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Panfish 101

Get started on a summer of outsmarting perch, crappies and bluegills.

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A little bluegill takes a big bite.
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Permanently affixed on our refrigerator is a bumper sticker: "My wife said, if I go fishing one more time she'll leave me. God, I'm going to miss her." She likes the message about as much as the fact that it is now adhered to the fridge! I love to fish and I'm glad to have this opportunity to share some tactics that have worked for me. Whether you like to catch fish and release them, or add to the family larder, panfishing can provide you virtually 365 days of fishing opportunity.

Here, we will focus on spring and summer fishing on open water. To catch fish consistently, one must be willing to experiment with lures and baits to mimic what the fish are eating. You need to think about how you present bait to the fish, and when it's time to change locations. You need to pay attention to water depth, note available plant cover or underwater structures that fish are using -- and, to some degree, track the water temperature. It may seem like a lot of work, but it will become second nature and also give you respect for both fish and fishing.

The people who regularly catch fish are those who take the time to understand fish life cycles and take educated guesses about where the fish will be and why they will be there. Like every other skill, you have to get on the water, practice your fishing techniques and make adjustments to entice fish into taking the bait.

In search of perch

In spring and early summer, most spawning behavior is triggered when the cold winter waters begin to warm. Among the many panfish species, yellow perch will spawn first when the water temps reach about 44 degrees. Perch spawn shortly after ice-out and deposit their eggs on vegetation, submerged brush or gravel bottoms. After perch spawn they leave the spawning site, unlike crappie and bluegills.

Pre-spawn and spawning perch are difficult to catch - their minds are elsewhere. Furthermore, fishing conditions can be brutal as early spring weather often brings raw winds and cold days. (Besides, many of us are turkey hunting!) I think your time is better spent concentrating on post-spawn perch moving out from the shallows into emerging weeds.

To find actively feeding post-spawn perch, try the technique called "weed walleye" fishing. I use a six- to seven-foot graphite rod with a very sensitive tip. I rig the rod with 4-pound test line and a 1/16th to 1/32nd ounce jig. I tip the hook with a small fathead minnow or larger crappie minnow. Hook the minnow through the open mouth and then up through the top of the head. This allows the minnow to trail straight behind the lure and it won't work off so quickly. Search out new weed growth in about four to nine feet of water. Cast out your line, leaving the bail open, and let the jig drop slowly toward the bottom.

Pay close attention to the line lying atop the water. When the line stops moving, the jig is on the bottom or is hung up on a weed. (If the line twitches, it's a bite! Set the hook!) Take up the slack and slowly raise the rod tip to the 11 o'clock position and hold it there. When you think you've raised it enough, cut your speed in half and it should be just right. This action just teases the jig off the bottom.

When the rod stops, the jig floats back down while you maintain a tight line. When the line stops moving, lower your rod tip, wind in the slack and repeat this slow retrieve, bringing the rod up and holding it at 11 o'clock, etc. The fish usually strike as the jig is falling. Perch bite in a series of fast raps. Drop the rod tip for a few seconds while picking up the slack, lightly set the hook, and bring in the fish.

Try different techniques when casting and retrieving to tempt feeding perch.
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Using this technique you can cover larger areas of weeds in search of actively feeding perch. Don't get frustrated if you hook weeds once in awhile. If you get hung up on every cast, switch to a weedless jig. When you locate perch, quietly drop an anchor. If it's windy, anchor each end of the boat so you are parallel to the weed line you want to fish. Switch over to slip bobbers, set just an inch or two off the bottom on the top of the weeds where you had a bite. Place a small split shot 15" to 18" above the hook and tie on a small ice-fishing jig like a Willy Worm or Rat Finky jig baited with spikes, wax worms, panfish leeches or pieces of worms or night crawlers. Experiment with color combinations of jigs and a variety of baits.



Generally the larger perch are caught within inches of the bottom, so set your depth carefully. Also rig one rod without a bobber and just hang it over the side of the boat. Lots of times it will out-fish the other rigs.

A little later in the year when the water warms up, the weeds become too thick to penetrate. Time to try another technique! Put on polarized sunglasses and use an electric trolling motor or just slowly drift through the weed bed looking for "holes" or openings in the weeds. Panfish love warm water surrounded by the safety of weeds. They will hang out in these small pockets where they can pick off little bait fish and insects. Pop your slip bobber rig in the opening and fish around the entire edge of the opening. Mark the outside edge of the weed bed with marker buoys and fish the entire edge, paying close attention to keep your bait within six inches or less of the bottom. Again, regularly change bait types and color combinations until you find what the fish are hitting.

As summer progresses and water temperatures increase, fish will be more active where the water is a little cooler. Focus your fishing on deeper outside weed edges and fish the first and last two hours of daylight. For the energetic, run a few crab traps and peel the meat from crayfish tails to use as bait. On many northern lakes this is deadly bait. Don't be surprised if these same techniques catch other panfish, walleye or bass.

Chasing crappies

Sometimes crappies will provide the first action after ice-out. Search out lakes with dark or stained waters; they'll warm up weeks before the clear waters do. Look for shallow bays with 2-6 feet of water, where you'll find the warmest water in the lake. Male crappies move into the shallow water first as temperatures increase. Crappies begin spawning when water temperatures are between 61 and 68 degrees, but the males can be caught long before that.

