


Pond Fishing for Kids

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*Matt and Jared Sutton are all smiles after catching this mess of catfish in J.D. Cole's pond.
Keith "Catfish" Sutton Photo*

Finding a Pond Where You Can Fish with Your Kids

by Keith "Catfish" Sutton

Saying thanks can go a long way when you take your kids to fish in a neighbor's pond.

I have six sons. They're grown now, but it doesn't seem like long ago they were just youngsters, and I was searching for places where we could fish together. We caught fish everywhere from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi River. But our favorite spot was a little pond owned by our neighbor J.D. Cole.

The story of my sons' relationship with Mr. Cole is one I enjoy telling, because it was not only important to us, but to Mr. Cole and his wife as well.

I was introduced to the Coles by another friend, John Hogue, who was a fisheries biologist with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. I worked at the commission, too, and had just moved my family from a city home to a country place. Most of my boys were still in elementary school then, and they loved fishing. I asked John if he could help us find a nearby pond where they could fish.

“I know just the folks you need to meet,” John said. “And believe it or not, they’re just down the road from you.”

That afternoon, John introduced me to Mr. and Mrs. Cole.

“Keith just moved into the new house up the road,” he told them. “And he’s got a whole passel of boys who like to fish. I thought y’all might get acquainted and maybe you’d let the youngsters come over to fish your pond some.”

“John helps me manage my pond,” J.D. said as we walked to the water’s edge. “It’s not very big, but it’s loaded with eating-size channel cats. There are a few real monsters in there, too, including one ol’ blue cat pushing 25 pounds.”

We arranged a weekend visit, and Mr. Cole showed the boys exactly what they could expect to catch. “Watch this,” he said, tossing a scoopful of floating catfish chow into the water.

“Wow!” the boys exclaimed as dozens of nice catfish came up to gorge on the feast.

“Well, get your poles and get busy,” Mr. Cole said. “You can all keep some fish to eat. And you can come over here any time. Just be sure you tell your parents first, and stop by here and tell me or Mrs. Cole, too.”

I don’t remember how many catfish Matt, Jared, Shaun and Zach caught that first trip, but each landed several 1- to 5-pounders. The big blue cat gobbled up Matt’s bait, but after a short battle, it broke his line and escaped. Over the years, that beast would become legendary for its ability to elude capture.



Ponds are great spots to spend a few hours fishing with your kids. Many are well stocked with channel catfish. Keith “Catfish” Sutton Photo



This young man is enjoying an afternoon of fishing in a city-park pond. Because by nature they are small, ponds keep fish corralled in smaller areas so they’re easier to find and catch. Keith “Catfish” Sutton Photo

When we were home again, I asked the boys, “Don’t you think it would be nice if you wrote a note to Mr. and Mrs. Cole to thank them for letting you fish?” And that they did. Using crayons, they sketched themselves by the pond as they battled the fish they hooked. Each piece of artwork included some words of thanks, too. We mailed them to the Coles to surprise them, but little did I know how nice a surprise it would be.

Over the years they fished at his place, J.D. Cole treated the boys like grandsons. He often gave them jobs to do and let them camp on the property. But it was the fishing that cemented their relationship. Nothing put a smile on J.D.’s face quicker than seeing those boys tussling with catfish in the pond. Nothing, that is, except the thank-you notes they continued to send him and his wife.

One day, when Matt was in high school, he and I dropped by to fish a while. As always, we stopped by to tell the Coles we were there. J.D. was working outside.

“I want to show you something before you go to the pond,” he said, beckoning us into his home. Mrs. Cole smiled when we entered and led us to the kitchen. She pointed to the refrigerator and adjacent walls where dozens of the boys’ thank-you drawings and notes had been hung.

“I doubt you realize how much these have meant to us all these years,” she said. “Your boys sent them every single time they visited, and we never threw one away.”

I turned to J.D. He had tears in his eyes. So did I. Matt was starting to tear up a bit, too.

“Me and my brothers loved being able to fish here and camp and play outside,” Matt told the Coles. “We didn’t always like writing those notes, but now I’m glad we did it. I understand how important it was to you.”

I share this story so it might be an example for you if you are looking for a place to fish with your kids. Ask around. Say thank you when someone grants permission. Then say thanks again, just because. It might mean more to your friends than you ever imagined.

Tips for Fishing with Your Kids

- **Keep your trips short, at least in the beginning. Youngsters have short attention spans. Short trips equal fun trips.**
- **Buy your children some inexpensive tackle—rod, reel, bobbers, hooks, etc.—they can call their own.**



The author’s youngest son Zach was grinning ear to ear after catching this channel cat in a neighbor’s pond. Keith “Catfish” Sutton Photo

- **Pick ponds where you're fairly certain the kids will enjoy lots of action, even if the fish are small.**
- **Encourage outdoor explorations. Skip stones. Take a hike. Look for shells. Catch some frogs, crawdads, or other critters.**