

Crayfish Tales

by

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#15

The Annual Crayfish Trek to Hawley

Unfortunately probably the last trek to this unforgettably productive crayfish lake

The Hawley Crayfish Tradition

How many times have I gone for crayfish to Hawley Lake on the Apache Reservation in Arizona? The first time I went was around 1970. That makes this trip to my favorite crayfish lake trip number 30 or thereabouts. And while it probably will turn out to be the last one to this crustaceous heaven, it will be rated as one of the best. Maybe the very best. At least in terms of how many crayfish I caught.

As usual we started out on a sunny Sunday morning from Payson. Son Peter and his family, including grandchild Annika, came up from Phoenix to hook up their trailer and boat parked behind our garage. This year, not only I was going up with them. This time we had an old friend from Älvkarleby/Rawleigh with us, John Allinger. John had come to reunite with old Phoenix friends and to refresh his memories of catching crayfish in the moonlight at Hawley Lake. Alas, there would be no moonlight this year, but crayfishing there would be lots of.

The Caravan Takes Off

Around ten o'clock Peter had hooked up his trailer and hoisted his aluminum boat on top of his new truck, and we were ready to go. This time I would bring my own little old truck also packed to the rim with camping gear, crayfish traps, 30 of them, as well as friend John and his sparse camping gear. To make sure my old truck would not get stranded without help during the three hour long trip up to 8000 foot elevation, Peter and I had ham radio contact with our 2 meter rigs in each car.

With full tanks we headed up the mountains and stopped only when we came to the Hondah Casino on the Apache reservation. Plenty of reasonably priced gas here - Phoenix had just gone through a gas crisis with exorbitant gas prices - and after topping off the tanks, we were only half an hour from our goal. But first John and I stopped for worms, one of the specialties of the Indian community of McNary. We were of course also going to fish for trout. Trout bite better on worms in my opinion.

Arriving at the Hawley Campground

Hawley Lake is one of the most beautiful spots around. The lake, a pearl surrounded by tall spruces, pines and aspen, has for many years been the pride of the Indian tribe that runs its concessions, a motel, a store and rental boats. Sometimes even a stable of riding horses. In spite of the hard drought during much of the previous years, the lake was full up to the spillway, so I anticipated the same successful crayfish catch as we were used to

from previous years.

At the campground we soon found daughter Ellen with family and grandchild Taylor plus their friends Pat and wife from Flagstaff. Pat often points out that he is 1/8 Apache Indian and that his grandfather's name, Hawley, became the name for the lake. Peter quickly found a perfect spot for his trailer, and soon the camp was established only a few feet from the water's edge.

As usual we had planned to stay for three nights during which we would all share the space in Peter's trailer. Peter's family in one end, I at the other and John sleeping on the couch in the middle. Finns det hjärtrum så finns det stjärtrum say the Swedes. (Which means, if there is space for the heart there is space for the rear).

Trying to Break My Crayfish Record

The year before I had picked up no less than 1300 crayfish in three days. I was determined to break that record. And why not? This year I had no less than 30 crayfish traps with me. Some of those traps I would try out for the first time. Some were recently imported from Sweden under the name of the Blueboy, some were 12 new traps that I had made myself just before the trip. Obviously I was particularly interested in how my own traps would perform. In addition there were ten old Jackpot traps of the spring coiled net construction that always had performed well for me. With great anticipation we unloaded my traps from the truck and placed them down by the water's edge near Peter's aluminum boat. This year I had brought a large amount of bait in the form of turkey necks that were thawing out in my bait bucket.

After baiting all the traps with John's help, we went out on the lake at about sunset, ready to leave some of the traps in all night, and the old ones only for four hours. Why? Because the old traps were not equipped with so called escape stoppers. They prevent, hopefully prohibit, the crayfish from escaping the trap during the night. The old net traps can not be equipped with these devices, so I decided to stick to the old habit of pulling and emptying them about every four hours. So if we put them out around 6 o'clock, we should empty them again at about 10 o'clock. Logic says that after that we should empty them again about 2 or 3 in the very early morning. One night John convinced me do that and Peter promised to set his watch and wake us at that ungodly hour. Well, his watch did not go off so we missed that early emptying. (Later he told us that he had mistakenly set his watch for PM instead of AM. Thus no alarm at 3 in the morn. Oh, well. We enjoyed the sleep.)

