any fish recipe!

For more information on the flathead catfish or Florida freshwater fishing and boating regulations, visit Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) website at www.myfwc.com . All freshwater catfish are returned to the river at these tournaments except the non-native flathead at the request of the wildlife commission to try to replenish the native species.