



The CRAYFISH TALE

Catching Hawley Crayfish

In the August newsletter I wrote about my preparations for the annual Hawley Lake campout. Would you like to know how I did?

In brief, it was a success. I brought home 600 crayfish that now are fighting for space in our two freezers. August is not only my crayfish month but also my wife's garden harvest month. A certain amount of conflict occurred, but we finally reached a peaceful settlement among the frozen containers. I'll eat frozen crayfish on Labor Day.

The drive up to my favorite crayfish lake takes about three hours. Starting at an elevation of 5000 in Payson, the route takes me up to the 7000 foot heights of the Mogollon Rim, a gorgeous view of Zane Grey's "Pleasant Valley War" area, through stately Ponderosa pine trees and then through Show Low, the town named after a card game.

During summer, the area between Show Low and Hawley is filled with vacationers from the hot Phoenix Valley, and just before you reach the turnoff to the lake, I stopped by the colossal Indian casino at Hondah. Strangely, gasoline up on the Apache Reservation was cheaper than in Payson which is lower than Phoenix.

Then a last climb up to 8000 foot elevation where the man made lake is situated among aspens and pines and herds of lowing cows. In early August, Arizona was still enjoying (?) a strong monsoon season, and as I saw the first glimpses of the lake, rain started falling. Nothing unusual about rain at Hawley. Last year's campout experienced a whole day of non stop rain. This year the weather was relatively benevolent.

Ahead of me in my little old Toyota motor home drove son Peter with family, visiting friend and two large dogs. They had found a perfect camp site right down by the water's edge, with a view over the lake of the Apaches that took your breath away.

Eager to investigate the site and the lake shore, Annika, my granddaughter and her friend dashed out toward the lake. Not being aware that free range cattle roam the camp grounds, Annika's friend, Andrea, failed to notice an ample supply of cow deposits, and before you could warn her of its messy consistency, she had not only stepped in it but also skidded to a complete prat-fall disaster.

While Peter was busy unraveling his over-populated truck, camping trailer behind and a boat on top, I baited a couple of Trapper crayfish traps with Tilapia fish from Wal-Mart, and walked down to the lake. I chose an area with an outcropping of rocks, and reverting back to my old time methods of sinking traps in a lake, I threw them in from the shore. This is not recommended. Throwing them in may be alright, but pulling up traps from the shore is wrought with problems in a lake filled with junk, rocks and what-nots. But the boat was still on top of Peter's truck, and I was as usual anxious to make sure the lake still had its ample supply of crayfish to offer.

It did. After only an hour, I pulled the traps, gingerly, knowing how easily they get caught on the bottom when pulled in from the shore, and to my satisfaction I found each with about a half dozen crayfish. The lake was still up to old time's habits. Now serious crayfish catching could begin.

Among the crayfish traps I had brought, taking up much of the space of my little motor home, were three special traps that I wanted to test. Two of them were equipped with special escape stoppers consisting of 'plastic fingers' from quick-ties. They were arranged so that they allow crayfish to enter the trap, but would keep them from exiting. Escape stoppers, contrary to their name, only make it difficult for the crayfish to leave a trap. Smart crays probably find their way out after all bait is gone.

Two of my traps had these 'fingers' installed while another trap had a plastic collar placed just inside the funnel entry so that the crayfish, trying to get out of the trap, would not find any 'grip' on the smooth surface of the collar. I had put great expectations on this later contraption, hoping for a full trap indicating no escaping.

After a pleasant dinner of chili (but no carne) in the company of Peter's family and dogs, I prepared the traps with ample amounts of Tilapia bait and we set off. Peter's boat, about eleven feet long and equipped with an electric trolling motor, quickly brought us to the part of the shore that looked rocky and promising for harboring crayfish. I had brought my home-made trot line cranker – made from a plastic milk carton crate – and soon I was letting out the 200 foot long trot line with loops every twenty feet for hooking on traps. Among the Trapper and Trappy crayfish traps were the two test traps with quick-tie fingers and the one with slippery plastic collars. If successful, I fantasized, they might revolutionize the crayfish catching industry.

As the day was nearing sunset, I intended to leave traps out for the night. During an all night session, you have to be sure the escape stopper really keeps the crays inside the trap. Normally, after a few hours, and with many crayfish in the trap, the bait will soon be eaten. And after the bait is gone, any crayfish with some intelligence will start looking for the exit. Many traps, according to a Finnish survey, lose as much as 70% of the initial catch during an overnight session if they have no escape stopper. When using such a trap many years ago, I used to maximize my overnight catch by emptying traps every four hours; before the smart ones decided to vamoose. I caught lots of crayfish that way; but few winks.