First Catch

The trip to empty traps in the dark was as usual quite mystic and trollish. We didn't see any trolls as the moon was not out as I had erroneously predicted. At ten o'clock we walked down to Peter's boat anchored next to the trailer. With John in the rear of the boat I did the rowing out to where Peter and I earlier had set out the crayfish traps. With flash lights we soon found the first red floats from the ten net traps. I always approach the first trap with a lot of anticipation. Will it have any crayfish in it? Will it be empty or full? I have been skunked before, pulling up traps with nothing or hardly anything in them.

What would it be this time? As I had my visiting friend with me I wanted, for his sake, that we would have a bonanza catch.

Another Bonanza Catch

My anxiety soon disappeared. Hawley Lake came to my rescue. The traps were quite full and John had a ball pulling up one trap after the other brimming with crawling crustaceans. The traps were well filled with big Hawley crayfish (probably *Orconectes virilis*), and many with very large claws. I have emptied crayfish traps at night many times, but I always find it an unforgettable experience. The stars above is all the natural light available and faint silhouettes of the trees along the shore line tell me roughly where we are. As long as I watch the stars and the silhouetted trees, I am in good navigational shape. But after pulling up a trap while not looking at the stars and with the boat slowly turning and pointing any which way, when you look up, you have lost all your bearings. There were times when I had no idea of where we were in relation to the camp. The shoreline was full of other camp fires and we soon were totally lost in the dark of the lake. But our five gallon bucket was by now full of crayfish, so we were happy, lost or not.

After some analysis of our geographical location we found our campfire glowing behind the next wooded point, and we were soon on target. Back at the camp we unloaded the crayfish bucket and stored the contents in a cooler for the night. The campfire was circled with people activity now and for a couple of hours we enjoyed the camaraderie that goes with camping. Sitting around a campfire with a glass while watching the embers from the fire rise between the tall trees, many a tall tale was aired and all were happy.

Second Catch of All-night Traps

The following morning it was time to pull the all-night traps, those traps that have an escape stopping mechanism installed. This is a gadget I learned from an expert crayfish catcher in Washington. With this ring of spikes round the trap entrance, the crayfish will have great trouble getting out again. In my reading about how to catch crayfish I have found some estimates of nightly crayfish escapes amounting to as much as 70%. That's too much to suit me, so when I saw this escape stopper in my purchased trap, I installed it into all my Swedish plastic traps as well as those I was building in my garage. Now I would be able to leave traps in all night without losing a large amount due to crayfish restlessness after all the bait is eaten.

And the result of pulling traps in the morning seemed to prove my point. The traps with escape stoppers were teeming with crayfish. And this time I had about twenty traps to empty. Again, John and I were enthusiastic about the catch, especially I, who would stand to gain all winter long from the result of this successful fishing. Again, John pulled traps sitting in the rear of the boat, and I rowed backwards up to each of the red floats bobbing in the water. The weather was still perfect. All clouds were gone after a short shower during the night, winds were gone and no waves obscured the floats from view. Except one of them. I knew from the spacing between the floats that we must have missed a trap along the way. Where was it? I tracked back and looked closely when suddenly I saw the red trap float about a foot below the surface of the water. Apparently the depth here was a

bit more than the ten feet that the float line allowed. We were lucky. So far we had not lost single trap.

Sometimes I may lose a trap when the knot between the float and trap for some reason gets loose. Pulling a float once I got nothing but the string in my hand with the trap still lying on the bottom. Fortunately I could vaguely see the silhouette of the trap and its white net outlined against the dark bottom. Not to worry, said Peter who hauled out a clothes hanger from under the boat seat. With that hanger attached to a long string we soon snagged the wayward trap, and up it came again. Full of crayfish.

