

# **THE MONSTER OF WILLARD BAY**

**By Pat Scouten**

The solitary fisherman in the float tube undulated the swim fins on his feet to propel himself slowly backwards along the rock jetty. His line trailed a small lure which had fooled a sizeable stringer of small crappie.

The vibrations from above awakened the dozing creature resting on the bottom of the lake. The creature was hungry, not having eaten since cornering and inhaling that school of walleye two days ago. Now digested, the two hundred pounds of walleye had added another ten pounds of permanent bulk to the creature. With ever more body to support, its food requirements became even greater.

The creature wriggled its rubbery whiskers, trying to pick up additional sensory input from the moving presence above. The scent from the crappies on the stringer wafted down to signal edibility. The sensitive lateral line along the forty feet of smooth flanks helped the creature zero in on the exact location of the departing disturbance.

The creature sensed no need for urgency. It perceived that its intended prey was slow and vulnerable. A couple of slow sweeps of its six-foot tail and it was directly beneath the unsuspecting angler. A mere flick of each pectoral fin tilted the creature's head upwards toward the oddly moving prey.

The fisherman relaxed in the early morning sun, enjoying the serenity and solitude before the arrival of all the power craft and water skiers. It was bliss to just soak up the spring warmth and to speculate on how much longer the snow would last on the sun-baked peaks nearby. Soon he would need to watch out for heavy bow wakes and crazy skiers.

If the hapless fisherman had been looking into the uncharacteristic clear water of the lake, instead of into the cloudless morning sky, he would have probably died from shock. A huge, wide flattened head, with beady eyes and waving barbels, was maintaining position within a couple of feet of his fins.

Curiosity became replaced by hunger and urgency. The delicious scent from the bleeding crappies reminded the creature of the need to refill its empty gut. With a powerful swish of its tail, simultaneously opening the cavernous maw, the creature engulfed both the fisherman and float tube in a violent explosion of water.

The former fisherman did not even have time to inhale a breath with which to scream. Life was crushed from him instantly and mercifully as powerful jaws clamped down over him.

Turning toward his favorite deep hole on the other side of the lake, the creature paused to chomp its jaws several times in quick succession. The primitive instinct for separating edible portions from non-edible materials prompted the creature to spit out the deflated and shredded remnants of the float tube, fins, etc. It swallowed only the remains of the angler and the crappies, which had only moments before been his prey.

A sleek racy metal-fleck finish ski boat was just rounding the point of the marina entrance at the moment the creature struck its victim. The two young men in the front seat were pointing at the float tube angler, and agreeing that it would be great sport to buzz the guy when it happened.

"My God! Did you see that?" The driver yelled.

"What the hell was that?" His passenger screamed simultaneously.

The driver slammed the craft's throttle forward, and the powerful engine threw a rooster tail, as the ski boat flew the short distance to the still receding waves and ripples of the attack. The demolished float tube bobbed in the center of a large dark cloud.

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Realizing that they had just witnessed a horrible but unexplainable accident, and fighting to keep from being sick, the young men retrieved a few scraps of the float tube and raced back to the marina to tell what they had seen.

Though they were in a mild state of shock, the witnesses were able to render a fairly coherent account of the incident. They had even had the presence of mind to take note of the exact location and distance from the harbor entrance by noting the difference in rock formations on the jetty directly aligned with the fatal spot.

After listening to the incredible tale poured out by the two wild-eyed boaters, and examining the evidence provided by the float tube, the head ranger looked meaningfully at the sheriff, who had just coincidentally dropped by for coffee. He dismissed the trembling young men, after getting their names, addresses and phone numbers for any necessary follow up on the report.

"I hate to admit it," the sheriff sighed, "but it looks like you were right. We'd better find out what's out there and do something about it pretty damned quick, or we're gonna have to close the lake. Ain't no way the local business people are gonna sit still for that. You got any ideas?"

The ranger had been looking out over the harbor, squinting in consternation and from the glare off the water. Slowly his shoulders seemed to relax, and he turned toward the sheriff. "Well, I've been giving it a lot of thought" he began. "It seems to me like we've got some kind of overgrown mutant fish or something out there...maybe even more than one, but I don't think so."

"As you know, sheriff, Willard Bay is manmade and shallow...no more than about twenty feet or so anywhere. Since the lake is not that old, I'm sure that this is no prehistoric monster, like they say there is in Loch Ness."

