

Late Fall St. Lawrence Smallmour Unter Angling Opportunities Going Down Swinging Pine to Prairie Panfish Fishing the America Cup Big Fat Musky



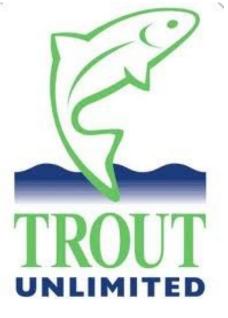


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December 2011 Winter Fishing

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I hope you enjoy reading new Internet our publication. As vou go through the publication you will notice that we have added few new nuances that separate us from other publications. And, since there is such large а crossover between fishermen and hunters, we have included a Fishing and Hunting News section (I don't like the word Blogs) it

sounds bah, so we are calling it a NEWS Section. Included in the publication you will notice hot links to both our sponsors and various partners for your reading pleasure.

Our articles are written for fishermen by fishermen with editorial content covering many of the major freshwater species i.e. Bass, Crappie, Catfish, Musky and Striper fishing. Occasionally we will include articles on various saltwater species from around the world, in addition to conservation news, articles on boats, motors, electronics and new product reviews.

You will notice that we are doing something different for your reading pleasure and added a new "Family Section" with articles written by authors as young as six years old, on their outdoor experiences. You can also follow us on <u>Facebook</u> and <u>Twitter</u>.

And please, Enjoy the outdoors,

Larry Thornhill Editor & Chief 813-230-2346 http://www.odumagazine.com/ Editor: Larry Thornhill

Assistant Editor: Bill Schwarz

Publishing Team: Bill Schwarz, Richard Baker and Kathy Baker

Advertising inquirers for our Fishing Magazines, ODU Fishing News or ODU Hunting News should be emailed to: bill@odumagazine.com

Contributing Writers: Bob Bohland, Jake Bussolini, Bill Vanderford, Vic Attardo, Capt. Bill Miller, David A. Brown, Craig Stapon, Mark Modoski, Chris Jenkins and Lawrence Euteneier

Business Address: 4315 Cross Ridge Ct., Valrico, Fl 33594

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HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?



Winter Tides Present Angling Opportunities and Boating Hazards

By David A. Brown

It happens every year – trout and redfish pile into the deep holes and troughs on the east side of Anclote Key and inexperienced anglers end up adding a few more slashes to the area's sensitive sea grass.

They're called "prop scars" – those ugly narrow trenches dug by propellers spinning in water that's way too shallow for such things. Located just north of the Pinellas/Pasco County border in Florida's North Suncoast region, the pristine Anclote habitat epitomizes what anglers long for and the mistake they often make in pursuing their objective.

Sometimes these environmental encroachments occur when boaters suddenly realize they've run out of water. You hear a loud gurgling behind the prop and notice the telltale cloud of mud and shredded grass blades. At this point, it's too late for "oops."

In other scenarios, boaters may sneak into the backwater area and fish comfortably, only to find the outgoing tide has drained their exit when they try to leave.

The tidal trap presents a potential problem throughout the calendar but the chilly months merit greater concern. Winter sees the year's lowest tides and the hard winds of frequent cold fronts can push shallow water even shallower. The strong tides of new and full moons produce the most dramatic lows.

At Anclote Key and throughout area backwaters, random bottom depressions will hold enough water to support fish through low tides. The trick is getting in and out safely and responsibly.

Knowing this seasonal truth and learning to work with the conditions will help anglers catch more fish, while sparing the environment.

KNOW THE AREA

Consider these points: First, any decent boating/fishing chart will show you the depth ranges and if you've ever looked at a chart of the Anclote





area, you know that most of those depths behind the island are pretty skinny.

Second, tides rise and fall every day, so sufficient water going in won't stay sufficient forever. Lastly, nature offers signs. If the water looks like it's covering a porcupine's back, that's the tips of sea grass – a clear indication of meager depths.

Likewise, there's a reason anglers often refer to blue herons and great



egrets as "Gulf Coast depth finders" – if these birds are standing in the water and you can see their knees, it's way too shallow for running.

Most importantly, a straight line may be the shortest distance between two points but it's not necessarily the safest. Bottom contour meanders, so you'll often have to pick your way into the shallow water sweet spots.

THE APPROACH

Running the big outboard motor into shoreline shallows is never a good idea, if for no other reason than the likelihood of spooking fish.

Trolling motors will get the job done, but even these little hummers may bump a rock or oyster bar if you're not paying attention. At slow speeds, the damage is usually negligible, but that big boil followed by dozens of streaking wakes was your school of redfish blasting out of town.

The other way folks inadvertently spook shallow water fish is switching their trolling motor speeds. Inshore fish like trout and reds can be remarkably tolerant to alien sounds, as long as they remain constant. Sudden changes in pitch put them on high alert, and often send them packing.

Push poles require more work, but they offer quiet propulsion with the option of "staking out" – planting the pole's tip in the bottom and tethering the boat with a rope.

Proper poling and staking out inflict no environmental damage, but striking rocks or shells can alert wary fish to your presence. Tapping a push pole on the deck will also ruin your shallow water stealth, so







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Lay a towel, bath mat or sweatshirt under each end of the pole to minimize the scraping sound that can occur from incidental bumps and bounces.

For ultimate approach stealth with minimal environmental impact, shut down your outboard and ease into the target area on a wind drift. As you move shallower, you'll need to trim up the engine, but keep it tilted downward and angle it as needed to help steer your drift.

THE RIGHT BAITS

Just like the approach, "slow and patient" applies to shallow water fishing during winter. Fish will perk up during

warm, sunny mornings, but cold water will keep them generally slower than spring and summer.

Shrimp on jig heads or hooked through the tail and weighted with small split shots will tempt anything with an appetite. Just keep the crustacean over sandy spots, or your bait will hide in the grass.

Artificial shrimp lures are also effective when slowly hopped across the edges of sand and grass. For optimal versatility, rig a soft plastic jerk bait on a 1/8- to ¼-ounce jig head or a weighted worm hook. Experiment with colors and retrieve patterns until you determine what the fish want.

Once you're finished, ease back out as carefully as you approached and you'll leave the



environment no worse for wear.

Through his professional writing Line service. Tight Communications. David Α. Brown delivers a variety of journalism and marketing communication projects. For more on David's work. visit www.tightwords.com.







Going Vertical For Coldwater Walleye

By Mark Modoski

A few years before I ioined Lake Hopatcong's Knee Deep Club, I started reading the fishing reports written by members and posted on the club's website. After looking back on the past year's reports, became it quite obvious that there a handful of common fishing methods used to fish the lake

at different times of the year. Shortly after ice out, anglers would begin flat-line trolling small stickbaits and Phoebes and continue to fish this way through the entire trout stocking season. After the water warmed, herring netted from the lake would serve as the top choice for bait into the fall. When water temperatures cooled, there was once again a clear method of catching fish, in particular walleye, and it was vertical jigging.

Although vertical jigging catches its share of 'eyes on New Jersey's biggest lake, the tactic is

equally effective when applied to almost any impoundment in the Northeast that contains these tasty fish. The same method and baits have also brought anglers success in catching lake trout, hybrid striped bass and even the occasional musky.

