



## Don't Ridicule Natural Baits when You're out after Black Bass

*This report tells you which ones are good, and how to use them*

By: Ramon J. Ross

Let no one belittle the skill and finesse required to be an accomplished natural-bait fisherman. This is just as much of an art as fly fishing, and skilled manipulators are just about as scarce. After all, it isn't the use of flies and other artificial bait that makes the true angler, but the spirit of sportsmanship. Here are some suggestions on the use of various natural baits in fishing for black bass:

***Earthworms:*** This most common of natural baits is sometimes very effective in fishing for both largemouth and smallmouth black bass. On the whole I have found that two or more large worms or night crawlers to a hook are more effective than a single worm, though the latter may produce best in low and very clear water when the fish are particularly wary. At such times the use of a small hook can also be of advantage.

To hook bass when fishing with worms, and at the same time not let them swallow the hook, I'd advise the use of a fairly large hook with two worms, say one with at least a 7/16-in. gap and even more if the bait covers the barb. Then, when a fish takes hold, don't wait too long before striking or the bass will swallow the bait.

### Use of the Covered Hook

While in most fishing it is probably best to have the point and barb of the hook exposed, there are times when you can fool the bass better with a single worm on a fine-wire #2 or #4 hook and so arranged that the entire bend, including point and barb and most of the shank, is covered. This stunt is also effective when you want to fish among weeds or on a rough bottom. Always make sure that the hook is sharp. The finer it is, the more easily it penetrates the worm.

You need a bobber or float for worm fishing in lakes and other still waters that have weedy and snaggy bottoms. Place the float so that the bait drops to within a few inches of the tops of the weeds, rocks, or brush. Naturally, you have to change the position of the bobber when you move to a new spot where the depth is different. I've seen folks fishing 3 ft. deep when they ought to be down 6 ft., and others with the bait hidden on the bottom while the float bobbed aimlessly on the surface. Of course, they weren't getting any fish.

In bobber shapes and sizes my own preference is for the long, thin types, because they offer least resistance to the fish. Wary fish are sometimes suspicious of the bobber pull. At times I have found the delicate quill floats to be best in fishing shallow, clear water.

When the bottom is smooth enough, however, it is best to fish the worm without a bobber. Cast it as far as you can and let it sink to the bottom. Then retrieve very slowly, a few inches at a time and without jerking. When this is done right, you can work over a surprisingly rough bottom without getting snagged.

In my opinion you shouldn't use a sinker unless it is absolutely necessary. The natural sinking of the bait is much more effective than the rapid descent caused by a weight. However, when air or water currents make it impossible to fish the bait

on or near the bottom without it, a sinker of proper weight should be brought into play.

***Hellgrammites:*** The large aquatic larva of *Corydalis cornuta*, the hellgrammite fly, is an exceptionally good bait in rocky streams and rocky-bottomed, clear-water lakes. It is also called dobson and by many other names, some in keeping with its rather fearsome appearance.

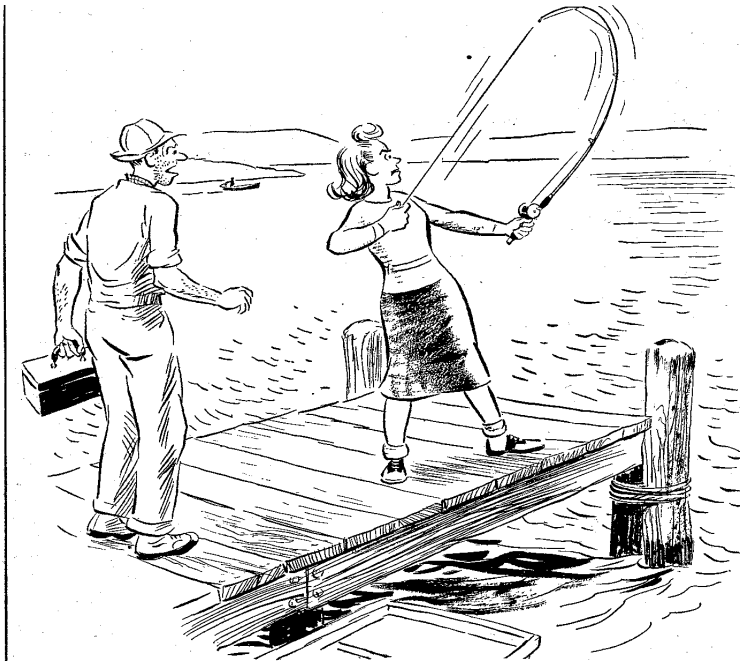
I consider the hellgrammite primarily smallmouth bait. I've tried it considerably on largemouths, but these fish were decidedly apathetic toward it except in a few places where the water conditions resembled those of smallmouth habitat.

