

RICK HILL ILLUSTRATION

DO-IT-YOURSELF NESTING BOXES

It works for birds – so why not build them for catfish?

By Tom Timmermann

CHANNEL CATFISH NEED nesting cavities to spawn and reproduce. Unfortunately, because many ponds and small lakes lack this kind of habitat, people must stock catfish to have a constant source of fish.

Luckily, they no longer have to rely solely on stockings. Fisheries biologists, drawing on some multi-state collaborative work, now advocate adding wooden spawning boxes. These mimic the necessary habitat channel catfish need to spawn in small lakes and larger ponds.

Spawning boxes have simple designs, are inexpensive to make and can save hundreds of dollars in fish stocking costs.

Start by building a box out of six 9-by-32 inch boards of rough sawn wood, such as oak, poplar or hemlock. Stay away from construction wood, such as pine and manufactured boards. Boxes should be two boards wide at the top and bottom, and one board deep. Enclose the ends with 9-by-16 inch boards.

Cut a 6-inch hole in one of the end boards. This is how the catfish will enter and exit the box. Then, drill two ½-inch holes on the top boards above the entrance hole. Finally, bolt two 16-by-16 inch paver blocks onto the bottom to keep the box weighted down.

Before the start of spawning season, sink the boxes on a gradual slope in 3 to 5 feet of water. Place boxes near natural cover, such as submerged logs or overhanging trees. Keep the boxes away from feeder creeks and drainages into the lake, as these carry sediment which can bury the boxes and make them unusable.

Male channel catfish will move into the box to clear it once the water warms in spring. The female will then enter the box to deposit eggs. For the next two weeks or so, the male will protect the eggs by keeping away predators, such as sunfish, and clearing the eggs of any sediment.

Catfish fry will leave the safety of the spawning box once they reach 1 inch long. Fry are their most vulnerable at this point – they're in open water with limited cover and without the protection of an adult fish.

However, there are ways to increase their chances of survival. Placing brush or piling rock near the boxes can provide fry the cover they need.

Biologists with the Pennsylvania Department of Game and Fish, one of the originators of using spawning boxes to re-

place stockings, put spawning boxes in a rock pile surrounded by brush. The nooks and crannies of the rocks, along with the tight branches of the trees, proved perfect cover for young fish to escape predation.

Given time and a little luck, some of the fry produced in the spawning boxes should survive into adulthood. However, the job isn't complete yet.

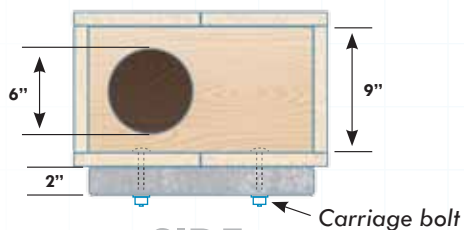
With the potential for a steady source of fish entering the population, harvest becomes a necessity. A portion of the adult fish must be removed to provide resources for the younger fish. Larger fish are good candidates for a swim in some hot grease. While it may seem counterproductive, harvesting bigger fish is necessary to maintain a healthy, self-sustaining population.

Nest boxes are not necessarily the best solution for the small ponds, however. Owners may find it more cost effective to stock fish instead of relying on natural reproduction of catfish. ■

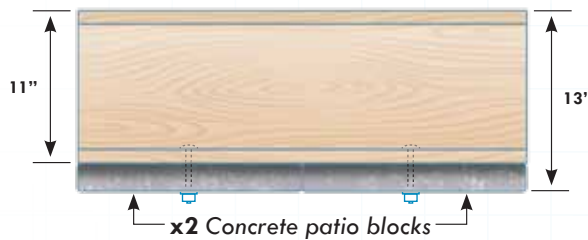


OBIE WILLIAMS ILLUSTRATIONS

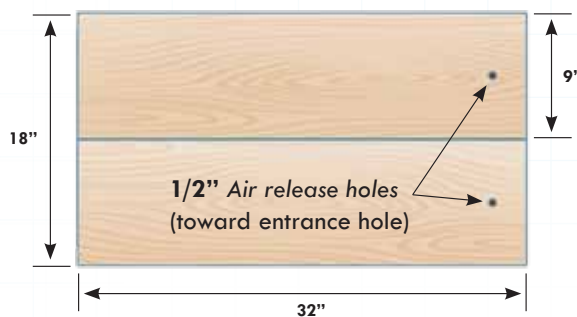
FRONT



SIDE



TOP



MATERIALS

- Rough cut poplar lumber - **x2.5**
(1"x9"x8')
- Concrete patio block - **x2**
(16"x16"x2")
- Common nails (10D)
- Carriage bolts - **x4** (1/4"x3")
- Carriage nuts - **x4**
- Carriage washers - **x4**

TOOLS NEEDED

- Drill
- Reciprocating saw
- Circular saw
- 7/16" Socket and ratchet
- Claw Hammer
- 5/16" Masonry bit
- 1/2" Wood bit



TOM TIMMERMANN PHOTO

SPAWNING BOX TIPS

- Spawning boxes are best for ponds larger than 10 acres. For smaller ponds, routine stocking is still the best and easiest option.
- Don't use these boxes unless you routinely harvest fish. Overpopulations of fish can cause slow growth, stunting and poor populations due to competition for limited resources.
- Rough sawn lumber is the best option for boxes. This wood is thicker and better suited than planed wood.
- Get some help. These boxes are heavy and awkward, not to mention the rocks and trees you'll need to add around them. This project is perfect for Scouts, FFA chapters or civic groups.
- Give it time. Rarely do things in ponds and lakes change overnight. Rushing things, stocking in addition to installing boxes and having unrealistic expectations will result in failure. Expect to wait at least three years before you see keeper fish, perhaps longer in less fertile ponds.
- Contact the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources for help. Department biologists will advise you how to produce the best fish for your pond. Call 1-800-858-1549 for more information, or go online to fw.ky.gov for listings of the department's district fisheries biologists.