When And Where To Begin

Although anglers may catch a few fish by late September, the best time to start jigging is after lakes turnover. The exact time that lakes "flip" can







vary depending on a host of environmental and weather factors, but as a general rule of thumb, this occurs when water temperatures drop into the lower 60s. After the turnover is complete, there will be more oxygen below the thermocline, or lack thereof a thermocline, and fish will be able to hold just off the bottom in the deeper parts of the lake. It is at this time that targeting main lake points, deep drop-offs, rock piles and other structures can produce solid action on jigs. It is also worth noting that these same areas will produce fish through the ice season, just make sure you have a proper means of making a hole and take the appropriate safety precautions.

Tools Of The Trade

Both spinning tackle and conventional tackle can be employed for vertical jigging. Medium-action rods are often all that is necessary. Spinning reels should be typical freshwater 2000 or 3000 models and in regards to conventional tackle, a baitcaster you'd use for tossing spinnerbaits to bass will get the job done here too. A shorter

rod, 6-feet in length with a fast action tip is preferable, but most any freshwater set-up will do.

There are applications in fishing when you can debate mono versus braid versus fluorocarbon, but this is not one of them. Although you can, in reality, fish with any type of line, there is no doubt that for vertical jigging in deeper water that braid is a winner. Braid's absence of stretch and the fact that it lacks the buoyancy of monofilament will allow you to keep your bait on the bottom and detect even subtle strikes. Twenty-pound test Power Pro is a top choice. Fluorocarbon also lacks the stretch and buoyancy of mono, but it has more memory than braid. Some anglers prefer to attach a length of flouro leader with a uni-to-uni or Albright knot, but there are plenty of sharpies who catch lots of fish without taking this extra step.

Lure selection should be focused on baits that have a line-tie on the back so that they





hang vertically in the water. Popular choices include Rapala's Jigging Rap, Sea Striker's Got-Cha plug, "The Binsky" by Fish Sense Lures, the Lindy Darter and the Salmo Chubby Darter. Rattletraps are also fine options and I've heard that the Koppers Live Target Golden Shiner has proven deadly on walleye and lake trout populations in other parts of the country and Canada. Someone ought to try them here in the Northeast.

Putting It All Together

Once you've picked your bait and tied it to your braid, it's time to find some fish. Once again, the best place to target walleye is off main-lake points and rock piles. Drifting over these prime areas while keeping your offering just off the bottom is the name of the game. Depending on the type of lure, either shorts snaps or longer even pulls will produce the right action.

During the fall, wind can often be a force to be reckoned with. This is one reason why braid is an absolute must. During faster drifts, the small diameter and sinking qualities of the line will give you a much better chance of keeping it in the strike zone. If the wind is really whipping, which it often can be, a drift sock can be employed to slow the drift. Putting the brakes on a drift will enable anglers to keep their baits just off the give fish a bottom and sporting chance to eat it.

There are lots of anglers of who look forward to vertically jigging walleye, hybrid stripers and lake trout every fall. I'm of them. This is one а relatively simple technique that doesn't require any fancy gear, aside from a boat – any boat. This is the absolute best time of year for this type of fishing, and would encourage anyone who hasn't tried it to give it a shot.







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Late Fall St. Lawrence Smallmouth





Between the 1,000 Islands and Montreal Canada, the St Lawrence River has been carved up into a series of manmade lakes through the installation of shipping locks. Lake St Francis is one of these lakes, hosting a variety of fish species, being most famous for its enormous Smallmouth

Bass. It was on St. Francis that Charles Sim and Nigel Touhey set a Canadian record in 2008 for a one-day bag of Bass weighing in at 30.35lbs.

The lake itself consists of enormous weed and sand flats, shoals, bays and channels. But what makes St. Francis truly unique is the current. Large cargo ships transits through the lake, but in spite of the locks being closed most of the time, a continuous rush of water through man-made spill-weighs equivalent to that which passes over Niagara Falls ensures a consistent 3 mph current.



As with Lake Erie, the Goby has invaded St. Francis along with Zebra Muscles. The muscles have resulted in a ten-fold improvement in water clarity, making it far easier for Smallmouth to prey on Gobies, which in turn has increased the size and number of the Smallmouth Bass.

Popular techniques for catching these river-hardened Smallies include burning spinnerbaits over weed flats, dragging tubes on sand flats, and drop-shotting shoals and humps. All three techniques seem simple enough, but understanding the interplay between presentation style and the ever-present current is where things get tricky.

One might assume that drift fishing on a large body of moving water would make life simple in that one need only cut the motor, drop a line down vertically, and then let the current move you from one large Bass to the next. Not so. What



Lake St Francis offers the fisher isn't really a lake, and isn't a river either. A significant slip stream means the bottom 10-15 feet of the lake's water hardly moves while the water above this slips along at speeds that can reach over 3mph. The net result is a fishing experience similar to Lake Erie on a windy day with 50 yards and more line stretching out from the boat.

Excellent boat handling and heavier weights are essential to get down 20-25 feet. Positioning ones boat with the bow pointed up stream allows the use of the trolling motor to counter the effects of the current. This doesn't mean the fighting current, as trying maintain to а stable position in 3mph of current will kill even the biggest batteries



in a few short hours. Instead, by keeping the trolling

motor on low speed, one can reduce the boat's drift speed from 3mph to around 1.8 to 2.2mph. Yes, the boat drifts backwards, but it's now possible to maintain steerage while countering winds so lines being dragged off the bow aren't tangled. Minn Kota's Autopilot or I-Pilot can assist greatly in this regard by automatically maintaining boat orientation.

Configuring the bow-mounted GPS chart plotter / sounder to display a split screen assists in dissecting this huge body of water. With one side showing depth and contours and the other side displaying tracks, it becomes possible to execute consecutive drifts over target areas. The net effect is recorded GPS tracks displaying much like a well-ploughed field with tighter groupings representing prime areas. Running maps such as Navionics "Fish & Ships" at the helm is also essential for scouting fertile waters and avoiding the notorious shallow portions of the shoals that snake out from the shore for miles.

Drop-shotting St. Francis eliminates all possibility of a slack-line presentation. Thus, selecting your baits accordingly is crucial. Whereas smaller more supple offerings such as X-Zones Slammers may perform excellent on a slack line, when being dragged just off bottom at 2mph, their attribute for responding to subtle currents is lost. Baits with paddle



tails such as X-Zones new Swammer take advantage of the baits constant horizontal movement. Up-sizing the presentation to account for large fall appetites is also a must.

Tackle should include 1/2 ounce cylinder tungsten weights such as those manufactured by Ultra Tungsten. Tungsten not only allows for stronger tactile feedback over lead, but slip through the water faster with less resistance due to their 50% smaller profile. The smaller tungsten profile also reduces the likelihood of Bass



mistaking the weight as prey. Avoid the round weights as these will have you repeatedly firing up the big motor to return up stream to recover weights lodged between rocks.

Given the amount of line needed to get the presentation to the bottom, braid is a must to both maintain strong tactile feedback and ensure solid hook-sets. A miniature swivel for use in connecting the main line to a 36" 10 or 12 lb fluoro leader is mandatory to minimize line twist. Tougher leader material is warranted due to the rig being continuously dragged over Zebra-Muscle incrusted rocks. Size 1/0 hooks like the Trokar 150 will reduce the chance of large river Smallies from straightening out your hooks.



