

Crayfish Tales

by

Trapper Arne

#18

Wrestling the winds on Woods Canyon Lake

3841 words

My garage freezer was still full of an ample supply of frozen crayfish. Yet I found myself planning another excursion to one of my favorite crayfish lakes in Arizona. Just north of my retirement hangout in Payson, north of Phoenix, you find several trout lakes that not only tempt fishermen from the hot valley of Phoenix, but also crayfish devotees like me.

Already in April I had visited one of the lakes for an early attempt to check the crayfish activity. I had anticipated a slow and meager harvest that early in the season when the water temperature still hovered around or below 50°F. And I proved myself right.

Although a lovely spring day with air temperatures in the seventies, the cold waters still kept their crayfish populations in a kind of nirvana. I only picked up ten crayfish in my twelve traps.

But now spring had almost turned into summer. Weekend crowds from Phoenix, trying to evade the 100° temperatures of the Valley, were streaming up the Beeline highway through Payson in droves. So, in spite of several more containers of frozen crayfish in my freezer, I decided that I could not resist the temptation to try again to see if the crayfish had awakened from their winter sleep.

My little ten foot aluminum rowboat also had a reason for me to give it a whirl on one of the lakes. I had just installed a rotating seat on the middle seat of the boat, at my son's request. (It's really his boat, but as he was for the moment on assignment in Italy installing some computer chip making equipment, I figured he would not be using his boat for a while.)

The weather was mostly fine with the exception of pesky spring winds that made us wary of forest fires. The winter had been extremely dry and woods were now tinder dry and the strong, hot winds raised memories of forest fires that had ravaged the area in earlier years.

But the temptation could not be resisted. I had to go up to see if my favorite quarry was awake and ready to crawl into my crayfish traps in search of food. I loaded twelve traps into my little truck, fishing lures in the tackle box, a sleeping bag and some food for keeping me from starving. This time I would only bring traps of the Trapper model, my

favorite trap for catching crayfish. When I really want great numbers of crayfish I also bring at least ten of my Jackpots, the collapsible Swedish import, but as large numbers of crayfish was not really on my wish list this time, I settled for ten.

On the way out of Payson, I stopped at one of the large gas service stations and picked up a container of worms, just in case I would find the trout fishing to my liking while waiting for the crayfish traps to fill up.

I am fortunate enough to live only about 50 minutes from some of the best crayfish lakes in Arizona, and as I reached the top of the Mogollon Rim, I was near the first of a string of trout and crayfish lakes to choose from. I decided that this time I would try out Woods Canyon Lake. This lake is the first you reach and offers the convenience of a paved road all the way to the launching ramp. Most of the other lakes include some travel on dirt roads. Consequently Woods Canyon lake is the most popular of the lakes. On weekends that means a large crowd of fair-weather fishermen and campers. So to avoid the crowds, I had decided to go up to the lake on a Wednesday.

Arriving at the lake, the weather was great, sunny but unfortunately windy. Going through the dense forest nearing the lake, the winds were not very obvious. But as soon as I came out in the clear by the lake, I could see that I was in for some problems. Not exactly white caps on the lake, but small waves rippling the surface indicated that a guy with oars would have some difficulty managing the boat and the trot line alone.

My friend Howard from Overgaard had promised to join me as soon as he was done with a doctor's appointment, but as I prepared the boat for setting out my ten traps, he had not yet arrived. I ventured out alone.

The Woods Canyon lake is a small lake of about 55 acres size at an elevation of 7500 feet.. With lots of little inlets, bays and coves, there were several places I could place my trot line of crayfish traps while at the same time be somewhat protected from both winds and from other trolling fishermen.

As soon as I rowed past the dock for rental boats, I could feel the wind tugging at the boat and my hat had to be secured with its neck string. Fortunately, going out to my designated area, the wind was in my favor, and I made good time and found that the newly installed boat seat worked well and was no problem while rowing in the wind.

Nobody was fishing in my selected cove, so I set up my home-made trot line winch and started getting the traps ready. To my irritation I discovered that I forgot to bait the traps while at the launching area. Probably I had become concerned at not finding my friend there yet and took off before I had attached my store bought whiting from Wal-Mart on the trap clips.

No big problem. I let the wind blow me into a little protected area, and with the boat bumping against some rocks, I got the bait bucket out and started baiting the traps. As the season still was early and the water temperature a little low, I had decided to use fish as

bait instead of the artificial bait I sometimes use. The artificial bait manufacturers advise you to wait until the water temperature is summer-high before using their bait. I did not know it yet, but later that day I found out that the water temperature was just around 55°F which is a little low for artificial bait. Actually it is also a little too low for real crayfish action in these lakes.