After placing the traps we headed home in deepening dark. Soon stars began to appear and we used the campsite Coleman lantern as a homing light and headed for camp and a lively camp fire. Kids enjoyed marshmallows and grown ups had a beer or a glass of white wine while relaxing in front of the crackling fire. Soon we all were ready for bed.

Mornings at Hawley Lake are magic. If you get up before sunrise, you will see heavy mists stretching in long bands over the water. A sign of 100% humidity. A mother duck with her little ones paddles away on the mirror-like surface. Toward the east, the light gets redder and soon there is the first blip of the sun rising over the distant mountain ridge.

This morning I was first one up. No wonder, I was in bed long before ten, and only a distant lowing cow interrupted my sleep. After a quick breakfast on Granola cereal, I quietly walked down toward the beached boat. All seats were covered with heavy dew, so my rain proof plastic waders kept my rear dry as I prepared to shove off. I had been quiet. Not a soul was stirring. Not even the Doberman and the Black Lab in their own side tent made a noise.

A few pulls on the oars and I was on the way to where we had placed the trot line the night before. At one end of the line I had placed an inconspicuous little float that indicated the beginning of the line. I always make sure the float is hard to see for anyone but me, just in case we had nosy neighbors at other camps.

If you really want to be unobtrusive with your trot line, you can use a grapple hook to find the trot line between traps. The line is made from floating polypropylene, so dragging a grapple hook across where you think you placed your traps will quickly locate the line and bring it up for you.

The first trap up was a big Jumbo, and it was filled with over 40 crayfish. Nothing to write home about, but a substantial catch nonetheless. The next trap was one of the test traps with escape fingers. It was fairly well filled with maybe 25 crays, mostly keepers. This was enough crayfish to tell me that at least the 'fingers' did not prevent the crays from entering. But how well did they keep the crays from escaping the trap? As the next trap without escape 'fingers' came up with about the same number of crayfish in it, how would I know whether the test trap really worked? In both traps and all the following traps, all the bait was gone. According to my theory, the crays should have started looking for the exit, and the smart ones should have made it out. But with or without escape 'fingers', the traps had about the same number of crays. So what had I proved? Obviously nothing.

To really prove anything you would have to place maybe a hundred traps in the lake and then statistically average how much each trap had caught with and without stoppers to come up with a valid conclusion.

Another confusing find was that identical traps along the trot line sometimes had widely different amount of crayfish in them. Nothing new here. Obviously, there are areas in a lake that harbors many crayfish and some where there are few. This simple fact makes it impossible to render an efficiency verdict on a trap based on being placed just a couple of times in a lake. And how do you find crayfish hot spots from the surface of the water. You don't. Unless you have some sort of a crayfish finder. And that may be a far fetched hope as most crayfish don't swim around like fish, but rather hide between rocks or other junk that give them security from predators.

But the test trap with the slippery plates inside the entry funnel did not work out well at all. It had decidedly fewer crayfish in it, and I was very surprised and disappointed. Did the plates scare them? As the plates were rather large and glaringly white, maybe the crayfish were scared off by the color? Should I paint them black, maybe?

I am still theorizing about the whys and wherefores of the amount of crayfish I pulled up in each trap. The fact remains, though, that I averaged about 20 per trap, so the end result was not altogether bad. I hauled up over 200 crayfish in ten traps. Enough for a big crayfish feast the following evening.

There were times in the past when pulling up traps, that we also rebaited them and set them out again. This proved difficult and cumbersome especially if we pulled traps at night or when the weather was inclement. So what I finally ended up doing was to simply pull the traps and let them accumulate in the boat until we got back to camp. That makes the pulling procedure quicker and easier, and when back to shore, I can in an orderly fashion check the traps and their individual production as I empty them into five gallon containers.

During the day I cooked 50 large crayfish. Actually, most of the catch consisted of large keeper crayfish – ten to twelve to the pound - and soon the inside of the motor home filled with the lovely aroma of crayfish cooking in dill,

the Swedish way. That evening we got together outside Peter's trailer enjoying the fruit of our labors, freshly caught and cooked crayfish in the company of family and friend and dogs. The camp fire added atmosphere to the setting and we all enjoyed the crays and camaraderie; especially old man Trapper Arne.

Trapper Arne