Once the boat is positioned to begin drifting backwards, cast out your line about 50 feet in front of the boat. Dropping vertically over the side is not recommended as this will only have you opening the bail repeatedly before continuous bottom contact is established. Keeping the weight ticking bottom is essential to catching Smallies. This is especially the case when coming off humps or shoals when a distracted fisher might allow minutes to pass before realizing their bait is soaring many feet above the bottom. Give the bait a few shakes and twitches when bumping over significant bottom structure while re-establishing bottom contact to simulate injured pray.

Spinning gear over baitcasting is preferable due to the amount of line needed to be released to establish bottom contact. Spinning reels release line quickly with their zero resistance. My preferred set-up is a Shimano 2500 Stradic C4



and Shimano 6'10" Cumulus medium weight extra-fast action rod. I have to admit that when I first picked up the Cumulus my initial impression was that there is no way a rod this light could properly manage 5lb+ Bass, but was I wrong. The Cumulus is not only super light and sensitive, but proved its strength earlier in the season when I successfully landed a 36" Musky caught on a Baby Slammer.

It's not unusual to have more than 50 yards of line out when drifting in 20+ feet of water. Remember, even though the boat may be moving at 2mph, the bottom 10'-15' feet of water you are fishing in isn't moving. Heavier weights and extra line is a must to get to the bottom.

Strikes almost always come in the form of pressure. Swing for the fences with your hook sets. Not because these fish have unusually hard mouths, but the top 1/3 of your drop-shot rod is little more than a spring that needs to be fully extended before the rod's lower power section can be brought into play. Maintaining no more than a 10% bend in the rod during the drift also assists with hook sets by having the no-stretch braided line running almost perfectly straight between the hook and the reel.

Fishers are beginning to arrive from all parts of the North-East US to try their hand at St Francis Smallies. It's strongly recommended studying your maps prior to arriving as this is truly big water fishing, and the added element of current means you need to be strategic in lining up drifts over productive areas. One other word of caution, watch out for the ships.



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In Search of Native Brook Trout

By Bill Vanderford

While fishing with my Uncle Bob in the quiet serenity of a small mountain stream when I was a small boy, we had a terrific day catching tiny eastern brook trout or "native specs" as the locals called them. I wanted to take home a limit of the

scrappy little fish, but Uncle Bob wouldn't hear of it.

"These are the only mountain trout that are native to Georgian waters," he said. "Their habitat is slowly diminishing, and because of the growing human population, there won't be any left before you die. So, let's just keep the ones that are hurt badly with the hooks, and let the others go."

I thought to myself, "He must be wrong. There are plenty of these fish." However, Uncle Bob was right. Even though I hope that I am far from the end of my allotted time on this earth, most of the "native specs" have already disappeared. Only knowledgeable mountain people, a few biologists, and expert fly fishing guides are able to find these diminutive fish with any regularity.

The "brookie" is the only true trout that is native to the Eastern United States, and according to DNR fisheries biologists out of Georgia's Lake Burton Hatchery, their range is limited by the fact that they don't compete well with other fish. Therefore, they are only found at higher elevations and in smaller streams where a natural barrier falls prevents other trout from migrating into the brook trout habitat.

Native brook trout are easily distinguished by cream colored spots on a dark background. The spots along the back are elongated and appear worm-like, but the spots below the lateral line are round, red, and each is surrounded by a bluish halo. The fins along the bottom of brook trout have a distinctive white leading edge followed by a black streak with the rest of the fin displaying various shades of red, orange, and yellow.

Tiny brook trout require clean, clear, cold streams in order to thrive. Therefore, the vast majority of these are small headwater streams found in scattered locations throughout the higher elevations of the Blue Ridge Mountains.



Eastern brook trout rarely reach a maximum size of more than 9 to 10 inches, and a 12 incher is a rare trophy. Most examples of these fish are in the 3 to 6 inch variety. Like the brown trout, brook trout spawn in the fall in shallow depressions in clean stream gravel. Their eggs incubate though the winter months and hatch out in the early spring.

According to Georgia fly fishing guide, Bob Borgwat, all small brook trout are opportunistic feeders and will eat whatever they can find in the small streams. They prefer aquatic insects that live under the rocks along the stream bottom, but are also known to feed heavily on the adult stage of these insects as they hatch and take flight during their brief courtship and egg laying cycle. Also, ants and beetles that fall into the water are readily eaten as are small crayfish and minnows, which makes brookies vulnerable to many lures and fly patterns.

True trout fishermen and conservationists prize the tiny brook trout as a game fish. Because of their small size, however, most brook trout streams support low numbers of adult trout and these should be returned to the stream to spawn again. Borgwat also strongly recommends the use of artificial flies or other small lures with barbless hooks when fishing for native brook trout to minimize hooking injuries.

Though many headwater streams still have healthy populations of "native specs," reaching these areas without the knowledge of an experienced fishing guide like Bob Borgwat can be both dangerous and futile. Therefore, if one wishes to catch and observe these rare fish in their natural habitat reservations are necessary. Borgwat can be contacted by email at: <u>bwanabob@tds.net</u>.

Uncle Bob's foresight had kept him alive during the hellish nightmare of trench fighting against the Germans in World War I, therefore he easily saw the coming decline of the rare and beautiful native brook trout. Nevertheless, with careful preparation and knowledge of the

smaller, higher streams in the Appalachian Mountains, catching and releasing these feisty, gorgeous trout is still a real possibility!

Bill Vanderford has won numerous awards for his writing and photography, and has been inducted into the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame as a Legendary Guide. He can be reached at 770-289-1543, <u>JFish51@aol.com</u>, or at his web site: <u>www.fishinglanier.com</u>.





Going Down Swinging

By Chris Jenkins

Seasons come, and seasons go, but don't rule November and December out when it comes to bass fishing. In fact, this month has got to be one of best my months when it to comes catching obese largemouths. Typically I don't catch a lot of fish. but there is



always a good chance I will land a solid eight pounder or two.

Dressing for the occasion is highly recommended and will actually increase your odds of having a good day. Let's face it, when you are cold, you are miserable. When you are miserable, it's impossible to give it 100%. I keep my dome and face completely covered, and wear my Costa Sunglasses to keep the wind and sun out of my eyes. Multiple layers are the name of the game. You can always take it off, but if you don't have it, you will suffer. Now that I have that out of the way, let's talk fishing.

The first mistake most anglers make this month is assuming they have to slow their presentations down to a sloooow crawl in order to get a bite. Wrong, on more than one occasion I have actually caught bass on a buzzbait in November. Thus proving, nothing is certain in the world of bass. Perplexing and frustrating can be the mood of a fish, so indeed there are times when that slow methodical approach may be your best bet. However, please don't rule out the option of a good old reaction strike. Allow me to provide you with another example. Last November 20th I was out fishing with my buddy John. He is a great angler and we have boated countless bass together as well as a couple that most would have hung on the wall. When we shoved off that morning I saw that both of us had on a jig, plastic creature baits, and a spinning rod set up for shakey heads. The difference was that I had a reaction bait on one rod. When we pulled up to our first spot, a main lake point that had a lot of scattered rocks on it, John reached for his jig.

There was certainly nothing wrong with his choice, and that was in fact to be my second option. However, when the water temperatures hover in the 45 to 55 degree range, I never



discount a rattle trap. Also, during the late fall and early winter we generally witness a shad die off that makes this lipless bait a great choice. Because I am trying to imitate an injured or dying shad, I need the bait to fall through the water column without "tumbling", or spinning. Certain baits possess certain qualities, and the Strike King Red Eye Shad has the unique ability to fall straight down on a slack line. I love the jumbo XCalibur lipless baits in the spring, but Mr. Red Eye owns the fall and winter in my opinion. So as John inched and hopped his jig along the bottom, I started launching my ³/₄ oz lipless bait down and across the point.

