

# Catfish in the Rhône

by Rémi Masson

Fishermen accuse them of eating all the fish, attacking ducks and even swimming dogs. I was very sceptical but, in reality we know so little about them.

Because of its snake-like form or because they can easily exceed two meters in length, wels catfish have always had a reputation as a monster in France. In addition its habitat of turbid water accentuates the mystery making them mythical legends.

Because of their reputation, I wanted to learn more about this mysterious creature so I decided to try to meet him in the hot water (everything is relative) of the Lakes in Provence. Indeed, into several lakes, like the lake of Saint Cassien in the Var, very famous for its numerous carp, many of which weight several tens of kilos.

Here I have, in the past, seen several wels catfish including one splendid albino which was 1m50 long and I was delighted to be able to swim with an enormous specimen of more than 2m30. However the wels catfish is a nocturnal fish and the individuals whom I met during the day were generally motionless on the bottom or in the middle of the aquatic plants.

As a result I decided that the only way was to enter their kingdom when they were active to observe their behaviour at night.

The big problem, however, was that the water is always turbid, varying from very, very poor to almost nil, especially after heavy rain. The other difficulty was the current, often quite strong, and this made the snorkeling dangerous. So I kept this project in mind, not knowing if I was going to be able to carry it out.

Sometime later I received a phone call. It was from a fisherman who specialised in catching wels catfish, and who was also a good diver. He knew me from my underwater photographs and was interested to dive with his prey but more importantly, he knew a place which might provide good diving conditions. My dream had come true.

And so, several months later, we met by the Rhône, in the South of

*All the underwater photos were taken with a Canon G10 in Canon housing, 28 mm, using Auto exposure and 400 ISO*



Lyon. I had already seen wels catfish in lakes, but I knew nothing of their behaviour in a river.

We kitted up quietly, before sliding into the rather warm, greenish water. To my surprise, the water was less turbid than I was expecting and I even managed to make out the silhouette of a rock, covered by sponges, about 2 meters in front of me. Not fantastic, I agree, but I had been expecting much worse. The problem now was would it be possible to take good pictures?

We began exploring the river and seeing a number of barbel, European chub, bream, bleak and giant's gibel carp. Not far away, a big pikeperch was watching them and, maybe, dreaming of his next meal and then we came face to face with our first wels catfish.

It was a young specimen of a little more than a meter fifty. Unaware of our presence, or indifferent to it, we were able to watch him for quite some time before he suddenly swam off. The rest of the time revealed nothing more so we decided to go further into the river.

We followed the bedrocks until we touched the bottom at about 6 meters depth. The bed consisted of pebbles scoured by the current during floods and and practically flat. Nothing came to break the dullness of this place. At this depth, the sunlight

is much diluted and we were diving in an unreal green light. To increase our chances of sightings, we dived side by side but end to end so we could see what was happening behind each other.

Several dives were needed before we saw our first big wels catfish. At first it was just a black form, progressing slowly in our direction. When he was about two meters from us we could make out his "mustaches", in reality sensory barbells, which he holds tightened, straight ahead in front of him.

We were not sure how he would react to our presence in his domain. Generally, in freshwater, fish are less fearful than their cousins who live in the sea. Some, such as carp, are relatively curious and come to see the divers who penetrate into their universe. However, they keep a reasonable distance and, when their curiosity is satisfied, they quickly go away.

But this wels catfish was even more bold and and came up to stare us in the eye. Another rubbed itself against us so this behavior reassured us that there was nothing to be afraid of. They are confident because when they reach 70-80 centimeters long, wels catfish have no other species to fear. On the other hand, they have to keep an out out for their parents who can have cannibalistic tendencies!



The wels catfish is a great predator and behaves as such but their movements are not alarming. On the contrary they are very gracious and able to swim effortlessly up current which made us envious.

To see them awake during the day surprised us but we were even more amazed by the curiosity which they showed, including the small ones. We just had to stand still on the bottom and wait for a few seconds before they appeared. As the water was relatively dark and charged with particles, we saw them only at

the last moment as they approached head on and touched us. There was nothing scary about it. They are not a particularly aggressive species and have small teeth which can only scratch at the most. I would be more worried in front of a pikeperch, which have two long teeth like a vampire...

Now the scene was becoming amusing as they appeared suddenly, went under our arms, along our backs or hid behind our heads to see what our reaction would be when we turned round to see a giant specimen, 2m long, hovering 20 cm behind our



heads!

Wels catfish move around a lot and a few sectors of river, completely deserted one moment, could then be the place of a magic meeting with a big specimen one moment later.

To follow their movements, we had no other solutions than to dive and dive in the same place. The current was always a problem but fortunately it took us to a sector a little richer than the others. Here, in every dive of a little more than 1 minute 30, we saw not one, but two, and then three. And then, suddenly, it was not

possible to count them any more.

We were in the middle of a swarming dark mass. Sometimes we can see the eye of a fish, and two seconds later he goes back to the group. They were everywhere around us and they were as big as a shark!

Looking up towards the surface we could see their dark and massive shapes silhouetted against the green water and backlit by the sun.

Few specimens exceeded two meters long and their wide mouth reminded me a little of a whale shark. This image will remain forever

engraved in my memory.

Back at the surface, we realized that we have witnessed an incredible wild scene. This bunching contains up to more than thirty individuals. As they have seldom been observed up to now, their origin remains another mystery. More diving will be necessary to understand and explain this strange behaviour.

A very exciting project!

**Rémi Masson**  
[www.remimasson.com](http://www.remimasson.com)