### **A Handy Trick to Know**

The simplest and probably the best way to hook these creatures is through the collar. Be careful not to puncture the flesh under the shell-like cap, or you will shorten the life of the bait. Before fishing it, pinch the very end of the tail sharply with the fingernails. This cripples the tail and keeps the bait from catching hold of anything it happens to touch, but doesn't harm it in any other way. If you have never tried this little trick, you have a surprise coming.

It is usually best to fish the hellgrammite without either a sinker or a float. If there is little or no current, you must raise the rod tip frequently to keep the bait from getting a firm grasp on the bottom. If the current is fast, you can get a natural drift without a sinker by either of these methods:

First, having selected the water to be fished, cast the larva upstream into a current tongue that will carry it to the desired spot. If you figure it right, the bait will then drift and sink on a slack line in a most natural manner. Watch the line carefully while the drift is in progress; if it gives a slight twitch or starts to drag, cautiously take in the slack. Often it will be a strike.



Second, in some currents you can let the water pull the bait downstream for 30 ft. or more. Then, with the larva splashing on top; give the rod a sharp upward movement, causing the bait to jump into the air and come back toward you. Thus you get slack and a short, natural drift which you can lengthen by having more line stripped off the reel and shooting it through the guides by a waving motion of the

rod. With practice you can get great results with these two methods or a combination of them. Only when you can't get the desired depth this way should you resort to the use of a sinker.

### **If the Nippers Bother You**

Some fishermen don't like the nippers of the hellgrammite. These have never bothered me, but for anglers who object to them I'd suggest making a finger guard. I've even seen a commercial product for that purpose.

**Lampreys:** In the small sizes these queer-looking eel-like creatures make a most attractive bait, often better than any other natural one. They live well on the hook, and it is one bait that will often serve to catch several bass.

Just below that part of the body which might be called the head are a number of markings like portholes. The hook slides easily into these holes, going in one side and coming out the other, yet they are small enough that the barb of the hook keeps the bait from being thrown or pulled off. The hook does not harm the lamprey in

any way. It is the only natural bait I know that is tailor-made for the angler's hook. Fish this bait as you would worms or hellgrammites.

**Crawfish:** Found in many bass waters, these crustaceans also make good natural bait. The most effective are the shedders, those that have recently shed their shells. When they are found in this state, the hardening of the new shell can be retarded for a day or so by putting them in a refrigerator or in cold water. The shedder is inclined to hide under stones, weeds, and other objects, and can be recognized by its light color.

I've never found the largemouth to be as enthusiastic about this bait as the smallmouth, which forages for crawfish even in extremely shallow water and grubs for them among the rocks, actually overturning small stones.

The proper hooking of a crawfish presents something of a problem. Probably the best place is through one of the tail segments. However, far better than hooking is to solder two fine copper wires to a long-shank hook 2 1/2 or 3 in. long, one forward and one aft, and each wire having two loose ends. Then, with the hook gap pointed down, place the crawfish on top of the shank and twist the wires around it firmly enough to hold it and yet not so tightly that it will cut the bait. Also, you can tie the crawfish on the hook with thread, but you have to be a patient person to do it.

**Frogs:** Since I can't use this bait without feeling that I am being very cruel, I haven't had much experience with it, although these amphibians make the most effective of natural baits. A live frog may often be used successfully by hooking through one front paw and casting to a likely place, where it is allowed to swim around at will. This is a more humane method than hooking through the -lips and then jerking the back. Sometimes, however, a frog produces best when dragged or jerked through heavy weed growth. In such cases I believe a freshly killed frog will

bring just about as good results as a live one. Incidentally, there are pork chunks made in imitation of frogs, which I have found very effective.