Within three casts I missed one and boated one. My fourth fish on that point though was what



made John rethink his strategy. A lovely fish pushing eight pounds engulfed my Red Eye Shad and nearly had me requesting a courtesy net job.

Location is certainly a critical factor any time of the year, but I pay strict attention to steep points, humps, creek channels, and sharp banks associated with deep water. My technique for the lipless bait this time of year is simple. Cast it out, let it sink to the desired level, and begin a lift and wind retrieve. You raise the rod tip, and then wind in the slack as you drop



vour rod tip back down. Now you see why it is imperative to have a lure that falls true. That bait is free falling when you drop the rod tip and represents an injured, easy meal that predators are hard wired to attack. I guarantee most of strikes vour will occur on the fall so be aware and be ready. If you feel any weight on the end of your line when you the raise rod tip.....SWING!!



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Word to the wise, when you are messing with a bunch of treble hooks it's always a good idea to use a rod with a forgiving tip, coupled with a moderate action. I also use a 10 bearing 6.7 ounce Revo Premier high speed reel to pick up that slack line in a hurry.

r, versatility and an open mind is when it comes to the success of er. Example = I have used the Yo technique described above to vy, lethargic bass on swimbaits erbaits during the winter. I am not ou to abandon your favorite baits ues; I am merely throwing options juation that have worked for me in I still rely heavily on jigs, soft and I won't hesitate to drop a just want to have some fun. In not leave home this winter without 6" Lake Fork Ring Fries. I have o many big bass on these bait to p as coincidence or luck. We all have our favorites, but if you rule out

moving baits too early, you may be missing out on a real rod bending experience.

Chris Jenkins email <u>sowbelly.hunter@yahoo.com</u>.



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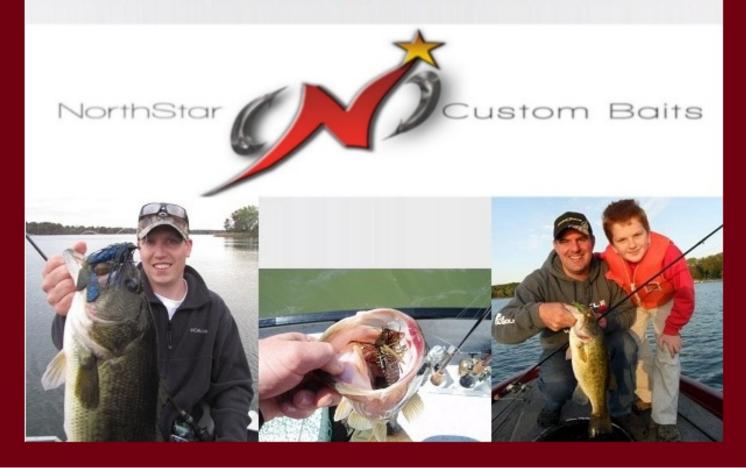
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By Capt. Bill Miller

Call it the one-two punch of inshore fishing. It's the tandem jig and it's a bona fide fish catching tool that I always keep handy whenever I'm fishing the coastal shallows.

The attraction is very simple – predators have two potential meals in close quarters. The benefits for anglers are also very straightforward. First, the fish you target have a pair of objects crossing their radar, so if they miss one of the jigs, the other one follows a second



later. Sometimes, you end up catching two fish on one rig!

Legendary Tampa Bay area lure makers, Bill and Steve Love pioneered this setup with their famous Love Lures tandem rig. This rig is available at most saltwater tackle shops, but it's easy to tie your own.

The tandem rig consists of two soft plastic tails rigged on light jig heads in the 3/16- or 1/8-ounce range tied on a 30-pound monofilament leader with a small black swivel to connect to the main line. The jigs are staggered with the top jig six inches from the swivel and the bottom jig 12-14 inches from the swivel.

WHO LIKES IT

Speckled trout over grass flats is the scenario most commonly associated with tandem jigs, although



this rig will catch anything that swims. Redfish, jacks, ladyfish, cobia, snook – any fish that chases shallow water baitfish will find this rig interesting enough to take a closer look.

Even fish that feed at or near the bottom might take a shot at the tandem rig. Flounder, pompano and permit are some of the possibilities here. To fish deeper water, just vary the weight of your jig head to reach the bottom.

Fishing for pompano, I stagger the two pompano jigs just like



the Love Lure setup above. Popular colors in pompano tandems include yellow, white, pink and any combination of these colors. To enhance the appeal, I'll add a small fly tied with a loop knot to the eyelet of each pompano jig. The flies add extra action that seems to draw more strikes.

A popular use for the tandem pompano rig is to vertically jig it around bridge pilings. Scraping



a few barnacles into the water will create a chum line that enhances your opportunity.

WORK THE RIG

Work the jigs with a hopping motion that might imitate the movement of a shrimp or a small baitfish. Slower is usually better but, at times a fast erratic movement will draw strikes when the slower action will not.

Several tail colors will work, although I prefer pink, silver, and white. I usually have my fishing partners try different tails to







see if the fish are keying in on a particular color. I will also try different colored tails on my jig heads to try and establish a productive pattern.

A trick that was taught to me by Capt. Bobby Buswell is to put a popping cork above the tandem jigs. The popping cork sounds like a fish striking will draw competing fish from a bigger area looking for free food.

OFFSHORE OPTIONS

When trolling for Spanish mackerel, Capt. Billy Miller and I use a tandem rig that consists of a silver No. 1 squid spoon tied on a 16-inch length of No. 6 coffee-colored stainless steel wire attached to a small black barrel swivel. Attached to the same swivel on an 8-inch



separate piece of wire is a ¼or ½-ounce yellow or white bucktail jig.

The jig's weight holds the tandem rig just under the surface with the silver spoon riding above the jig. (If you need sink the to mackerel tandem deeper, trolling use а lead.) Troll 4 - 5around

miles per hour around schools of bait or striking fish and you'll usually draw fast action on Spanish, kings, jacks, ladyfish and other predators pursuing the bait.

Kingfish anglers occasionally use tandem stinger rigs to run multiple baits. The lead bait will be hooked through the nose on a J hook and the back bait will be hooked through the nose on the stinger treble. With the second stinger segment riding at the second bait's back end, the rig has a hook at every point a king may attack.

The logical theory for tandem rigs is that putting twice as many lures or bait in the water gives you twice as many chances to catch a fish. I like those odds.

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Big Fat Muskies

By Craig Stapon

Hey, I just love the fall! This is my time to get out and chase around some big fat musky! As exciting as this time can be, it can also be a very humbling experience. More often than not you can come home with the big black stripe across your back! That being said. understand that every time you go out you have a serious chance at a real big fish. That is the reason



I spend every spare moment on the water in late fall. I remember breaking ice last year on Dec .1 watching an ice fisherman 500 yards away as I fished open water.

Speed at this time of year can be the trigger to success. When trolling vary your speed to figure out what will move fish. I usually speed troll at about 4 mph yet have on occasions bumped it up to 6 mph! The faster trolling speed will often trigger a reaction strikes instead of a push! If you troll to slow you run the risk of not hooking up even though you get a good strike, your line will go slack as the fish hits preventing a proper and solid hook set. I have lost several big girls trolling to slow.

