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Ervin Smith hefts the 74-pound, 12-ounce blue catfish he caught at Lake James last Tuesday. The behemoth was 46 1/4 inches long.

A REAL WHOPPER

Ervin Smith's catch tips scales at more than 74 pounds

Editor's note: Due to technical problems, a portion of this story was left out of last Sunday's paper. Here is the story in its entirety.

By Marty Queen

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Ervin Smith knew there were some large catfish in Lake James; after all he's caught plenty of them in the 10- to 25-pound range.

But when he first glimpsed the leviathan of a blue catfish he hooked last Tuesday night, he couldn't believe his eyes. It looked exponentially bigger

than any other fish he had ever had on the line.

"The thing I remember most is when I first saw him," said Smith. "I knew he was big, but I saw the back end of him and how broad his tail was, and I couldn't believe it.

"When I saw him, it was surreal. I knew it was a big fish, but I had no idea it was of this magnitude."

Smith knew he'd have a tough time netting the whopper himself, so he looked around for his wife, Pam.

But Pam had seen the giant fish and wanted no part of it.

"She was scared and she ran

to the back of the boat," laughed Ervin. "I said, 'hey, don't abandon me now.'"

To her credit, Pam rushed to her husband's side and helped him land the monster. Although nearly 2 feet of catfish still stuck out from the net, the duo grappled it into the boat.

"We sort of wrestled it in," Smith said. "And then we celebrated."

Later, a set of certified scales flashed an amazing number: 74 pounds, 12 ounces. The behemoth measured 46 1/4 inches long.

And though Smith's monster missed the state record by 14

pounds, it could be the largest fish of any species ever taken from Lake James.

Blue cats and their relatives, flathead catfish, are among the largest freshwater fish in the state. Neither is native to Lake James, although both are routinely caught there. Biologists with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission have said fishermen are responsible for placing blues and flatheads in the lake, a practice the commission discourages because it could have a negative impact on many other species.