"What I figure, is that maybe that test missile from the coast...you know, the one they lost in Willard Bay...maybe it had some chemicals or something radio-active in it that got to a fish and triggered abnormal growth."

"Another thing is that I know the fish and game department has been experimenting with all kinds of new growth hormones and feeds in their hatchery programs. In fact, one of the guys spilled the beans last year and told me about a new strain of catfish they've developed. It grows four times faster than the others."

"Now if you were to take a fast growing freak fish, and secretly dump him in a lake where he might get exposed to something which accelerates his growth even more... or won't ever let him stop growing... you might just end up with something that eats people."

"Good Lord!" the sheriff spluttered. "You mean you think that might be some kind of giant man-eatin' catfish out there?"

"I'm no biologist, sheriff," the ranger answered, "but from what I do know, I would have to think that's what it is. From the few reports we've had, and the fact that all the casualties have been slow moving swimmers and fisherman, and not fast water-skiers and the like, it looks like a catfish rather than a wiper or a walleye."

The discussion of the problem, and the debate over the next steps to take, took only a few more minutes. The ranger and the sheriff quickly agreed on the course of action and moved fast.

First were the hastily hand-lettered signs put up around the lake access areas, warning fishermen, boaters, skiers and swimmers that the waters were closed. The signs listed water pollution and "swimmers' itch" organisms as the reason.

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While the rangers were implementing the sign and enforcement program, the sheriff's department took care of notifying the local media and sporting goods dealers to spread the word of the lake's closure... avoiding the mention of the most recent tragedy, and using the pollution and organism excuse.

Within a couple of hours the desk phone in the ranger's office began an angry ringing, as outraged motel owners, restaurateurs, service station operators and other local purveyors of recreational goods and services began complaining. The ranger did the only thing he could do to silence the phone. He took it off the hook and laid it on the desk.

As he threw back his head to swallow two more aspirin, the ranger noticed a beat up old pickup truck pulling into the launch area parking lot, towing one of the most magnificent tricked out bass boats imaginable. He continued to watch as a scraggly looking figure emerged from the truck, stretched, yawned and looked around.

Spying the ranger, the newcomer started forward him. Holding the door open, the ranger greeted the approaching figure. "Sorry, no boats allowed on the lake until further notice."

"Yeah, I heard." There was a snaggle-toothed grin through the unkempt beard. "An' I know the real reason why, too."

Unnerved, the ranger wondered what this weird looking stranger really knew. "Allow me to introduce myself. Richard P. Gruntley the third," the figure offered, along with a grimy hand. "My friends just call me Grunt."

"OK, Grunt," the ranger countered. "Just what is it you think you know, and why are you here?"

"Well," Grunt began, "you see, I fish this here lake a lot. I don't hafta work. I got a rich old man who sends big allowance checks, and my old lady's gettin' good money and benefits where she works. I got that there bass boat with the unemployment checks from the last job I got fired from. I don't work...so I go fishin."

"So what!" the ranger prodded.

"So I been seein' an' hearin' things lately" Grunt continued, without annoyance at the ranger's impatience. "Like just after ice-out a couple months ago, I saw a whole flock of honkers settin' down to rest. Just as the last one hit the water, the whole damn bunch of 'em disappeared... sucked underwater in a big old whirlpool. "

"Then" Grunt continued, his eyes beginning to glow as he got warmed up, "one of my buddies lost his Labrador pup while he was throwin' a stick out to it up at the north marina. The poor little sucker jest let out a yelp and was pulled under water.

"I also heard there was a couple of swimmers turned up missin' recently. Now all that has set me to thinkin'. Last year I was spendin' a lot of time night fishin' for cats and walleyes out in the lake. Along about July I started hookin' an' losin' some humongous fish ever time I fished out in this one certain hole. Ever time I would go out, I'd find that same hole with my thousand dollar sonar system on my bass boat. Each time I'd take a bigger rod and reel and use bigger bait, but I never could hold whatever that fish was."

"The last time I went out, I had me one of them print-out graph recorders. This here's what I picked up as I went across that hole." Grunt produced a piece of rolled up paper with a continuous dark line running across it.

"What's this supposed to be?" the ranger asked, holding one end of the graph.

Grunt's leer was positively evil as he traced the line with his finger and explained. "This shows the smooth bottom of the lake...at about fifteen feet, then goin' out to over twenty feet in the hole."