Water temperature is key and will dictate how fast you should go! As the water drops below 45 degrees it is time to slow down. Many experts say that when the temperature hit below 40 degrees you are done. To that I say hog wash! I have boated 7 and 8 musky in a day when



the water temperature was 34 degrees. Just remember to slow down as the cooler temperatures roll in.

I find fall turn-over one of the most difficult times to catch the big ones. It just messes things up as the fish wander as the whole system is the same temperature.

The best advice I can give you is let the fish tell you what to do! It may sound silly but it works. I usually start of shallow, say 6-12 feet and work from there. Hook size is critical and I usually pull huge baits late in fall.





Remember however that there are exceptions to every rule. This year has been crazy with water temperature far above seasonal averages. In fact I have used smaller baits this year than I have in the past 10 years. Now smaller means 8-10 inch in size not my normal 14 inch that I usually use. I have found by downsizing the bait size the catch ratio has gone up. Understand that as the water cools and drops below 40 the big girls want a meal and not a snack. On a normal year I would pull the big bait, allow the musky to expend little energy on getting a big meal. This year with the warmer water they are a little more active and will chase a bait a little further for a meal. We have had great success moving fish in the shallows on summer tactics.

Musky fishing is not rocket science, put a big hook on and cover open water reefs or shore lines and sooner or later you will do battle. Just remember to get a good hook set and use the proper equipment. This is the time of year the big girl slip up

and come out to play! There is nothing like doing battle with a 50 plus inch musky in fall. It is getting more difficult to boat these giants as increased pressure has taken its toll. Musky fishing is one of the fastest growing areas in sport fishing. Twenty years ago I was one of the few boats on the water. Now I have to go out and find new locations as allot of the good old spots are now community holes. These giants can and are being conditioned as the get smarter with increased angling pressure. That is not saying we still can't go out and catch them! We all just have to understand the windows of opportunity that presents itself every day. Understand moon phases, sunrise, moon rise, moon sets and the barometer and you will be a better angler and put more giants in the boat.

The best advice I can give you if you want a true giant is scent your bait! I use pro-cure bait oil, let me tell you there is nothing that will increase your catch ratio that this product. I have consistently put fish over 50 inches in the boat when using this product. Check it out on line and get some. This product goes on easily and stays on; in fact it's like peanut butter. It spreads easily and stays on your bait. I think this gives me an advantage while out searching for the big ones! I don't care if you don't scent your baits as it will leave more of the fatties for me.

Hope you all had a great season, "Keep your lines tight"



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Fishing the America Cup





Early in the fall I received a call from an old friend, Lance Glaser, who wanted to know, 1, can I fly fish, and 2, would I be available to be part of a team of anglers with disabilities he was putting together to fish in the America Cup International Fly Fishing Tournament.

Now, few who know me would disagree that I enjoy fishing more than most. Having been registered blind at age eight and then living through a gradual and now complete loss of sight has done little to dampen my enthusiasm. In fact, some might say my enhanced sense of touch and ability to focus has even given me a slight advantage. However, when I got the call from Lance I wasn't even sure where in the basement my fly rod now languished, and may have stretched the truth somewhat when I said to Lance, "no problem, I love fly fishing".

Lance suggested I come to Colorado several days prior to the Tournament to take in a few days of practice fishing. The morning after arriving, Lance, Maestro my Bernese Mountain guide dog, and I were driving through the now famous town of South Park located in Park County Colorado. We were heading for the Hartsel Ranch and 4-Mile Creek. Turned out Lance's notion of a refresher course involved using dry flies on a creek so small the pools were the size of hot-tubs. Further complicating matters were the incredibly strong winds that tore across our meadow as they barrelled down the slopes of the surrounding mountains.



We decided to enter the river and fish pools well up-stream. Lance advised taking no more than one false cast to avoid spooking the Trout, a hard-wired reaction to flickering light Colorado's Trout developed have to counter the numerous predatory birds. So here I was, about to fish а creek reminiscent of my childhood, only this time without being able to see a thing. I casting know my technique was sound,



having recently practiced with Bill Spicer from the New Fly Fisher during a recent outdoor show, but could I catch fish?

I shook out some line and made my first false cast straight into the wind. Lance suggested a little more line and a bit to the right. I discovered quickly enough that his directions were based on inches and not feet after settling my dry fly first on the right bank and then the left. By the time I managed to execute a few successful drifts, the



Trout had long since cleared out. Between lance's critiquing of my technique, the winds that were holding my slack line almost horizontal, and constantly having to remind Maestro not to venture forward and spook the fish, a doubt began to creep into my subconscious that maybe I should admit to being an Isaac Walton impostor and simply withdraw from the competition.

Just for a lark I swapped my 5-weight rod for Lance's 4-weight, and before long I was making 30+-foot precision casts. I also began getting hits, which brought up the next challenge, how was I to know when a Trout took my dry-fly? After catapulting several smaller Trout clear out of the river, we worked out an arrangement that when Lance said "Check", I lifted my rod straight up in one fluid motion without changing the angle of the tip.

The next day's practice session Lance stepped it up a bit with a wade up the Middle Fork River. A slightly larger river than what we had fished the day prior, but absolutely breathtaking in terms of offering up a true mountain fishing experience. With mountain peaks surrounding us on all sides, my senses were overwhelmed with Red Tailed Hawks screeching overhead, the scent of sweet Sage mixed with wild-flowers, temperatures that started the morning in the low 30's and climbed 50 degrees to the mid 80's by noon, cold fast running rivers, and large Brown, Rainbow, Brook and Cutthroat Trout that would leave one quaking in ones waders. Lance and I took turns fishing the pools, but I still had a dry-fly tied on which, all things considered, isn't my favourite. I didn't know it yet, but a man I was going to meet that very evening would address my fly-selection concerns in ways that would later blow my mind.

Later that day I met my volunteer guide for the tournament, Gene Gamber, CEO of the Breckenridge Adaptive Ski Program, and the rest of my team, Sarah Will our Captain Tred Barta, Carlos Thompson and Randy Ford. It was over dinner later that evening with Gene



that I was introduced to Billy Burger who was just coming off 25 straight days of guiding and was now kicking back for a bit of R-and-R. Now maybe Billy was just tired, or it may have been the "relaxing" Billy had par-took in already that evening, but he insisted I accept his offer to loan me several boxes of his home-made flies; the beauty of which rendered Gene speechless. I readily agreed.

Day one of the tournament was tough on the Blue River without doubt. T started the day by breaking off on what 5lb had to be a Rainbow within moments of hooking up. I had been using a Hopper pattern as an indicator with a Wet fly and small Billy Burger nymph on the bottom. The Rainbow had taken the Nymph, a "Purple Poison" on a #18 hook, but for some reason my 4X leader parted the instant the Rainbow surfaced.



The water on the Blue River was moving unusually fast for the time of year with a flow rate of 800 CFS (cubic feet per second). The gates on the Green Mountain Reservoir up stream had been opened to meet demands for water in the Denver area 100 miles away following a series of devastating fires that destroyed over 100 homes the week prior. The roiling water meant the Trout either hunkered down in deep pools or sought refuge by tucking far in under banks. It also didn't help that tournament rules restricted us from fishing the far bank.