This time we had so many traps full of crayfish that we had to start on the second cooler of the four I had brought. I had estimated that with 200 or 300 crayfish per cooler, we could easily bring home around 1200 this year. That would be near or at my previous record. But we still had two more days to go!

Cooking Crayfish at 8000 Feet

That afternoon I selected 50 of the largest crayfish for a campsite crayfish boil. In a kettle on the trailer stove I prepared one gallon of water, ½ cup of salt, one can of beer and a handful of dill seeds. Soon the air around us was permeated with the heavenly smell of cooking crayfish. As we were up at 8000 feet elevation (about 2650 meters) I had to let the crayfish boil a little longer to compensate for the lower boiling point up here. To cool off the boil quickly, I placed the kettle halfway submerged in the lake water. My plans were to serve crayfish, cold crayfish, for dinner the next day. John and I would surely eat at least most of them with the remainder divided between Peter and Tracey. However, Pat and his camping group had requested 10 crayfish already that evening, so he enjoyed his while they were still warm. A very un-Swedish habit.

That evening we all enjoyed a roaring campfire, roasted pork ribs and plenty of veggies and beer as well as some other liquid refreshments. Grandchildren gazed bright eyed at the flames and the grown ups told stories about bears visiting campsites at night.

Second Crayfish Harvest

Later that evening John and I went out again to pull crayfish traps. At sunset we had placed the traps along another stretch of the shoreline, hoping for an even better result than the first night. This time we had determined not to get lost on the lake, so a well placed lantern next to the boat launch guided us back safely. Same wonderful setting of starlit skies and trees silhouetting the shore of the lake. We could hear voices from the party still going on near our trailer. Again we emptied the old net traps of large amounts of crayfish. But somehow I got a feeling that the catch was not quite up to what we had the night before. Maybe other people had been trying their luck for crayfish along this shore. The following morning we pulled the rest of the traps, the escape proof ones, that had stayed out all night. This time I decided to compare the Swedish plastic traps with the ones I had recently built in our garage. To my delight I noticed that ten of my traps almost filled a five gallon bucket while ten of the plastic traps only filled one by two thirds. I had already a suspicion that they were not quite as productive. Maybe because they have a flat bottom and the rocky bottom seldom offered a flat area for them to rest

on. A round trap always seems to have good contact with the bottom, rocky or not.

The Mushroom Incident

Friend John is used to picking mushrooms in Sweden in the fall. So not surprisingly he wandered around the camp ground in search of these sometimes delicious fungi. He found quite a few and brought them back to camp. On an empty picnic table he sorted them according to the species and we all gathered to enjoy his unusual catch. Americans seldom know much about mushrooms except that some of them are poisonous. No wonder mushrooms are seldom gathered here.

John explained to all who had gathered around about the different varieties and their names and the corresponding types he had picked in Sweden. Nobody in the group noticed two Indian forest rangers who slowly walked up and watched the mushroom display. They both looked impressively official with black uniforms, insignia here and there plus ominous pistols in holsters on hips.

They took one look at the mushrooms and declared to all gathered that this was a blatant break of regulations that were in force on the Apache Indian Reservation. Nothing could be taken off the premises, including plants and trees and permanent fixtures. This was clearly described in the booklet describing regulations while on the reservation. The young, fat, ranger asked "who picked the mushrooms?" John, who stood like a peddler at the table with all the mushrooms, said, "I did". With a dark look at John, the younger of the two rangers pontifically declared, that'll be \$250 in fines. But then someone, in an effort to distribute the blame somewhat, said, we all picked mushrooms. "Well, then" said the young and rather obese Indian, "then it will be \$750 for the group."

And where was I while this was going on? I was baiting traps just a few feet away down by the boat. Actually, the older ranger came down to me and asked to see my fishing license, as it was obvious what my intentions were with about thirty crayfish traps all around me. He checked my license, was satisfied and walked back to the fracas about the mushrooms instead.

