



How to Catch Panfish

Of all the fresh-water fishes, yellow perch and bluegills are probably accountable for more pleasurable hours of fishing than any others. Of course those deriving this pleasure are not the rabid trout and bass fishermen, but the large numbers of anglers who fish mostly for relaxation and for food, and who are satisfied to associate with the lesser lights of fishing society.

Generally speaking, perch and bluegills are easy to catch, except when it comes to getting big ones. Because of this, people who fish for them are often looked upon by trout and bass anglers as lowbrow fishermen. The odd thing about this is that many of the anglers who don't do so well with trout and bass are the ones who are most likely to act superior toward the pan-fisherman. And while they may themselves have an urge to catch some of these common fish, they don't give it a try because they're afraid of being scorned by the elite, the stars of the trout and bass world.

In my opinion fishing should not be competitive or comparative. Rather, it should be contemplative - a sport to build up your soul and refresh your mind. So that after a day or more on a lake or stream you can go back to the job of making a living with renewed vigor and new ideas.

For this purpose panfish serve just as well as the more popular gamefishes. If you get skillful enough to locate and fool large perch or bluegill, you can feel just as proud as the angler who catches a two-pound trout in water where a pound fish is considered big.

Yellow perch were once restricted to southern Canada, New England, and the northern Midwest states. Now, as the result of stocking, they're found in all states. Since they're wolfish killers of other fish - to the limit of their size and physical powers - these perch are seldom protected by closed seasons and bag limits.

While yellow perch prefer a diet of minnows or other small fish, they also feed on, insects and crustaceans. With an adequate food supply they may run to a good size and sometimes be rather difficult to catch. However, it's rare to find them running better than about half a pound. Under ideal conditions they can grow to a weight of four pounds or more, but if you ever catch a two-pounder or better, you're entitled to a little bragging.

As a rule, yellow perch are found in large quiet streams and in ponds and lakes. Their tendency is to seek deep water, even to 30 feet or more, although the smaller ones usually stay in the shallows near vegetation. However, I've caught large ones while trolling in shallow water for bass and pickerel.

Good spots to try are areas off weed beds where the water breaks abruptly to greater depth and to a bottom of gravel, rock, or sand. It also pays to investigate water of good depth near pilings, docks, bridges, etc. Large perch will usually be in the vicinity of forage fish, or where they can grab the unprotected fry of bass and other gamefishes.

Perch schools usually number from one to three dozen fish. In each group the size of the individual fish will be fairly uniform, any difference of more than two inches in length between the largest and the

smallest being uncommon. Perch are spring spawners; sometimes spent females are observed before winter ice has disappeared.



One time while fishing a smallmouth bass lake with chub minnows, my companion and I consistently took as many perch as bass, with the perch running heavier. Sometime later, fishing with 5/8-oz. plugs in the same water we took only one large perch to each eight smallmouths. However, we had many misses which I suspected were yellow perch.

I felt sure that the missed strikes were mostly from perch that couldn't handle our bass-size lures. Later on I went back to test this theory.

Using smaller minnows and small spinners on a fly rod, I brought my yellow-perch score up to four for each smallmouth. In subsequent experiences with yellow perch, I always did better when using small bait.

Another time a couple of us were fishing for pike in a northeastern lake. Ordinarily pike are ready strikers, but on this occasion we couldn't seem to find them. We searched the depths (some 30 feet of water) and experienced many "bunts," or a feeling of something tugging at our lures, but we couldn't connect.

Experience told me to try a smaller lure, so I weighted a very small one to get the proper depth. The bunts then became hooked fish - yellow perch averaging about a pound each, with an occasional larger specimen adding an extra thrill.

My most recent experience with yellow perch was in North Carolina. The bass fishing was a bit dull. In some seven hours we'd caught only seven or eight, with the top fish a 4 1/2 pounder. Then we ran into the perch. With the same lure that had taken the largest bass, a deep runner, I hooked a 11/2 pound perch while we were drifting downstream. I was surprised to find one in that country, till my companion, Perry explained they'd been stocked there.

Then we noticed another boat downstream, the occupants of which were taking fish fast - perch, as we found when we inquired. We learned they were using small minnows, but since we had no bait of any kind we started casting with spoons and plugs of bass size. These didn't produce very well, so we changed to small spoons, which did a bit better but not well enough to suit us.

The water where the perch seemed to be congregated was below a dam. For some distance below it the water was quite swift, and we had very little luck in this area, taking only one fish, a bass. Farther downstream the water moved rather sluggishly. In the deepest part of this section we got the most hits, so we decided to let the boat drift over it while dragging the bottom with small wobbling spoons.

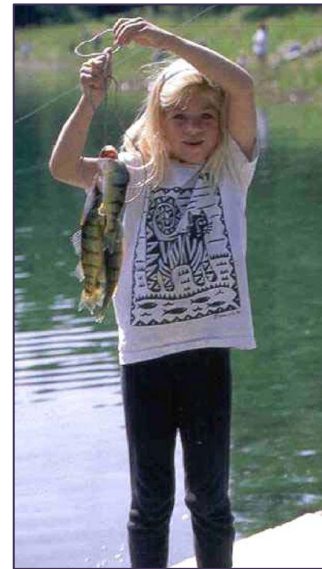
From then on we took perch readily. There were three requisites:

1. A small spoon that didn't snag easily.
2. Fishing the spoon so that it dragged the bottom.
3. Keeping consistently in the active area.