Day two started with Gene and me crawling on hand and knee up to our first pool. Maestro knew the drill at that point and kept well back. It wasn't long before we had our first fish of the tournament – a nice 21" Rainbow caught on a hopper pattern that I had dropped in under some over-hanging branches. This beauty was followed up in short order with a 23-inch Cut-Bow Trout, a naturally occurring hi-bred.

Without doubt we had found ourselves on water heads-and-tails better than what we had fished on day one. Calmer, broader and deeper pools meant fish were able to feed more actively without fighting heavy current. These were river fish nevertheless, and their strength was truly extraordinary. It was nothing for a 2-foot Rainbow to peel out 90 feet of fly line and another 50 of backing.



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More than once I experienced Trout hooked tearing past me and then just as suddenly turn and in run the complete opposite direction. The net result was а considerable loop of line being left far back in the Trout's wake. The thrumming in my rod produced by combined the speed of the Trout and my effort to recover line is a sensation I'll never

forget.

Naturally, I lost my largest Trout after a short but intense fight. Within a split second of being hooked, Gene watched in awe as a 10lb-pluss Brown Trout darted directly towards us and then turn 180 degrees and cover 30 feet in a split second before breaking off. I knew I had a fish on and was scrambling to take in slack, and then suddenly the line went tight as a bow string and parted. Gene's description of the Brown's incredible speed left me profoundly shaken.

Our netting technique involved Gene crouching next to the river while I brought the fish in the last ten feet by reversing up the bank. Gene would then slip into the water and net the fish. I'd place the rod on the grass and slide in next to Gene to hold the net keeping the fish in the water as Gene extracted the fly. I'd then lift the Trout as Gene plucked my camera from my shirt pocket and snapped a quick photo, after which I would revive and release the fish. The Trout were out of water for no more than 30 seconds.

The Billy Burger nymphs and wet flies I was catching most of the Trout on were in the #18 to #22 size range. The 4-weight rod I used most of the time reduced my ability to force the fish, making for some intense stand-offs. The smallest of the 12 fish I caught throughout the tournament was an 18.5" Brown and the largest was a 25" Rainbow.

Day three was only a half-day of fishing, and we once again scored a decent section of the Blue River. My luck held and I managed to catch another five Trout. I worked a streamer on occasion to no avail, and took all my fish using the floating indicator fly with a wet fly and



nymph suspended below. My 12-fish total was not enough to place me among the top anglers, but definitely positioned me in the top 50 percentile.

Many of the competitors coming from Europe used a technique called check nymphing. Instead of waders they used wet suits to almost fully submerge themselves leaving just their head and shoulders above water. Whether Check Nymphing actually constitutes fly fishing or is more akin to jig fishing is a debate I'll leave for others to resolve. In fact, some might argue the method I was using involving floating indicators is little different than float fishing, thus, far be it from me to "throw the first stone".

The Check Nymphing technique involves a long 11 to 13 foot rod with extra-fast an action. Instead of fly line, reels are loaded with 20lb mono tipped with 10' fluoro leaders. There's no actual fly casting involved as the flies are simply lobbed Fishers utilise out. wet suits to maintain a low profile in the water as they move about. Flies used are а combination of three weighted nymphs tied to the line 20" apart. The fisher selects



weights that allow the current to tumble the offering along the bottom of the river bed. Heavy enough to provide bottom contact, but not too heavy as to hold fast.

The fisher simply lobs the offering up stream and then follows the presentation with the rod tip as it drifts and tumbles past. At the end of the drift the rig is extracted with a sharp jerk and flung back up stream for another pass. The extra light tip section of the rod allows the fisher to lift and check for bites without spooking the fish and the heavier middle and lower section of the rod facilitates lightening hook sets. Check Nymphing is a highly effective method of catching neutral or highly pressured fish.

I really enjoyed fishing the America Cup – I mean who wouldn't if they were in my shoes. I had a topnotch guide, an unlimited supply of amazing flies, and access to great gear and a world-class Trout River. One thing is for certain, I'm going to give the check nymphing technique a try as it seems to depend more on ones sense of touch than casting ability, and as exciting as dry-fly fishing might be to watch, unless the fish hooks itself, that's one bite I almost never feel.



TROLLING CRANKBAITS FOR LATE-SEASON CRAPPIE

By Vic Attardo

Fishing does seem to come full circle in the fall, especially for panfish. In late winter and early spring, with no ice of course, targeted areas were mostly warming waters with thin vegetation. Main lake flats, shore side



drop-offs and creek channels particularly in shallow bays and coves were the aiming point for panfish, and for crappie in particular.

Back in that new season, the chief offering was small jigs. The lead heads were used to present either tiny twister tails or live bait, namely minnows.

Now in late fall and early winter, the circle is circling.

At this time of year, with water temperature falling like stock prices on a bad day, I like to add another item to my boat before taking off for a day of crappie angling. I like to include a tray or two of small to medium-size crankbaits.

In this period, you can catch both schooled tightly-packed crappie or schooled looselypacked crappie. Most anglers will land the former. Using the traditional jig, they'll work beside traditional crappie locations, particular bankside laydowns and cover, and catch a number of fish. But when those numbers run out, and the cooler is still not filled, the question remains where to go and what to do next. It's then I pull out my crankbaits and troll deeper fall locations.

Crankbaits aren't generally considered trolling lures but in fact, they are highly effective when pulled, somewhat steadily, behind a boat. They can be fished plain, that is, with the crankbait itself, or they can be worked with an assortment of trolling sinkers and rigs. This latter idea is very important for cold-water crappies and I'll detail the rigs shortly.

The need for trolling crankbaits is pretty straightforward. Many crappie schools will be sparse or spread out. In addition, I often find the looser fall schools occupying a deep horizontal plane as opposed to a standard stacked vertical array. All this adds up for the need to cover



more water with a working lure rather than attacking a singular spot as with a jig, unless powering a jig.

Crankbaits are eagerly taken by crappie but you need to select the right kind. For the most part, crappie are hot for thin-bodied minnow baits as well as short, tight-wobbling models. They aren't a big fan of wide wobbling or highly erratic crankbaits. The material of which the crankbait is built is also important. Slender body minnows made of balsa wood are effective but balsa crankbaits actually take a back seat to plastic crankbaits which rise faster. Often suspending are good as they right in a crappie's line of sight -- when rigged correctly. In addition, many of the smaller, front-wide crankbaits originally intended as walleye baits make excellent crappie crankbaits.



There is no big mystery to trolling stand-alone crankbaits for crappie and there is no need for heavy trolling equipment – downriggers, cannonballs and the like. Instead, the bait is freelined behind the boat and worked at a speed that solicits the best of the bait.

Using simple rod holders, point the rod tip low to the water and drop the line about forty feet behind the boat. This distance is totally subjective as it all depends on water depth and possible obstructions. The point is, for those unfamiliar with flatline or freeline trolling, you don't want the bait close to the stern and you don't want it so far away that you can't set the hook.

In flatline trolling there is a line size consideration: you need to balance the concept of getting the bait down with light line versus the ability to free a snagged line without breakage. Four-pound test would be ideal for the size of most baits but that size line breaks too easily when hung on the bottom. Ten is way





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too much to get the bait along the bottom in short order, so the average is six or eight pound test.

When freeline trolling you want your crankbait bouncing seductively over the bottom or riding inches above it. A bait that is several feet above the lake floor will catch some fish, but a bouncer and scraper will garner more, even though a crappie favors looking up for food. The trick is to make repeated changes of speed with your trolling motor (electric is best) so that the bait rises gentle on its own and into the line of sight of the up-eyed crappie.