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Really getting into it by now, Grunt continued "These here patches are probably schools of gizzard shad or somethin'. Now, you see where the line dips and goes down into the hole? There...all of a sudden it goes up over some big round thing. Then, after the boat passes the hole, the line goes back up to shallow."

"This is the scary part," he chortled. "I came back over the hole from another angle, and this is what I got. Look like anything you've ever seen before?"

The ranger tried not to show emotion as he saw the unmistakable outline of a side view of a catfish, lying on the bottom of the lake. "What's the scale on this thing?" he asked.

"Near as I can figure," Grunt answered, "That baby must have been about twenty feet long. Now, that was about October of last year."

The ranger was turning pale, as Grunt kept on. "Mister, I'm pretty damn sure you got yourself a real giant grand daddy catfish out there. It's eatin' anything it can get ahold of, includin' people. You're gonna lose a lot more folks before it's all over, because tellin' them they gonna get a rash ain't gonna keep 'em outta that lake, an you 1mow it. They gonna go right out in it soon's your back's turned...so you better do somethin' to catch that damn fish. Right?"

"How?" the ranger gulped, doing a good imitation of a carp gulping air. "I been doin' some figgerin' on it." Grunt answered evenly. "I useta think I was gonna land him myself with some kind of super fishin' gear, and get a million dollars for a new world record. Anymore, I don't think that'd be possible. Anyways, you only get a million dollars for a new bass record...not for some ugly old catfish. No tellin' how big that sumbitch is by now."

"There's still got to be some way to kill it" the ranger offered. "Have you got any ideas on how we could trap it or net it?"

"Sex!" Grunt yelled. "Only thing a catfish pays more attention to than eatin' is makin' baby catfish."

"I don't get it" the ranger sighed. "I was under the impression that we both feel there is only one fish...and we don't know whether it's male or female. How would we ever be able to capitalize on the spawning urge?"

"First of all," Grunt leered, "I do 1mow whether it's a boy or girl. It's a male. I done some research, and the body outline on my graph shows the signs of bein' a he fish."

"So," the ranger injected, "Where do we find a giant sexy female to do a Mata Hari on our little problem out in the lake?"

"That's where I come in," Gr1mt giggled. "I got a little proposition for you and the business folks around here. Ya see, I got it all figgered out. It's gonna take a little time to get set up...and I'm gonna need to bring in a few of my buddies to help me. They're mostly out of work now, same as me, so I should be able to get the ones I want...if you can come up with the money."

"How much?" the ranger choked apprehensively.

"Oh, not much." Grunt smiled, waving his hands in a magnanimous gesture. "We'll just need some expense money and maybe about \$150 per week...each...with a two week minimum. That's more than welfare, and it'll help cover our beer expense. How about it?"

The ranger hesitated. "Money is not my department, and I can't give you a yeah or nay. Anyway, what guarantee do I have to take to the local council that you can even get the job done?"

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"You oughtta know there ain't no guarantees in life, Mr. Ranger, sir. What I do got to offer is that I probably know more about them catfish than anybody else in the whole world. I was raised catchin' em, and I spent six years in college on my rich daddy's money studyin' fish in general and catfish special. You want to hear a bunch of technical stuff?"

"No, that won't be necessary, Grunt."

"Good, that stuff wears me out. The main thing to tell your council is that the water temperature is warmin' up to the point where catfish start to get frisky and spawnin' crazy. If we're gonna get the job done we'd best be gettin' it on."

The ranger involuntarily reached for the grimy paw again without thinking. "Call me tomorrow about four thirty in the afternoon. I'll have your answer."

Grunt crawled back in his beat up old truck and headed back toward town. On the way, he made a couple of brief stops. One stop was at the local military surplus outlet, known to the locals as Smith & Eddies. He satisfied himself that if granted the job he would be able to obtain most of his supplies locally.

Grunt spent the rest of the day and many hours into the night drinking beer and playing pool with the buddies he had recruited, confident of the voting outcome in the council.

At first, the ranger encountered overwhelming rejection on his proposal. The local merchants wouldn't buy the preposterous story of a giant catfish that ate people, much less guarantee some ne'er-do-wells two weeks wages to mount a snipe hunt.

It was only after the sheriff stood and made his corroborating report that the council got down to business and approved the hare-brained scheme. There were still dissidents at the end of the meeting who suggested that both the ranger and the sheriff had been spending too much time out in the sun... or that they were overdue for some rest and relaxation from the stress of their jobs.

