

# Chewers by Masticadores

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## “The Courageous Catfish” by Matias Travieso-Diaz

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*Never eat eggs of fish whose name begins with b*  
Provençal Proverb

Barbel was a very large sheatfish (also known as Wels catfish or *Silurus glanis*) that lived at the bottom of a nuclear power plant discharge canal in southeastern Europe. Late one summer day, Barbel was standing guard (as was the duty of all males) next to the nest of plant material that held thousands of eggs laid by his spouse. The eggs would soon hatch, and miniature fish would emerge to swim contentedly in the warm waters of the canal, and thus start a life cycle that, if completed, could last almost a century.

Barbel's vigilance was required because those eggs, and the infant catfish that would soon emerge, were prey for many species of water dwellers and foraging birds that resided or hunted in the canal. Barbel himself was a formidable creature, nearly six feet long, and well over one hundred and fifty pounds in weight. He was a natural predator that fed on slugs, shrimp, crayfish, and river fish.

As his tiny offspring hatched and began spreading about in the turbid waters, Barbel approached the edge of the canal and stationed himself there to better monitor his children's progress. It was then that his sensitive senses of hearing and smell detected a large figure approaching from the forest and coming to a halt at the edge of the canal, only a few feet away.

It was Medbed, a four-hundred-pound brown bear, who decided to supplement his usual diet of berries, grasses, and insects with a serving of seafood. The bear was ravenously hungry, for his usual large mammal prey had successfully eluded him, and the rodents and other small mammals he encountered ran away too fast for him to catch up to them. Medbed reached into the canal waters and, in a swift motion, snatched Barbel's body below the head and attempted to bring the catfish to his mouth to be devoured.

Medbed was surprised, however, by how difficult it was to get a firm hold on his intended victim. Barbel's skin was smooth and slippery and was covered by slime, making it difficult for the bear to get a firm hold on it. The bear sank his large, curved front claws on the body of the catfish and was able to puncture it and draw blood from the wounds; however, the fish had no scales covering its skin, so the bear could not get enough purchase to rip the body open.

After the bear's initial attack, Barbel jerked his body violently, dislodging himself from the predator's grasp and propelling himself backwards in the water, seeking to leave the bear behind. Medbed went after him and tried to attack again, but the catfish lunged forward and closed his huge mouth on one of Medbed's front paws, biting ferociously at the flesh of the beast. The fish's sharp teeth were small but numerous and quite sharp, and Medbed started to bleed from a large wound. Furiously, the bear shook his opponent off and growled. Both animals paused for a moment and regarded each other.

The bear attempted to intimidate Barbel by squaring off towards his opponent, baring his canine teeth, twisting his muzzle angrily, and stretching his neck towards the surface of the water. Barbel was not cowed. He circled his pectoral fins, creating an eddy that served to conceal his location, and started to swim away. This should perhaps have been the end of the encounter, but the bear was still hungry and was furious at the failure of his attack, so Medbed plunged into the canal and gave chase.

Both animals were bleeding and starting to tire, but Medbed pinned the body of the catfish to the riverbed's gravel and launched a new attack. The renewed encounter proceeded almost identically as the first one: the bear pawed furiously and tried to chew off the fish's head; Barbel resisted with all the force of his large body and,

realizing he was at a great disadvantage in size and raw power, frantically maneuvered to prevent a fatal bite from the bear's canines.

The sky darkened for a moment as a large shade flew over the waters, nearly touching its surface. It was a predatory bird, an eagle. It circled over one and then the other combatant, as if considering whether to get involved in the clash. At the end, the bird issued a high-pitched, piercing cry of disdain and flew away, to Barbel's disappointment.

The bird's derisive call, still resonating in the evening air, elicited a strange stirring that disturbed the surface of the canal: other large fish, mainly pikes, zanders and carps, emerged from all directions and gathered protectively around Barbel, striking the bear in a series of sharp guerrilla attacks that confused Medbed and added to the wounds from his fight against Barbel. Medbed stood his ground indecisively for some time, but at the end decided that there had to be easier ways to get a meal and turned tail, melting back into the forest.

Gratitude is an emotion rarely displayed by fish, but in this instance, Barbel was able to signify his appreciation by circling about his saviors and striking the canal water forcefully with his caudal fin. He was seriously wounded, but his constitution was strong and he would eventually recover.

Had Medbed learned his lesson? One would hope so, but bears are stubborn animals and often their pride prevails over common sense, so it is likely that there could still be further encounters between bears and fish at some point in the future. But the courage that Barbel had displayed and the solidarity of his peers would be remembered for a long time by all the denizens of that part of the world.

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