Often I use some type of trolling weight to get the crankers down.

My favorite piece of equipment for this tactic is the bottom-bouncer sinker. These sinkers are built on a large wire frame, shaped much like a wide-open safety pin, with the weight molded onto one of the arms. The bottom of the wire frame is only a thin point of wire that slides easily over a lot of obstructions. The top of the frame is shorter and carries a snap swivel. You tie a shank of line to the swivel and the other end to the floater/diver. The bait can rise no further than the height of frame and the length of the line. I find a 12- to 18-inch piece of line, plenty long.

The bottom bouncer is trolled touching and ticking the bottom. A neat trick is to maintain a hold on the rod and move the rod tip forward, backward and frequently stalled. Keep tension on the line so the frame remains upright and when stopped or slowed the floater will rise.

There are also other sinker types that I'll use to accomplish the same attack. If I'm not being bit on a bottom bouncer, I substitute a half-ounce egg sinker or a rubber-core sinker. Build a rig like a Carolina worm complete with a swivel in front of the sinker. Rolled and pulled along the bottom, the egg or straight rubber core sinker is less obtrusive and it has the added attraction of raising silt and stuff ahead of the crankbait. This drama appears like a minnow pursuing whatever is kicking up the bottom. Paint your egg and rubber core sinker fluorescent red or chartreuse if you have time.

When setting the hook on a crappie that has struck a trolled crankbait, don't waste any time. There is already a problem with line stretch so you shouldn't fuddle around. Sweep the rod away from the line on a straight, level pull. Do not lift the rod high. That movement will only throw slack into the line.

Finally, change the hooks on most crankbaits to a brand that sticks -- even when a fish breathes on the bait.







Frogs for Big Cats.. Who Would Have Thought?

By Jake Bussolini

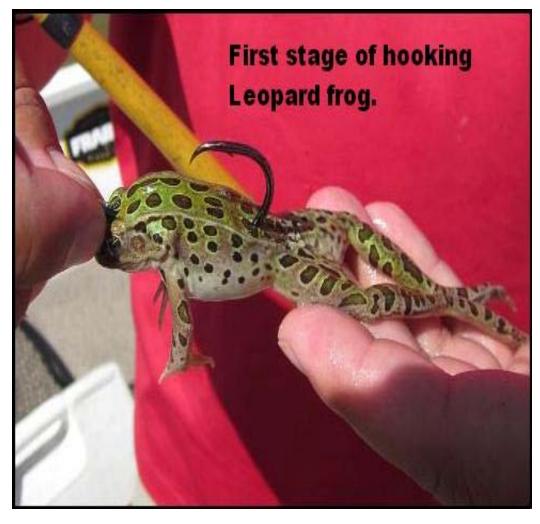
When I decided to make a 1200 mile journey from my home in North Carolina to the Red River of the North. it was to get information for the final chapter of new book The Catfish mv Hunters. Mac Byrum and I are coauthoring this new book about searching for big Catfish, and this northern location has developed a reputation as the go-to place to catch monster Channel Catfish. Here in the south, most Channel relatively Catfish are small

ranging from 4 pounds in most lakes to 15 pounds, considered a trophy in a few other lakes. Our new book attempts to look at fishing technique variations in different locations of the country, and variations in the habits of the three main breeds of Catfish, the Blue, Flathead and Channel Catfish. Blues and Flatheads of trophy size can be regularly caught I n southern lakes and rivers but to haul in a trophy Channel in the 20 pound range, it's necessary to go north to the Red River of the North.

Our planned trip to Grand Forks North Dakota had some detours. The Red River of the North is known mostly for its annual devastating flooding conditions, so it was necessary to find a time when the river was at a level that boat ramps were open and the known good fishing spots were accessible. After two delays we settled on the later part of August. I had been is regular conversation with Brad Durick of Grand Forks, who has become known as the "face of the Red River of the North". Brad is perhaps the most successful fisherman on the river, because he studies the river continuously, watching the water levels and fish behavioral habits as they vary throughout the year. Brad felt that a 22 foot water level was ideal for the big Cats and it was exactly at that level when we arrived in late August.

One trait of a knowledgeable Catfisherman is to make sure that he has a supply of at least three different baits on board. Channel Catfish are finicky, especially in fast flowing water where the water levels vary rapidly from one day to another. Our baits of choice based on Brads recommendation were Gold-eye, Suckers and Leopard Frogs. Mac and I have been around the fishing circuit for many years but neither of us had ever heard of Frogs being used as a Catfish bait, fine for Bass but never used for Catfish. Baits of choice tend to be the food that is naturally available where the fish live. Since Frogs are not normally found in deeper water where the Catfish reside, we would never expect them to be a popular food, especially during daylight hours when the Catfish are normally deeper in the water column.





It didn't take long to rule out the Gold-eye bait, less than two hours on the water we abandoned that bait. Cut bait using small Suckers was fairly consistent with the heads being the most popular, but as the day progresses toward late afternoon, it looked like the Frogs were suddenly becoming the bait of choice, especially for the bigger fish.

We were planning to fish until about 9pm and at mid afternoon we moved into areas of the river where the structure was heaviest, and the Frogs suddenly caught the eye of the bigger fish. In a two hour period both Mac and I had snagged our

personal best Channels, both catching fish over 20 pounds and all of the big catches were using frogs as bait.

The next day produced similar results, with some better results with Sucker cut bait, but in heavy structure the Frogs still maintained their popularity, producing a 20.4 pound fish for Mac and a 21.8 pounder for me.

Since my fishing books attempt to blend the science of fishing with the sport, the idea of Leopard Frogs appealing to Catfish as an afternoon meal intrigued me so I did some additional research on this Frog

The Leopard Frog is common the cooler climate of the northern United States and southern Canada. It lives along the grassy banks of rivers and lakes and eats mostly insects as do other Frog species. The first unusual issue with these Frogs is the method of attaching them to the hook. It has been determined that the channel Catfish prefer the frog to be dead, so that is the first order of business. A number 8 circle hook is passed down through the head and then passed up through the rear of the Frog. The last step, not shown here is to bring the back legs up and over the hook, attaching them through the lower leg so as not to permit the legs to dangle behind the Frog. It has been determined that the fish will often grab the dangling legs if they are left unhooked. The frog is now tightly compressed into a small ball on the hook. Most Bass lures that attempt to duplicate Frogs use the legs and their



movement as a motion attractor to the fish. No such feature here with the Frog, which is wrapped up into a small ball.

The question still remained however, why do the big Channel Catfish prefer Leopard frogs? The Leopard Frog is an interesting species. The internal workings of this frog make it the preferred specimen for school laboratory studies. No doubt, those of us who have been required to dissect a Frog in biology class used a Leopard Frog as our specimen. The Leopard Frog breeds in the spring and it can tolerate a wide range of water temperatures, but prefers water that has heavy vegetation. It also likes to hide in areas that have heavy underwater structure, but is not particularly fond of fast moving water. Its predominant diet is flies and insects may explain its abundance on the days that we fished since the May Flies were very heavy on the river.

There is a good amount of information available about the Leopard Frog, because the northern species contain an enzyme that has shown promise for reducing tumor size in both lung and brain cancer. A unique quality of the Leopard Frog that may explain its attraction to the Channel Catfish, is the fact that most other Frogs have a skin that emits a very distasteful secretion that would be un-inviting as a food source. The Leopard Frog does not produce this secretion but has a sweet taste to its skin and a more attractive smell. We usually think of the Channel Catfish as liking smelly foods, but perhaps the big Cats know more that we think they do, understanding the medical and dietary value of the Leopard Frog.

