

Crayfish Tales
by
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BACK TO HAWLEY LAKE
CRAYFISH CAPER 2002
AN ARIZONA CRAYFISH OUTING

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When August rolls around, Swedes start thinking of crayfish. The images of colored lights on a moonlit night, frosty schnapps glasses and heaping plates with red shelled crayfish dance in our heads. Crayfish eating and catching is part of our genetic make-up. My father for many years used to catch 20,000 each year. I have not reached that annual amount, yet, but since I started catching these delectable shellfish here in Arizona, I am working on it. My record catch during a three or four day outing has long stood at 1200. When son Peter and I took off for Hawley Lake in August, I was tempted to try to break that record.

So with a boat on top and with the back of the car filled with coolers and other camping gear, we took off on schedule for the three hour trip up the mountain roads. As the road snakes up from 5000 to 7000 feet you enter the largest stand of US ponderosa pines. Unfortunately, many of these stately trees turned to ashes during the enormous wild fire that swept the area the summer of 2002.

Swedes are impressed by this altitude of 7000 feet as it is higher than Sweden's highest mountain, Kebnekajse, which is only 6333 feet high.

The old Suburban slowed to a crawl as she pulled the boat, a trailer, lots of camping gear and uphill to boot. Finally she topped the hill and we could both draw a breath of relief. We began looking for signs of the wildfire that had reached and almost overwhelmed a retirement community with only feet to spare. As we came to Heber and especially Overgaard, we could see not only blackened pines on both sides of the road but also here and there the sad ruins of a cabin or summer homes. Years will be needed to restore greens in these areas.

Soon we arrived at Hawley Lake on schedule and in time for lunch. Daughter Ellen with family were already there, and before long, Peter had the trailer in exactly the same spot as the year before. All around us were

the blue waters of the beautiful lake under a cumulus-dotted sky.

Few places are as pristinely beautiful as Hawley Lake at 8000 feet on the Apache Indian Reservation. Tall pines and spruces edge the lake and here and there you see aspens fluttering in the breeze. Cows lowing in the meadow is part of the scene, and a slight, cool breeze keeps you feeling like a million dollars. No wonder we have been coming up here for as long as thirty years. After my customary nap after a sandwich lunch, it was time to consider the main purpose of the trip, crayfish. During all of these thirty years at Hawley Lake we have always found crayfish. Would this year be different? Some years, of course, have been slower than others, and successes have been mixed with disappointments. The day we went to a new spot across the lake and pulled up a trap with over 40 crayfish is what I dream about. Honestly! Then last year, we went across again after trying out the nearby shores, and we found only meager catches.

So each year, I approach the moment of pulling the first traps with a great deal of apprehension. But over the years I have developed a certain expertise in catching crayfish, especially at this lake. I don't simply leave the traps out for the whole night. Experience tells me that I can expect a bigger catch if I leave the traps out for three to four hours before emptying them. The second key to success is to have plenty of fresh bait. There is no doubt that after all the bait has been eaten the crayfish begin to look for a way out of the trap. And they find it sooner or later. As a result, I have lately begun to bait the traps with generous portions of chicken pieces, such as wings or legs. Chicken lasts longer.

My technique this year at Hawley was the two-punch method, first bait with plenty of bait. Then, after four hours in the lake, empty the traps and sink the traps again and leave them until sunrise. This second catch is not as big, but that's better than a poke in the eye, as a pal used to say. So, if the evening trap has about thirty crayfish in it, the morning trap may have only ten to add to the coolers. Nothing to sneeze at in my book.

With good catches my three coolers were filling fast. I plan on about two or three hundred in each styrofoam cooler for a possible total of maybe nine hundred. And that's more than I really need to satisfy my cravings for crayfish during the coming winter.

Hawley Lake and its crayfish population is fantastic. Already the first evening, after four hours in the water, the twelve traps were so full of crayfish that the first of two six gallon buckets soon filled up in the boat. Before we had emptied all twelve traps, the two containers were

overflowing. But the shoreline was still teeming with crayfish. Of course I was pleased, and so was Peter although he really doesn't eat them except to please me if I serve them. But I believe he sincerely likes catching them and joins me in my enthusiasm over a big catch. Pulling up traps in the middle of the night on a moonless night, is mystical. Sometimes misty veils move around the boat, and with only the flashlights to guide us and the black outlines of tall pines on the shore highlighted by stars, you are in a world your senses find hard to grasp. But Peter and I love it. This year the weather was perfect. No wind, no rain. All of our three main evening excursions before bed time were totally successful, and we both slept well in the cool of his unheated tent trailer. My sleeping bag kept me cozy and only an occasional mooing of a reservation cow reminded us of where we were.

Three evenings, three mornings, six emptying of traps. Result: 1173 large crayfish. Now, how would I know that? Did I really count them all? Yes, I did, but not until I was in the process of cooking them. Sure, we cooked about a hundred at the camp for our Tuesday night crayfish bash, but the rest were counted at home pot by pot with the predetermined mixture of water, salt, dill and one beer. My stock pots hold those ingredients plus one hundred crayfish in each batch. Six of those batches and we were set for both ample supplies for me during the winter as well as a hundred for our Swedish friends coming up to help us celebrate this crustaceous rite of the crayfish.

Peter and I arrived Sunday noon at the lake, and early Wednesday morning we returned home after having emptied the last string of traps. The trip down to Payson went a little faster than going up, and we were happy to see wife Joyce waving us in as we arrived with the catch. Peter unhooked his tent trailer before returning to Phoenix, I put the 1000+ catch in the bath tub and only the last phase of the crayfish caper was left, cooking the critters.

Using the simple Swedish recipe, the catch soon showed off their red shells before going into the freezer to keep me in crayfish until the next season rolled around. Learn more about crayfish and traps and how to catch them by visiting my web page at WWW.TrapperArne.com

The end

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