Then the real fight with the winds started. With the traps baited, I set out the first trap up wind and let the winds drift the boat down the inlet to keep the trot line taught between traps. Every now and then I had to compensate for the erratic winds that blew me either too far out the lake or too close to the shoreline. In general I try to drop the traps in ten to twenty feet of water, and now and then I had to grab the oars to adjust my distance from the shore. With a trot line you really don't know how deep your traps end up. If you use individual floats for the traps, you must know the depth, or the float might disappear below the water surface if placed in too deep water. With a trot line, where all the traps are connected to each other, you don't really care about the actual depth as long as the last trap is placed so you can place a marker for the end of the line.

Actually, you don't even need that end marker if you have a grappling hook with you to snag the sunken line. That is of course the safest method if you are concerned about uninvited visitors to your trot line. And there are those at some lakes, unfortunately.

This time I had decided to spend some of the time after placing the traps fishing for trout while still keeping an eye on the traps. So after I had placed ten traps on a trot line and two individual traps with floats, I rowed over to the other side of the cove for some trout fishing. While preparing my rod for fishing with worms and a bobber, I noticed to my irritation a small boat with a couple drifting in for some fishing right over my trot line. From where I was now sitting, getting ready for some trout fishing, I could see the boat was settling right over where I had placed my traps. This is not necessarily a problem as the traps and their connecting line is down near the bottom of the lake. But the polyethylene line is buoyant and between the traps it will float maybe a few feet above the bottom. This is good, and sometimes necessary, if you are using a grappling hook to locate the line later on.

But it irritated me now that the fishing couple, a man and his wife probably, had placed themselves right over my trot line. I kept an eagle eye on them just in case they happened to hook up with my trot line by accident.

But my biggest problem was the wind. It was very gusty, and although the wind was primarily holding my boat against the shoreline within sight of the other shore with the fishing couple, I sometime had to adjust the boat with the oars as I did not have an anchor with me this time.

But the fishing was poor. Neither I nor the couple I was watching, did any good on the trout population. I was using a bobber this time with a worm and sometimes some Power Bait, but not even a single strike encouraged me. Nor, somewhat to my satisfaction, did the fishing couple have much luck, and after some time they gave up and disappeared

down the lake in the wind.

Soon I gave up also. Hoping no one else would park themselves over my trot line, I slowly rowed down the lake, this time while trolling a Cowbell with a fat worm attached to a hook as terminal tackle. Still no luck. Until I came to one spot near the launching area. Suddenly I had several strikes on the cowbell and finally I landed one trout; nothing to brag about. But it had broken the spell, and now I had several strikes in the same area while I was battling the winds.

As I let the winds carry me slowly down the lake, I had no better luck and finally came down to the lake's dam and had to turn around and head back again. Now the winds became a problem. Going directly into the winds, my attention was mostly fighting the winds and, with a strike now, the boat would soon be back at the dam again while re-rigging the cowbell for more fishing.

Maybe, fortunately, I had no more strikes on the way back to the launching ramp. Except exactly where I had the first strikes. After a strong bite I wanted to reel it in, but did not dare for fear the winds would simply blow me back to the end of the lake again. So I decided to keep the fish hooked to the cowbell and slowly, I had no choice, row toward the launching area. Once there, I would reel in the Cowbell and pick up the fish.

Well, that's what I thought. When finally inside the lee of the rental dock, I started reeling in the line, but soon realized that whatever fish once was on the line had decided to rid itself of the impediment and taken off on its own.

By now my friend Howard was waiting for me on the shore and we had some time discussing techniques of making crayfish traps. Howard makes some real nice traps, so we had lots to talk about. But soon it was more than four hours since I had set out the traps, so we rowed out again to pick them up. The winds were still frisky, and now I had to fight the winds going back to the traps. At least going back again would be easier. I thought.

We found the end marker of the trot line easily. Apparently nobody had found it and robbed us of the line. Actually, during the 35 years of catching crayfish in Arizona, I have never lost a trap to thievery. Lost them for other reasons, yes, but not to thieving.

As soon as we found the end of the trot line, I connected it to the crank in my home made winch for winding up the trot line. This time I had a helper which made it easier to keep the boat in line of the trot line in spite of the strong gusty winds. Howard soon got the idea of how the trot line cranker worked and he did the cranking while I kept the yellow polyethylene line coming in to the boat from the nearest trap. Soon the first one came up through the water to the boat for the anxious moment of finding out whether we would be skunked or not. Well, not skunked, as there were several crayfish in the trap. But it was no bonanza. Not surprisingly as it was still so early in the season. Maybe the trap had only about ten, fifteen crayfish in it, but they were of good size. I felt relieved after being rather nervous as usual before seeing what the first trap had in it. Then the rest came in

pretty easily in spite of the wind. This time I did the rowing if the boat needed to be moved, but most of the time the cranking on the trot line kept the boat slowly going in the direction of the next trap. They all came up easily with a dozen or so crayfish in each until suddenly a trap did not want to come up in spite of heavy tugging. Finally I had to row up to the other side of whatever was keeping it stuck and suddenly something released and it came up with a of dozen crayfish in it. This heavy tugging on the trap that was caught on something proved one thing to me as it has several times before. The Trapper, although light-weight compared to some other popular traps in the business, had no damage done to it, and it came up looking as good as new.