At this point my daughter-in-law Tracey stepped into the fray. She took the older ranger offside and started explaining to him that, first of all, her "uncle" John from Sweden had no idea about the regulations on the reservation. Then she also explained to the Indian ranger that while plants may be protected according to the regulations, mushrooms are fungi and not plants and can therefore not be included in the ban. Amazingly, the older ranger was impressed by Tracey's reasoning and factual information. He walked back and discussed the situation with the fat ranger in Apache after which the two decided to forget the whole thing. Everybody drew a deep breath. But after that incident, Tracey and Ellen swore never again to set foot on the reservation. (Two years later we were all back at the lake, after all.)

Testing the Crayfish Boil

That evening we had planned to feast on the fifty crayfish I cooked the day before. In the cool night of the 8000 foot elevation, the crayfish had cooled off just right for eating.

John and I looked forward to the feast and soon had our beers, hardtack and herring and some higher percentage liquids ready. Peter, as usual, was a little more hesitant, but he was game for a few of the messy critters. Tracey passed and preferred some more civilized food of her own. The crayfish were just right. There is nothing like slurping fresh crayfish just a few feet from where they were caught. The moon, unfortunately, stayed away, but to the sound of a few lowing cows and some noisy crows, John and I soon had reduced the rest of the crayfish to a heap of red shells.

Last Crayfish Trapping.

One more night left to catch crayfish. Three of the four coolers were already full of crayfish. We set out the traps in a new place around another bend of the camp ground. We had often fished there during previous years with good luck. Again, the weather was calm and only the stars led the way around the point to the other rocky shoreline. As before, we laid out both the old Jackpot traps to be pulled after four hours as well as the new plastic traps and the ones I had made in our Payson garage, the Trappers. Those would stay in for the night as they all had escapee stoppers installed. Again Peter helped me put out the traps, and his electric motor came in handy getting to the beginning of the row we planned to set out. While placing the traps, he resorted to rowing while I lowered the traps, about 20 feet apart and at a depth of between five and ten feet. Some trout fishermen were still shore fishing in one place so we skipped maybe fifty feet to avoid having their lines hook any of the traps. When I first started placing crayfish traps around a lake years ago, I was afraid some people would interfere with them or even steal them. Strangely, I have never lost a trap for that reason. I have lost a few that got stuck or had the line break, but very few considering all the traps I have placed all over Arizona.

Back to the campfire and some chat with John, Peter and Tracey. After a while Ellen came over with granddaughter Taylor, and we had a nice family get-together. Peter had, as usual, prepared a fine campfire, with fire wood from the reservation forest. That is one thing the Indians permit you to collect, dead and down trees. It probably helps them keep the forest clean. Maybe I taught Peter how to start campfires during numerous camping trips in his youth. But most of all he learned to start fires, even in the rain and with soggy firewood, while camping in bear infested Alaska. That's probably also where he developed his intense interest in camping. Even under really bad weather conditions.

One topic that popped up constantly during this last campfire evening was the incident of the mushrooms. For several years I had felt that the Apache Indians really were not interested in enticing white folks to spend their money on their reservation for camping and recreation. Several years back they had started to deny renewals of the cabin lot leases that had been in effect for many years. The non-Indians involved were very upset. Some decided to move their cabins off the reservations, some even had them burned to avoid having them fall into Indian hands. The previous year we got a sense of the seriousness of the Indian attitudes when Ellen's husband Steve was fined \$100 dollars for letting his dog swim in the lake. It was an obvious violation of the regulations, but still. And the prices charged at the Indian store are rather well inflated.

But when the mushroom incident occurred, it became pretty obvious that the Indians

were doing what they could to make it uncomfortable for us. And after they had first decreed that John should pay a fine of \$250, we could not help wonder in whose pockets that money would end up. You were not allowed to pay with a check or credit card. It had to be cash. If you did not have enough cash, they said they would take whatever property of comparable value that you had with you such as car or trailer e.g. The discussion around the campfire seemed to agree on one decision. This would be the last time we would visit the Apache Reservation at Hawley Lake. As I personally had contemplated the same thing for age reasons, I did not mind hearing the consensus of the group. Especially Tracey was adamant that she would never again visit the lake. Peter was not quite as emphatic. (As said earlier, time healed our wounds and we came back again in 2006.)