If we didn't do all these things we failed to get results.

The active area was comparatively small, perhaps 80 to 100 feet wide, and 300 feet long. The bottom must have been literally swarming with perch, judging by the ease with which we caught them. We also picked up some bass at the same time.

The tackle for yellow perch should be light, to get the fullest enjoyment from fishing for them. A light spinning outfit is perfect.



In natural baits my favorites for perch are worms and small minnows. But if you're willing to take the trouble to get them, the following insects will bring excellent results: Meal worms, grasshoppers, all sorts of grubs, nymphs, large flies, and bees. Then there are other natural baits that are good on perch, such as baby crawfish, shrimp, and cut bait - for instance the meat of mussels and fish cut to the proper size. In artificial baits I prefer small spoons or spinners, such as those used on average size trout, but often very small plugs will do a great job.

Now we come to bluegills, with perhaps some exceptions the largest of the sunfishes. In different sections of the country they are called variously blue sunfish, blue perch, bream, pumpkinseed, green sunfish, long-eared sunfish, red-eared sunfish and sunfish. Then they are known as the western shell-cracker in the lower Mississippi Valley and in Florida. All are fair-size fish that will give good sport on suitable tackle, and all taste great.

The methods for catching sunfishes are the same as those for catching perch, with the understanding that you use smaller hooks and smaller baits for the smaller fish. Not that the smaller sunfishes won't try to grab big bait, because they will, and I've caught many quarter-pounders when fishing for bass with 5/8 to 3/4-oz. plugs. But that isn't the way to fish for them.

Bluegills nest from the middle of May until the end of July. Females are sometimes reported as spawning several times in one season. They are very prolific. As with bass (which by the way is a sunfish), the male

bluegill makes the nest. After the female lays the eggs, the male will chase her away and guard both eggs and young, up to a point.

During this spawning and protective season, the adult fish become very pugnacious. They'll attack anything that approaches the nest, even fish much larger than themselves, and this makes them easy to catch.

Bluegills are considered warm-water fish, and they prefer locations where there is plenty of vegetation growing from mud and sand bottoms. They are found - either native or stocked - from southern Canada southward to the Gulf States, and from New England to California.

My personal experience with bluegills and related sunfish dates back some 30 years. While I've strayed from the path to concentrate on bigger game, I still love to catch "gills". For their size they're outstanding fighters. Many a half-pound to one-pound bluegill has given me more of a battle than a trout or largemouth bass of equivalent weight on identical tackle.



Quite recently while bass fishing with floating bugs, without success, I noticed rises in several places, and there were numerous splashes around my bass bug. I put on a fine tapered leader, tied on a dry fly, and cast over the next batch of dimples I saw. Seconds later I was fast to a bit of fighting fury that made even my rather heavy fly rod bend beautifully to the water. The fish was a bluegill weighing 11/4 lb. I caught a number of

them that day on the three dry flies I happened to have along - a Blue Dun, a Light Cahill, and a Royal Coachman. The Blue Dun was tops.

Another time I was in Wisconsin with my dad, who was then too old for the more strenuous bait and fly casting. We decided to try for bluegills. There were a lot of them in the lake, and occasionally I'd taken a large one on a bass plug. We gathered a pint of worms and started out.

We tried all the places where we thought the big bluegills might be found, but didn't do very well for the first couple of hours, though we took several small bass and a number of smaller gills. Then we came to a channel between two islands that was filled with weeds, lily pads, and stumps, but with plenty of open spots where we could fish without getting into difficulties. The surface of the water was like a mirror.

I anchored the boat in a promising spot and made a tentative cast with a large worm, intending to let it sink to the bottom. But it never quite got there. I felt a couple of hard tugs, waited a few seconds and struck, then brought in a one-lb. bluegill. We had struck the jackpot. We both took fish after fish, all big ones.

But the hot area was very limited, not over 20 feet square. Bait dropped outside it remained unmolested. We took a dozen fish each, then quit.

I've had many pleasant hours of fishing for bluegills with wet flies and nymphs. These fish seem to prefer dull patterns, as a rule, such as March Brown, Blue Dun or Blue Quill, Cahill, Ginger Quill, Alder, and Gold-Rib Hare's Ear. As for hook size, No. 10 has served me best.

Among the fancy flies I have found Alexandra, McGinty or Bee, and Royal Coachman all excellent. Any dull nymph will do. As a rule, fishing the fly slowly with slight jerks is good practice. So is fishing them at different depths. Start by working the fly just beneath the surface, and then gradually let it go deeper before retrieving. Often a split shot above the fly will be needed to get the proper depth.

Among natural baits on a spinning rod, worms top the list, but grubs, beetles, and any other small bait that may be impaled on a hook will do the job. Remember that although these fish are good little scrappers, they have small mouths, so that unless you use small baits and suitable hooks - not larger than No.8 - you'll miss lots of takes.

While you may take bluegills with a rod and reel that you use for bass, the lighter the tackle, the more fun you'll have. I prefer very light fly or spinning tackle. One of my pet bluegill rods is an eight-foot split bamboo weighing two ounces. It's extremely limber, but what fun it gives me when I catch a fish.

Don't overlook perch and bluegills.

Both can provide you with good sport and good eating.

