

Crayfish Tales

by

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#16

Autumn Catch at Black Canyon Lake

The windy lake still delivers

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With a few hundred crayfish in the freezer it was not my intention to catch any more crayfish this year. Somehow, though, while Paul Edwards and I stood weighing up a pound of crayfish bait, we unexpectedly decided to visit Black Canyon Lake one more time for a test of his traps, my trap modifications as well as some trout fishing thrown in.

November is the beginning of the cold season, so no surprise when cold winds at the lake forced us to don warm jackets. Just as we started to launch the boat we noticed a small row boat slowly moving northward toward the dam area of the lake. In the boat we saw clearly some crayfish traps. As I seldom meet other people interested in crayfish, I wanted to make contact with this fellow later on and exchange crayfish catching secrets.

We loaded the boat with ten of my traps and four of Paul's. After a while all traps were baited with fresh whiting and we took off in an increasingly pesky wind from the south. Going down to the crayfish laden rocky shore down by the dam proved easy with hardly any rowing necessary. But how would we get back to the launch area later on in this wind?

Almost down to the dam we saw the fellow with the traps in a rowboat and rowed over to talk. The closer we came the more something seemed familiar. As we came within talking distance I realized it was my neighbor Steve in his row boat. But he had a problem. He had just broken an oar lock on his boat and had great trouble fighting the wind. He had just set out four of his traps with big orange floats bobbing in the waves. As we couldn't do much to help him with his oar lock problem, we parted company and continued down to the north shore west of the dam. On the way we placed two of Paul's traps east of the dam and rowed over to the west side where the rocky shoreline promises good refuge for crayfish and where I had previously caught lots of large crayfish.

First we placed two more of Paul's traps and then six of my Jackpots and then the four Trappers I was testing using tension strings instead of bungee cords for the entrance funnels. The wind was already giving me trouble shoving the boat closer to the shore than I wanted for placing traps. Now I wished I had an electric motor for the boat. But we persevered and soon all traps were placed.

By now it was time for lunch so we rowed over to the lee side of the lake for both some sandwiches and trout fishing. Paul cast out with some of his home made lures while still sitting in the boat and immediately his treble hook had a fish on that he brought up to the boat before it tore loose. A second cast and a second connect with a trout, maybe the same one. But this one also tore loose and Paul was disappointed. In the meantime I rigged up a #8 snelled hook with a worm and a bobber and started watching for bobber action while I ate my sandwich and drank a beer.

Every now and then I had some action on the line and finally I landed a little trout. Paul was still skunked. After about two hours of fishing, Paul 0, Trapper Arne 4. Strange, as apparently Paul had some very attractive lures but he did not manage to land anything. Anyway, we enjoyed the fresh air, spotted a bald eagle and an osprey, noticed that the overcast skies were clearing but that the winds were as pesky as ever with gusts that threatened my balance on occasion. We watched a Game and Fish Dept. boat checking something down by the dam. Maybe today I would finally get a chance to show them my life time Pioneer Fishing License that I was kind of proud of.

Finally, after the traps had been in the lake for about three hours, we decided to pull them and head for home. That proved to be easier said than done. Not that the pulling of the traps was hard work, keeping the boat from floundering onto the rocky north shore line was. The southerly but cold winds were beating on the north shore and made it very difficult to maneuver the boat. However, we managed to pull up all my traps and there were plenty of crayfish in them to my delight.

Not so with Paul's traps. The first two of his had absolutely nothing in them. This in spite of plenty of bait, both anchovies and manufactured bait. But Paul had equipped his traps with a strange innovation of a 2" PVC pipe going from one entry funnel to the other with an oblong hole in the middle of the pipe for the expected catch to fall down into the trap with little chance of escape. He was obviously disappointed having just helped pull up my traps with plenty of crays inside.

After pulling all traps but two of Paul's, we headed back to roughly where we had met Steve before. But now the wind was directly against us, and my rowing made very slow progress. I kept watching the trees on my right for any progress and was dismayed at how little there was of it. There were moments when rowing made no progress, and I could see on the side trees that we were actually going backwards, back toward the dam.

Finally I gave up and rowed for the shore. I had an idea that it might be easier to PULL the boat with its bow rope from the shore. So with Paul still in the boat at the oars, I started climbing over and between the boulders and rocks along the shore line, and soon was able to pull the boat slowly toward the goal, his last two traps and the launching area at the lake's south end.

By this time the winds had increased to make small white caps on the waves. Finally spotting the little float from one of Paul's traps, he tried to row out the twenty or so feet to grab it. The wind instead grabbed the boat and he couldn't reach the float. I had to pull him further into the wind along the shore and then let the boat float with the wind until he reached his trap. He finally pulled it up but with the measly catch of only two crayfish. This trap also had a PVC pipe between the entry funnels.

The rocky shoreline finally did a nasty trick on me. One boulder wobbled under my foot. Trying quickly to recover my balance, my other foot stepped on another loose rock, and down I went between a couple of sharp rocks. My hip hit a boulder but luck must have been with me because my head fell on soft sand between two large rocks. My hip hurt but I was otherwise in one piece. Back to pulling the boat.

The other trap we never found. We scoured the choppy lake surface but saw none of the little float. We finally gave up and by this time the Game and Fish Dept boat came by and offered us a tow back to the launch area. We accepted gladly, especially I who by this time was both sweaty and tired of pulling the boat along the shore.

Back at the launch we transferred all the boat paraphernalia, traps, fishing rods

and buckets over to the truck and soon we had the boat back on its trailer. Somewhat behind schedule for returning, we said goodbye to Black Canyon Lake, thanked our rescuers and were off to civilization again.

The hour long trek back to Payson became one of the most stressful trips in my driving career. The sun was about to set in the west and all the time I had blinding interference of the sun beams hitting my cataract infested eyes, making it hard to see what was ahead. On occasion the road was in direct line of the setting sun, and I had to try to see the painted lines of the road between painfully bright, red and amber streams of bright sun light. I thanked the road technicians for painting white lines at the outer edges of the road to give me some guidance while we hastened down from the Mogollon Rim toward Payson.

We made it after all, and were only half an hour late for dinner. Paul gathered his stuff and I insisted that he take some of the crayfish catch as a salve on his piscatory wounds and we parted company.

The next day I counted the catch. I brought home about 128 crayfish. I gave Paul 20 and the rest were 66 females and 42 males. The females were almost purged and ready to cook. The live males I would use for a photo session later on. My four fish turned out to include one baby bass which I also cleaned for dinner. (I should not have bothered with the bass. It had more bones than the meat was worth.)

I slept uninterrupted that night and woke up refreshed although with some sore spots to remind me of the boulders on the rocky shoreline. Time heals most wounds and all will soon be a pleasant memory.

The End