Grunt called promptly at four thirty. By four thirty five he had put his plan into action. The first step was to deliver the formula and list of chemicals to his younger brother... still in his gravy train days at college. Little brother was already a degreed chemical engineer, but stayed in school as long as the money from daddy held out... same as Grunt had done. Little brother would brew up the synthetic spawning attractor hormone formulated by Grunt.

The second order of business was to draw some expense money and go buy what they had to...and steal the rest. Grunt gave each one of his new recruits a list of materials to gather. They could keep whatever was left over.

Grunt's time was spent behind the closed doors of one of his father's large empty warehouses...retained for tax write-offs. For several days Grunt went without sleep, eating only an occasional piece of cold pizza left by his wife on the way home from work. He allowed himself to be interrupted only by one of his cohorts arriving with a vital addition for the project he was working on. Time was growing sort of short for spawning.

Ten days after the lake had been closed, the locals were growing hostile with impatience. Grunt and party arrived at dawn on the eleventh day to execute their plan. Across the opening of the long inlet channel they secured a double layer of heavy submarine net, rigged to a cable-pull closing device.

At the extreme end of the inlet channel, at its shallowest and narrowest point, a crew was sinking a thirty-foot replica of a giant female catfish... complete with painted on eyelashes and red lips for added effect.

As final preparations were being made, Grunt launched the boat. "C'mon!" he yelled to the nearby ranger. "All my crew is busy an' I'm gonna need ya."

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Although the ranger was filled with a sense of foreboding and fear, such as he had never known, he was too caught up in the unfolding pageant to wimp out. He had barely set foot amidships when Grunt goosed the throttle and they were skimming out of the harbor and into the open lake, throwing a big rooster tail behind them.

"I figger we might as well start lookin' where he's been known to hang out" Grunt hollered over the noise of the boat's noisy motor. "I'll turn on the sonar in a minute. We ain't far off."

The boat slowed, and Grunt reached over to flip a switch. As the boat began a slow zigzagging pattern across the target area, Grunt peered intently at the pixel record of depth and bottom conditions that crawled across the sonar screen.

"Ha! Here's the hole. " Grunt yelled. "Git that there bucket open and get ready to start puttin' some of that stuff in the water when I tell ya to."

The ranger obeyed as if in a trance. As he pried the lid from the five-gallon pail, however, he was jarred back to reality by the powerful odor that leaped out to assail his nostrils. "Wow! What is this stuff?" he moaned.

Without looking up from the sonar screen, Grunt laughed and explained. "That's the stuff I had my little brother mix up for us in his college chemistry lab. It's a synthetic catfish sex hormone I'm tryin' out. It's supposed to spread the news to any potential daddy catfish that there's a hot mama awaitin' to do a little foolin' around."

Grunt giggled his irritating giggle. "I don't know whether to call it Channel Cat #5 or Fishy Potion #9. I know it smells kinda gross to us, but to a hot-blooded he-cat it smells like roses. Now take this here dipper and start dribblin' some into the water. He's gotta be around here somewheres, and it shouldn't take much to get his attention. "

"Why me?" the ranger pleaded. "This is your plan, your boat and you're the one getting paid...not me."

"Cause I'm the captain now, Mr. Ranger, sir. I ain't pullin rank on ya or nothin'. It's just that I gotta have ya helpin' me. Everbody else has got somethin' else ta keep 'em busy. No way am I gonna let you touch my boat here, She loves only me. That leaves you to do the nasty stuff, so get with it."

The chastised ranger began doing as he was told. As the first ladles of hormone began dispersing throughout the surrounding waters, smaller catfish began responding. Within a couple of minutes the ranger could look over the side of the boat and observe hundreds of lust-crazed whisker fish weighing upwards of twenty pounds racing madly around... trying to find the source of this powerful liquid invitation to the orgy.

"Jeez!" Grunt squealed. The bottom reading on the sonar had suddenly jumped upward several feet as the creature swam beneath the boat to check out the commotion. "That big dude just went right under us. Did you see him?"

"No," whimpered the ranger. "All I can see are thousands of regular sized cats. At least this stuff seems to be working on them."

"Yeah," Grunt snorted. "It's gotta be working on big daddy too. I'm gonna head this baby back in toward the inlet channel. You keep that stuff dribblin' in the water and we'll see if we can get him to follow us. If he falls for it we're gonna pull this off. "

The grossed-out ranger dutifully dribbled while the boat maintained a slow and steady retreat to the south marina inlet. Grunt hadn't seen any further indication that the fish was still with them, but he somehow knew that it was.

