



the
CRAYFISH TALE
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AUGUST – The Crayfish Month

The tradition to eat crayfish during the month of August is typically Swedish. But you don't have to be a Scandinavian to agree that this month is really one of the best ones to catch crayfish, wherever you live. At least north of the equator. I suppose Australians may catch their yabbies in February.

When I discovered crayfish in the little artificial Hawley Lake up on the Apache Reservation in Arizona, it quickly became my, and my family's, summer vacation goal. It has remained a favorite with us since we came to Arizona in the early 1980's. That's when a Motorola friend of mine told me about all the trout you could catch trolling a cowbell lure in this lake. Little did he know, or I anticipate, that trout would become my backburner prey. Soon I discovered that this pristine lake up among the pines and aspens contained millions of crayfish of respectable size from one end at the lake's dam to the pier and launching dock at the other.

For years the Swedish Vasa lodge in Phoenix used to gather up at this lake for their traditional August rite of catching and eating crayfish. The cows and bears around the lake may still wonder about the strange singing that came from these hard drinking

Swedes while eating those funny crawling things called crayfish.

Yes, this lake has sustained me in crayfish ever since I discovered it over 30 years ago. It still manages to supply me and my friends liberally with this crustaceous delicacy year after year, and I still see no sign of decimation. And that in spite of catching and cooking some 1000 crays each year.

Same this year. The only difference between this year and other crayfish catching and camping excursions in August was that we – I and my son's family - decided to become a little more civilized by renting one of the many cabins around the lake. One of those cabins that the Indians decided not to renew the lease for after it ran out for some non-Indians from Phoenix or Tucson.

After many years of hauling up tents or maybe a camping trailer to the spacious camp ground, we decided this year would be different. With years creeping up on me, I appreciated not having to use smelly outhouses or to go looking for bushes in the forest. And with especially the females in the family appreciating civilized amenities, we settled for a nice cabin close to the shore across from the campground.

And the crayfish population on this side of the lake was just as good, if

not better, than where we had hauled up our August crayfish for 30 years. As usual we brought our little aluminum boat that could hold my ten jumbo traps and a trot line plus an electric motor and oars. Peter, my son, handled the electric motor while I handled baiting the traps and letting out the trot line of about 200 feet along the shoreline. Approximate depth for the traps was between five and ten feet. Deeper than that seems to have less catchables.

As usual, we placed our traps at sundown, when most fishing parties on the lake have called it quits for the day. This year I had prepared bait in the form of fishy (white fish and tuna) cat food cans. First I puncture the flat cans with four holes in the lid using an old-time beer can opener, then place one can inside each trap and slowly and gently submerge the trap hoping the can will stay put. After years of using chicken pieces for bait, I have now found that these fishy cat food cans are even better than chicken pieces. Easy to handle and not messy. The main advantage, though, is that these cat food cans catch more crays than anything else I have tried.

After placing traps, we rowed back to our launching site and returned to our civilized camp in the cabin. After a barbecue dinner and a few glasses of wine, the comfortable beds beckoned and we slept until sun up. Time for pulling the traps on the trot line.

Early Hawley is mystic. With the sun just above the horizon and the morning mists swirling over the water, we walk down to the boat, thanking our good fortune that it had not and did not rain. Something that is very common up

at this elevation of 8600 feet. But rain or no rain, the boat's dewy seats were too wet to sit on. Towels tucked under the seat helped remedy that problem.

So, out to the beginning of the trot line, located by the little unobtrusive green float indicating the end of the line. From there we started pulling up the 200 foot long string of Jumbo and Trappy XL traps, all filled with Hawley crayfish in different amounts and sizes. In a few traps we even had a couple of small bluegills that had not yet been eaten by the crays. In one of the traps I tested how well the bait boxes performed in these waters. Not to my surprise, I found that the cat food cans outperformed the bait boxes hands down.

With the sun rising well over the pine studded rim of the lake, we finished pulling traps, and soon were back to our civilized cabin to count our catch. This we repeated three times, all after nightly sessions. Yes, we left one trap out during the day, just to see if there was much difference between night and day catches. Actually not much difference, so you don't have to take advantage of the crayfish being nocturnal. They must always be hungry.

Were we satisfied with the catch? Oh, yes. However, I must admit, that every time catching crays I tend to compare the result with the best performances of past excursions, and when it comes to catching many and big crayfish, well, then there is the prize of the bunch, the Dennis Lake above the Mogollon Rim north of Payson, Arizona.

But that's another story.

Trapper Arne