

Crayfish Tales
by
Trapper Arne

WHEN FISH DON'T BITE
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After a couple of hours with not a fish in our fish basket, I was ready to throw in the towel. The sun was sinking toward the west and my wife at the camp site would soon be ready to start our dinner. A fish dinner. Little did she know that Peter and I had nothing in the fish basket to bring home.

No matter how skillfully you present a lure or bait, and regardless of how well you position yourself on a lake or a stream, there come moments when fish just don't bite. You hate to admit it, but some days you get thoroughly skunked. It happens to all of us sooner or later. Today it happened to me.

So what do you do when fish don't bite? Do you just tough it out, try another lure, some other bait or go to another spot? Or do you check with other fishermen to see if they have the same lousy luck as you do? And if they also draw blanks, how long do you continue to torture yourself before you give up?

Some years ago I found out what you can do when fish don't bite. My wife and I with son and daughter packed a tent into our Suburban truck and headed for the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. Way up in the north-eastern corner of the state is a lake, Wheatfields Lake, with lots of large trout. On the way we passed through Window Rock on the reservation and 44 miles further north we found this pearl of a lake at 7,300 foot elevation surrounded with a glorious stand of ponderosa pines.

After finding a camp site in the campground near the lake, we, that is our son Peter and I, grabbed our fishing poles and went down to the shore of the lake. Wheatfields Lake is a large artificial lake, as so many lakes in Arizona are, and it is well known for its supply of fat rainbow trout.

We found a good spot on the shore joining a few other optimistic fishermen, some of them locals of the Navajo tribe. In the east rose the Chuska Mountains. An area with two peaks was quickly named Mount Two-Tit

by Peter. We had not brought our little rowboat so we sat down on the gravelly shore and cast out our lines baited with worms and waited for action.

As a father I was always concerned about how our children enjoyed vacations we took. I was concerned about how Peter would take to fishing. No matter how I wished and no matter how wiggly the worms and how well they were presented, we soon realized that this was not our day.

As an anxious father I wanted desperately that Peter would have fun fishing. But no fish found our worms to their liking. I was hoping for some action, or Peter would soon become tired and lose interest. No wonder, he was only about ten years old at the time. Patience is not one of the traits he had inherited from me, and soon his attention to fishing was dwindling.

So I started looking around the shore line in search of something to improve the fishing situation. That's when I noticed that here and there were dried shells from crayfish lying on the beach. Crayfish? Crayfish shells? Hmm. That must mean that someone caught some crayfish and left the shells on the beach. And crayfish shells on the beach must mean that there are crayfish in the lake.

"Hey, Dad! There's a crawdad in the water coming toward you" shouted Peter. I sat up and started scouring the water. Standing up for a better perspective, I could see the crayfish. It was crawling in my direction toward the shore and it was a big one. Then another one came not far behind the first one. And a third. Several were coming from all sides up toward the shore line. The afternoon was getting toward dinner time. Maybe this was their time for prowling for their dinner, whatever they could find.

It did not take me long to realize, that here was a wonderful chance to change a dismal trout fishing expedition into something of a success. If I only could catch some of these critters that taunted me with their presence. At this time Peter had lost interest in tending his pole and had started throwing pebbles into the lake for a better pastime. It struck me right away that this was an opportunity to rekindle his interest in fishing, even if the species of catch would be a different kind.

But how to catch the crayfish? At once I started thinking of methods I had used as a youngster while tending timber logs on a river in Sweden. But then I had crayfish traps and bait to catch the critter. What did I have now? Nothing.

Well, now. Let's see. My brain started working overtime. This lake had

crayfish that I loved, and here I was with nothing to catch them with. I started looking around me. There was the tackle box, the fishing pole and the empty lunch pail. But wait, there was something else. I had brought the fish basket. That's the contraption made out of collapsible metal mesh where you put all the fish you catch. Our fish basket couldn't be more empty. But, hey, it had an opening with a spring loaded lid. Hmm. Couldn't that be modified somewhat. Of course it could.

Soon I had found a twig on the shore that was just right for propping open the spring loaded lid. And then a larger branch to go from the handle of the basket down through the inside to the bottom. That held the whole basket open. By golly, with some imagination it began to look like a crayfish trap. But wait, it needed some bait.

As we had caught no fish, I had no fish heads or tails to use as bait. But the Indians down the beach had caught some. Maybe they had a head or a fish tail or two to let me use as bait. I was in luck. They gladly cut off and donated a couple of fish heads and tails to us. Fastened under the spring of the basket lid, I was in business catching crayfish with the perfect crayfish bait.

Now the fish-basket-made-into-a-crayfish-trap had bait and I was ready to start catching my favorite food. The fish basket already had a long string attached to it, and from a boulder a bit out in the lake, I threw the contraption out as far as the string would let it go. At this point Peter had stopped throwing stones and had caught some of my enthusiasm, and was now eager to see if we could catch any of these funny little crawling creatures.

We sat down again to wait, put new worms on the fishing hooks and tried to entice some of those elusive trout to our worms. We waited about an hour or more but had no more luck than before. But the impromptu crayfish trap-contraption was lying out there in the crayfish teeming lake and we both could hardly contain ourselves to find out if we had caught any crayfish or not.

We had! We had indeed caught crayfish. When I briskly pulled up the trap, making sure I did not lose any in the process, I could see that there were crayfish in it. As it came up to the shore I found that there were lots of crayfish in it. I was ecstatic with joy and pride, and even Peter caught some of my excitement. There were no less than 15 crayfish in the trap and some were large compared to those I had seen and caught in the Phoenix canals. I could barely contain myself, and soon we had the catch safely in our lunch box where I intended to make them into a tasty dinner.

Before returning to my wife and daughter at the camp site, I rebaited the improvised crayfish trap and threw it out for the rest of the evening. After all, crayfish are more active in the dark, so I gambled on catching even more in the dark of the evening during a couple of hours.

To make a long story a bit shorter, yes, we caught quite a few more crayfish that evening, and we soon forgot our irritation at not catching any rainbow trout. That evening I cooked over 50 crayfish on the camp stove and soon enjoyed an unexpected camp dinner of freshly cooked crayfish.

That was the first time I resorted to catching crayfish when fish wouldn't bite. But it was not the last. Take Hawley Lake, for instance, on the Apache Reservation in Arizona. When we first went there, it was on recommendation from a trout fisherman in my office. Describing the sight of trout rising to the surface in the evenings, I soon made a beeline for this lake and its many trout.

But even in this lake, there were days when no trout rose to my offered lure. Not even my trolled cowbells, usually so effective, would always lure some trout to fill my stringer. But now Peter and I were prepared. We had found, by scouring the beach, that there were crayfish in this lake also. So when the fish would not cooperate, we went after the crayfish. And Hawley Lake has myriads of crayfish, much to some fishermen's irritation. To me they became what saved another fishing excursion.

From then on I would never get skunked again. If the fish don't cooperate, I'll go for the crayfish. Soon I even went up to some of these lakes just to catch crayfish, and there were many times that I came home from a vacation trip with only a couple of trout but over a 1000 crayfish in my coolers.

As years went by, I became known as the crayfish trapper, Trapper Arne, also known for the crayfish traps I learned to make. I learned the HTML web command language to construct web sites. Now everybody on the Internet can learn much of what I have discovered about crayfish catching by visiting my web site that I call www.TrapperArne.com.

The end

Arne P. Koch
1300 Random Way
Payson, AZ 85541
www.TrapperArne.com