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"Let's go for it," he growled to the numbed ranger. "Start dumpin' a whole ladle at a shot. Let's see if we can get that big bugger a little more excited. If we can get him to show himself, without eatin' the boat, we'll know where we go from there."

On about the third or fourth full dipper of pungent liquid thrown into the wake, there was a violent upheaval of lake water only two boat lengths back.

"We're gettin' to him!" Grunt screamed. "I'm gonna' speed up a little and you can dip faster too. In fact, as soon as we go by those poles holdin' the net, I'm gonna punch it. I want you to pick up that bucket and just start pourin' it in a steady stream. Got it?"

The ranger nodded in assent. He was feeling a strange mixture of fear, excitement and revulsion. His physical actions were smooth and automatic. He was not too afraid to do what had to be done. He had the pail ready and pouring as Grunt opened it up in a race to the far end of the channel.

Preparations had gone perfectly, according to the master plan Grunt had laid out. At the closed end of the channel his boat trailer waited... submerged at just the right depth to receive a fast moving craft. Leaving nothing to chance with his old pickup, Grunt had arranged for a powerful four-wheel drive truck to be waiting, hooked to his trailer, and a good driver who knew his business.

Only at the last possible moment did Grunt ease off the throttle, and the boat skidded toward the trailer. As the boat trailed perfectly, a shot was fired by one of the crew to signal the crew at the nets to draw them closed. The steel mesh panels closed smoothly and tightly.

Now, the stage was set for the final act. The outdoor arena was crowded with the assembled news media folks, law enforcement personnel and, of course, the local business people who were footing the bill for the performance.

When the nets closed, they had indeed shut off the escape route of the creature. The predator had now become the prey. However, The creature was oblivious to anything except the delicious aroma of willing female catfish. Though he had attained a length of almost 50 feet during his two short years in Willard Bay, this was the first time he had been mature enough to feel the stirrings of piscatorial passion. Like many a human, he was heading blindly toward an ignominious end... all in the name of love.

A loud hush fell upon the crowd, as they watched the creature approach. First there was only an almost imperceptible bulge in the water at the center of the channel. Then, as the creature followed the scent trail into shallower water, a large dorsal fin emerged and sliced back and forth as the creature searched out the source of the rapturous odor.

"Ever'thing ready?" Grunt barked at his second in command.

"Sure 'nuff, boss," the scruffy sidekick breathed, his own gaze riveted on the approaching presence. "When you wanna turn on the stereo?"

"Go for it...now!" Grunt commanded.

"Right on," came the reply, and a toggle switch on the hand held remote unit was activated.

From within the beautiful model lady kittyfish there emitted a series of weird noises. At least they would sound weird to humans. They were the sounds Grunt had recorded of actual mating catfish, during one of the lab sessions of Catfish Courtship II.

He had rigged the tape up to be broadcast at over 100 decibels. Now that would have stunned an ordinary catfish, but the creature...hearing them for the first time...found the music simply delightful. He proceeded directly to the side of this lovely singing siren.

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As the spectacle unfolded, all present were unconsciously holding their breath. "Everybody back," Grunt screamed. "This is it."

The creature rubbed up against the lovely man-made creation next to him. There was no response, but she still kept singing the same old come-hither tune. The concentrated scent of the dumped pail of hormones was driving him wild. He made a tentative butt against the female's side. He still got no reaction from the object of his affections.

"I hope that nitro me baby brother stole from the lab was enough to do the job" Grunt worried. "Otherwise all we gonna have is one extra large horny catfish what we've made madder than hell."

"Hey, man," his cohort assured him. "There's enough of that juice in mama's tummy to sink a battleship. I don't mind tellin' ya I'm still shakin' from havin' to handle it, gettin' it in place. I'm just glad it didn't blow while we was getting' mama ready."

Losing one's patience is often a fatal mistake. And thus it was also the creature's undoing. Failing to get a favorable response with gentle wooing, he decided to rough up his sweetheart...in the best catfish tradition...in a frenzied effort to get her attention.

Making a power sweep of the end of the channel to gain momentum, the creature aimed a powerful head butt into the side of the uncooperative pseudo kitty. He never felt the impact. The exploding nitroglycerine blew his mind.

"KERWHOOM!" There was an eruption of water, mud, blood and fish flesh. A cheer went up from the crowd as they watched hundred pound chunks of catfish chowder rain down around them.

Willard bay would be open for the summer.