Sleeping In the Trailer

Sleeping in the trailer was very comfortable. Peter and Tracey with Annika were in the pull out in one end. I was in the other end and John slept on the couch in the middle. The nights were very quiet. This year even the cows kept quiet. No bears visited us that we know of. At least no dogs alarmed us. Ellen and Steve had their dogs with them, so they would surely smell any bear intruder as in years past. The only problem with sleeping in the trailer was that every time someone moved around in their bed, the whole trailer shook for a while. But, after a while even that became old hat and did not wake me up. Although most nights were cloudy we had very little precipitation during the nights. A little pinhole in the vinyl above my head kept me concerned, but mother Nature cooperated, and all went dry and well.

Last Day

Dawn at Hawley is beautiful. This last morning was still slightly overcast, but the rising sun shone through the clouds and performed a gorgeous spectacle of red and orange streaks across the lake. Many of my photographs testify to this event. The first traps to be pulled were the old net traps that don't have escape stoppers. John was not awake yet, so I took off on my own for the ten traps around the point. To pull traps alone is a little trickier than when you have a helper. Now you have to both navigate up to the trap as well as try to reach the float and then pull the trap up. Sometimes the boat just did not want to co-operate. When you reached out for the float, the boat went the other way and left the float out of reach. After I had pulled the old traps, John joined me pulling the rest of the traps around the bend. The harvest was not bad, but I was disappointed that we did not have a bonanza this time. At the time I thought maybe someone else had been there before us. Later I began to realize that maybe the bait in the traps was getting sour and did no longer attract the crayfish as well. (I am now convinced that was the problem.)

Breaking Camp

As soon as traps were emptied, the last cooler filled and all tiny crayfish, what we called piss-ants, were discarded, we started breaking camp. Peter and Tracey took care of their trailer, John and I packed my truck with crayfish coolers and all the other paraphernalia. Before doing that, I took all coolers to the spring water faucet in the camp and thoroughly rinsed all the crayfish to make them better ready for the long haul home to Payson. On the way we stopped at the Hondah Casino and purchased four bags of crushed ice to keep

the crayfish cool during the trip. The trip went well. This time Peter and I could not keep radio contacts as my radio fuse had blown with no backup. We had no trouble, though, and after three hours we turned into 1300 Random Way to surprise wife Joyce.

Cooking the Catch

The rest of the day was a frenzy of cooking crayfish. Kettle after kettle on the stove hissed while each time a 100 crayfish turned red in the salty water enhanced by one can of beer and a fistful of dill. John selected the biggest crayfish from the supply we had dumped in the apartment bathtub, and at the end of the day we had cooked 800 Hawley Lake crayfish. Six hundred of those eventually became frozen for, as I call it, preserving the Swedish heritage in Payson. The rest were set aside for the Saturday crayfish party. Counting all the crayfish we caught this year the tally stopped at just over 1400 crayfish. For me that was a new record.

The Crayfish Party

And what a party that was! We were twelve at the table and we gorged ourselves on 150 crayfish not to mention the akvavit, herrings - some of which John brought from Sweden - toasted bread and numerous cans of beer. The prepared song sheet with menu and drinking ditties helped us more or less to stay on tune while singing old Swedish songs. The hardtack Wasa bread crunched, the crayfish shells cracked and the glasses tinkled as we all decided this was one heck of a grand finale to the Hawley Lake crayfish era.

The End

PS. Yes, time healed our hurt feelings at the lake. The following year we went to Knoll Lake on the Mogollon Rim for our annual get-together. The camping was fine there, but the crayfishing was not up to par with Hawley. In addition, at Knoll Lake you can not camp down by the lake, so we all missed the lovely atmosphere a lake can add to a camping event. Also, although lots of crayfish into the lake, they were mostly much smaller than I had hoped for.

So, after a while we started talking about going back to Hawley. And that's the way it went. In August of 2006, we were all back enjoying the pristine waters of Hawley. This time we did not pick anything not allowed.

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