Regardless of the reasons, we do know that most of the Channel Catfish that we caught on the Red River of the North, using Leopard Frogs as bait, ranged in weight between 15 and

22 pounds, and on both days that we fished this waterway, we caught at least a dozen in this weight range.

Jake Bussolini is a retired Aerospace executive who lives on Lake Norman in North Carolina. He has already published three books about freshwater fishina thev are Jakes Lake, Take on The Freshwater Fighters and Beneath The Surface. His latest book The Catfish Hunters . His books can reviewed be on www.freshwaterfighters.co m.









Pine to Prairie Panfish

By Bob Bohland

Big fish live in big fish waters. Most anglers seasoned know this. While a fluke trophy can be caught out of almost any waters; the best way to fish catch big consistently remains to travel to big fish waters. For panfish anglers in Minnesota. you need to simply pick up a road map and follow the Panfish Corridor to find your best chance at trophy panfish. This belt across the state has some of the best growing conditions for panfish, and due to the types of lakes in this region; panfish often survive even harshest the of winters that would otherwise decimate lake in the а

southern tier of the state, but can still withstand the fishing pressure they often see.

Why Here?

Some of you are probably thinking that the northern lakes in the state provide better fisheries for panfish than the middle tier of lakes. But the problem with the lakes in much of the northern parts of the state is their trophic classification. Trophic classification is determined by several variables, but the one most focus on is the total weight of biomass in the given body of water (think bugs as food for the fish). The lakes in the northern tier of the state are



generally either oligotrophic or mesotrophic. This means that they have fewer nutrients to fast growing support populations of fish and in the of panfish, their instance populations of large fish can be quickly depleted by over harvest and may take long periods of time to recover. So while these northern lakes can often have amazing fisheries. any amount of pressure can quickly dampen the chance at quality fish.

The southern tier lakes in the state have the exact opposite



problem. Many of these lakes are often in the eutrophic or hypereutrophic range. There is tons of food available for panfish to get big and get big quick. So while it may take only 4-6 years to grow a trophy bluegill or crappie in these lakes, they often will not live longer than that due to lack of oxygen in the lakes during harsh winters. Lakes in this area freeze out very regularly, so while an angler may find an amazing fishery for one or two years, it can just as easily die off during a long winter.

Lakes along the Pine to Prairie Corridor are right in the middle of the two extremes. Classified along the line of mesotrophic and eutrophic, they mostly have abundant food sources, and are big and deep enough to provide ample oxygen during a long winter to ensure the survival of a fishery. So these fish can grow fast and have the ability to live for a long time without the occurrence of winter kill. The majority of these lakes fall within a corridor of where the big north woods meets the prairies of southern Minnesota, essentially following Interstate 94. The best areas to target can be found by looking at the Minnesota DNR's ecological provinces map, as they all fall in the Eastern Broadleaf Forest section.

Narrow It Down

Now this doesn't mean that all lakes in this region will pump out trophy bluegills and crappies by the bucket load. It may take some homework to narrow down the best waters in the area. While many smaller lakes in this region can kick out some very nice panfish, small lakes are susceptible to over harvest just as much as the big northern lakes. Your major focus should be on lakes that are at least 250 acres in size and are known to produce quality fish, as it won't do any good to go fish a lake that doesn't even have a panfish population. Bigger lakes also have the added benefit of offering areas that hold fish that have often been overlooked by the masses. Although that isn't to say that you won't find a tiny little hidden gem from time to time, but they are more the exception than the rule, as this strip of lakes also has a large amount of human population in the area.



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A good lake map is your best friend when it comes time to find these plethoras of panfish and if the map shows bottom composition, it's even better. These fish get big fast because of the amount of aquatic invertebrates in the water. They will consume these insects in mass amounts while packing on the pounds. Many anglers don't understand how to incorporate lake maps with the type of insects the fish are keying on. For instance, if the fish in the lake you are fishing generally eat daphnia or freshwater shrimp, shallow to mid-depth flats with green weeds are the best spots to key on. Pelican Lake in Albertville, Mn is a good example of this type of lake. It is a shallow bowl that seems to pump out ridiculous numbers of big panfish every year due in large part to the overwhelming numbers of freshwater shrimp and other invertebrates in the lake. By keying in on green weeds on this lake you can find the bigger fish as they chase these insects and other prey around.

In deeper lakes with thick mud bottoms often times the fish will tend to key on insects that spend more time in deeper water such as mayfly larvae and bloodworms. Areas to concentrate on in these lakes include mud to sand/rock transition areas and any area that you can find with the stickiest bottom possible. On your Marcum, these areas will show up as a very thin band that indicates limited sonar read back. You can test the stickiness of the bottom further by putting a depth bomb on your hook and sending it down. The harder it is to pull the weight out of the bottom, the better the fishing will often be. One great example of this is Lake Osakis in Douglas County, the panfish tend to sit on sticky bottom areas gorging themselves on invertebrates, often even going down into the substrate to fan the bugs up off the bottom.



The Payoff

Many lakes in this corridor will have both shallow and water deep species of insects, so by meticulously going through a good lake map you can pick and

choose how you want to target the fish. For fish in shallow water, anything less than 15-20 feet, baits that can get down into the weeds quickly and stir things up work really well. For fishing shallow lakes for panfish such as Pelican, I like to go with the Lindy Toad. It fishes heavy, like a bait 3 times its size, and has the weight needed to punch through any aquatic vegetation. This extra weight is really helpful on lakes that receive a lot of pressure as the fish can often be reluctant to come up out of the weeds to eat when there are plenty of bugs available near the bottom.



Color selection is a variable many anglers simply don't pay enough attention to, especially in shallow water, it can make all the difference in the world. Even in dark or stained waters, fish can see variations in colors a lot better than anglers give them credit for. In stained waters, such as those found on Pelican Lake, I prefer dark colors. The Viking and Coach Dog colors available on the Toad are great for this application, as they stand out far more than lighter or



bright colors in muddy water.

When fishing for panfish in deeper lakes such as Osakis, the best areas to key in on are those with а "sticky bottom". This so called sticky bottom generally provides the best breeding grounds for aquatic insects, and where there is food, the fish are sure to follow. While many anglers prefer to

deadstick with waxworms or minnows in these areas, to really trigger the bigger, more aggressive fish, I prefer to dance a bait around above the fish. This is when I tie on the new Lindy Bug. With bulging eyes and a wide body, the Bug will glide out and around and quiver in place when pounded, and with eyes facing downward the fish can actually see the bait as it imitates the larvae of aquatic insects. By watching your flasher, you can see if the fish want the bait presented on the bottom or higher in the water column. If the fish prefer to eat something closer to the bottom, the new smaller sizes in the Slick Jig are my go to. Loaded with waxworms and pounded into the bottom, the Slick Jig looks exactly like a struggling insect hatching off of the bottom and can be very hard for a fish to resist.

If your goal this winter is to catch some giant panfish, either for the wall, or just to make your buddies jealous, grab yourself a map and follow it to Minnesota's Panfish Belt. These lakes have no problem producing big panfish through the years, and you may discover a few new hotspots that you simply had no clue about.