***Minnows:*** These, of course, are a natural food for the game fish most sought by anglers. There are many kinds, and while all are acceptable to the fish, the fishermen have very strong preferences.

### **Shiners Don't Last on the Hook**

Many anglers favor the bright-scaled minnows commonly called shiners. These are well liked by bass, but they die quickly on the hook or in the bait container. I have found that while they do get more strikes, in some waters, than the less glamorous species, this advantage is more than offset by the casualty rate! There are other minnows attractive enough to do a good job, which are more practical to carry and keep, and remain active on the hook.

One such minnow is what I have always known as the salt-water killie, round in brackish-water meadows along the eastern and southern coasts. It is dull-looking but very tough, even staying alive for considerable time out of water if kept in wet grass or seaweed. On the hook it will keep up a fairly consistent wiggle if fished fairly close to a hiding place, so that it keeps trying but can't quite make it.

Sucker minnows are excellent - every hardy and well liked by all the game fish I've tried them on. Another I like quite well is the northern creek chub or horned dace. A special favorite of mine is the horny-head chub, which has a large head and is very tough. I've not been able to buy them from bait dealers in many sections, but have used both them and suckers a great deal in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Small bullheads and stone cats are also great minnow baits but are seldom, if ever, obtainable from dealers.

Goldfish, or "Baltimore minnows," are considered tops by many anglers. These are great bait, but are outlawed in some states. When allowed to escape, they multiply and take over the waters. Better check on the law before planning to use them. By

the way, I recently got hold of a liquid dip that makes any minnow look like a goldfish, so there's no need to use the real thing.

Minnows are often hooked through the back, at or near the dorsal fin. If you do this, be sure to penetrate the flesh very near the top. If you get a bit low, it will quickly kill the bait. I generally prefer to hook them through both lips. This doesn't seem to hurt the minnow at all, and it stays livelier longer than when hooked through the back. Also, a game fish usually swallows another fish head on, so you can strike quicker when the hook is in the lips. But be sure the hook is through both lips. If hooked through only one lip the bait will die quickly, especially if trolled or retrieved a great deal. This is because the mouth is held open and the minnow suffocates-or drowns, if you want to put it that way.

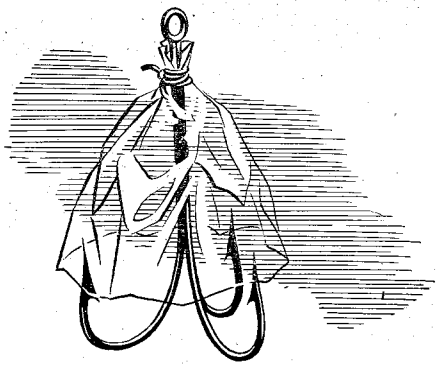
Preserved and dead minnows are effective only if kept moving. Even then, a preserved minnow should be hooked so that a striking fish is snagged the instant it strikes, as with an artificial. I've never known a game fish to hang onto a preserved minnow, or even on that is merely dead, as they do with a live' one. They know the difference.

***Mice:*** Here is another bait that I can't bring myself to use, though it is well known that they take bass. The most humane way to use them, of course, is to attach them to a harness hook or tie them on with thread or wire and, naturally, avoid throwing them about as you would a plug. In my opinion, the use of live mice is unnecessary. You can buy or make artificial mice that, with proper handling, will work just as well as and you can always have one or more at hand.

***Crickets, roaches, grasshoppers, etc:*** Any of the large and succulent insects make good bass baits. The natural way is to fish them on the surface, but occasionally I have been successful by fishing them deep when other things have failed. A hook made expressly for such baits is a decided advantage. If you 'can't find any in the

stores, you can make your own by soldering fine copper wire strands to hooks of suitable size. A medium or 2X long hook in sizes 6 and 8 will probably be most useful for bass.

### **Emergency Weedless Hook**



Fishermen often find that a likely looking spot for bass is jammed with lily pads or weeds. To improvise a weedless treble hook, simply make a "skirt" out of the transparent wrapping from a pack of cigarettes, and tie the waist around the shank of the hook. In my experience, the skirt does not interfere with hooking a fish when it strikes.