Drift across the bay, casting as far as you can from the boat using baits like a pinky jig (a small pink lead-headed jig tied with white or yellow hair) suspended about half the distance from the surface to the bottom. This will require light line and a long, flexible rod. Crappies are very spooky and it is rare to catch "a good one" -- in the 11-13 inch range -- close to the boat. Lightweight tube jigs in white, purple, yellow and pink also work well. Generally, you won't need to use live bait. Just fish the jig wrapped with feathers or hair. Don't place any sinkers between the bobber and the jig.

When you cast, you want the bobber to settle and the jig to drift slowly down. Crappies just suck the jig in, so you want that jig to drop very slowly. I prefer using long, thin pencil bobbers that lie flat on the water. When you get a bite these extremely light bobbers simply tip up and the fish feels no pressure at all. Your retrieve should be s-l-o-w. Move the bobber about a foot and lower the rod tip. This movement swings the jig upward at an angle, and when the bobber stops the jig will slowly settle down. Experiment next to the boat and you'll quickly see the speed you'll want to maintain to achieve the proper action.

As spawning temperatures approach, male crappies become more aggressive in searching out nesting sites. Like bluegills, crappies build nests, but their nests are in deeper water up to six feet down and are barely noticeable. Fishing crappie minnows on a #8 long shank hook will produce fish on most days just prior to spawn. It's an excellent choice for post-spawn crappies, too.

As temperatures warm up, concentrate your efforts in the evenings and early morning hours around outside weed edges, deep holes with fish cribs, sunken trees and logs. Again, be flexible. Change color combinations often, tip jigs with a minnow, speed up or slow down the presentation until you figure out the fishes' patterns. Check the deeper holes adjacent to known spawning areas for pre-spawn crappies. Suspended fish will be easily found with fish locators. Work lightweight jigs tipped with small minnows slowly through the holes at the depth where you marked fish. You won't need to use any bobbers.

Strategies for bluegills

Much has been written about the ease of catching bluegills. Once they are on their beds just about everybody can catch them, because bluegills will defend their nests from any invader. I know it's tempting to fish them at spawning time -- especially if you are fishing with children -- because fishing action is practically guaranteed. However, the fish are vulnerable during spawning, and they need a few weeks to raise the fry that will provide your fishing enjoyment in the future. So think twice before zeroing-in on spawning bluegills. Consider catch-and-release during this time.

Pre-spawn presents a greater challenge. If you know where bluegills typically spawn on your lake, try backing off into 6-12 feet of water and fish for suspended bluegills earlier in the season. Use very small slip bobbers, and small ice fishing jigs of various colors tipped with spikes or wax worms. Wet fly spider imitations tipped with a spike work well also. Focus on the zone from two to three feet under the water to about two feet off the bottom. Remember to use light gear. Have patience, fish slowly, retrieve about six inches of line at a time and let the bait settle. Many times you won't detect the bite by watching the bobber. It is only when you lift the rod tip that you will feel pressure.

Jigs and wet fly spider imitations can bring in the bluegill.
© Robert Queen

It is critical to use really small bobbers that will barely stay afloat. Add tiny slip shot to the line to keep the bobber within a heartbeat of sinking, and pick calm days to fish. If you want to get fancy, many of the fishing catalogs now offer English style bobbers that may only weigh a few grams. Heck, you could use these to angle for bait!



Bluegills begin spawning when the water temperature approaches 67 degrees. Just prior to that time the males move to shallow water. Keep your baits small and cast far away from the boat. If using Willy Worms or similar plastic tubes, cut the tube off just behind the hook and tip the rig with a spike. With jig-style baits, your bite and hooking success will increase if you pay attention to tying a proper knot. You want the hook to hang horizontally and after every bite or snag, you need to readjust where the knot is on the hook ring so the lure is suspended horizontally.

Concentrate your efforts on fishing in three feet of water or less, focusing on stumps, logs, brush or any kind of emergent vegetation. After bluegills spawn, they drift back into deeper water and relate to weeds. Although bluegills feed throughout the day, best action is within the first and last few hours of daylight. Slip bobbers offer the most flexibility and a wide variety of baits can be used. The standard is a #8 long shank hook with worms or pieces of night crawler. Also try ice-fishing jigs, Willy Worms, Rat Finkies tipped with spikes, and wax worms that cover the point of the hook. Especially in northern lakes, panfish leeches far out-fish other baits.

During the dog days of summer, bluegills tend to suspend about 12 to 14 feet below the surface. Marking schools of bluegills is easy with most fish finders. For this kind of angling, I like to rig fly rods with open-faced reels and again use #8 long shank hooks baited with worms or pieces of night crawlers. I put rubber core sinkers about 15" above the hook. The more wind, the more weight is required. Put a slip bobber stop on your line as a marker that you will keep right at the water line so you can quickly return to the exact depth after each fish is reeled in.

If the wind picks up don't leave -- just change your rig a bit. Above the #8 long shank hook, slide on a small chartreuse or orange spinner blade with a clevis spinning collar, then put four orange beads just above the hook. If there's enough wind to spin the blades, you're in luck. Many times this combination spooks the smaller fish but still attracts bigger gills.

So there you have it. A few tips on panfishing strategy, some encouragement to get out on the water, and a little marital advice: The bumper stickers you slap on the fridge ought to say something a bit more positive about your relationship. And perhaps you should try a less permanent method of attachment -- like a magnet.

Conservation Warden GARY HOMUTH fishes throughout the year for panfish on both northern and southern Wisconsin waters.