Soon all the traps were in the boat. As we were going to re-bait them and again place them in the lake for an overnigher, we emptied the traps in a container in the boat and were pleased as it started filling up. But we had two more traps to empty. The two individual float marked traps of a larger type, one of which made from galvanized hardware cloth and the other from green vinyl covered hardware cloth, just like the other Trappers. First the plain trap came up with a respectable amount in it, but nothing to write home about. Maybe fifteen crayfish in it. The we went for the green colored vinyl covered trap. This trap is easier to handle as it doesn't have the sharp edges of the other trap. And it was pleasingly green I thought.

And it was indeed pleasing! It had a bonanza of crayfish in it. Maybe 25-30 crayfish and I was pleased. Partly because plenty of crayfish always please me, but also because it was a green trap and all my regular Trappers are green. Could there be some magic in the color of the trap? Whatever the reason, we were both impressed by that catch.

Now for the re-baiting of the traps for the overnight placement. Baiting is always the least pleasant of the crayfish catching moments, and the wind, buffeting the boat, did not make it easier. I still had plenty of bait of the whiting variety, and soon all the traps were ready for another placing. This time we rowed over to the other side of the cove. Some time I have simply replaced traps in the same area as during the first placement, but this time I wanted to be sure we had a fresh supply of crayfish to tempt with our whiting bait, so down they cranked on the other side of the cove with Howard's help.

This time, as we were getting to the end of the trot line, we noticed a boat that had started fishing where we had just pulled up the previous trot line. For some reason we did not like the looks of the two unkempt fellows in the boat. They sometimes kept looking at what we were doing, and I began to feel uneasy about why they were watching us. Something about their facial appearance did not comfort me, and it was with great hesitation that we finally placed the end float as the indicator of the end of the trot line.

I suggested to Howard that we go over and chat with the guys just to get an impression of who they were, and maybe to make them aware that we were aware of their presence. And that way we could identify them if need be. Asking them how they were doing, they seemed to be unwilling to volunteer any information, and in general looked at us with some suspicion. So we said goodbye and took off down the lake, me rowing in the now contrary and still pesky wind. Somehow the wind had changed so that I still had to row

against the wind. Something about Peter's principle occurred to me.

Back at the launching area, Howard and I agreed to meet again the next morning at the ghastly hour of five o'clock. As I was going to the campground for the night, that would be no problem for me. But Howard had to drive all the way back to Overgaard. Still he promised to be at the launch area in the morning at five for the final pick up of the traps. To myself I nursed some doubts that he really would be there the next morning at five, but on those terms we parted and I went up the to Forest Service campground for a light dinner and some sleep.

No wonder I slept like a log. After rowing for hours during the day, my body was in need of rest. Now and then during the night I woke up and discovered that the moon was up and that the wind had finally died down. But at first indication of daylight creeping up, I crept up too, and prepared for a quick breakfast and an early take off from the camp. The time was now ten minutes to five, and I wondered if I would have to wait long for Howard to show up.

Just as I left the campground and entered the main road going down to the lake, I noticed a passenger car going down the road toward the lake also. That turned out to be Howard, and he had brought his electric motor and a marine battery to relieve me of the rowing that early in the morning.

We both drove in to the launching area practically at the same time, and I was pleased and impressed that here was a guy you could trust. Many years as an EDU (Explosive Disposal Unit) officer probably does that to people.

We made a beeline for the trot line of ten crayfish traps and two individual float traps. Almost immediately as we neared the cove, we found the float at the end of the trot line. At least the unkempt people we had watched the evening before had not pulled up the line. We soon had the first trap in the boat and discovered that the catch was about the same as the day before. An average of ten to 15 crayfish in each trap. This time we did not have to fight the winds. They were there, but nothing compared to the day before, so the rowing and cranking up the trot line went easily and with no problem or snags.

This time we left the crayfish catch in the traps as we were going straight back to the launching area afterwards. Apparently the motley crew we had watched the evening before had not done anything to our traps, and all were unmolested, even the floated traps at the end of the cove.

We returned to the launching area and made ready to empty traps and ready the boat for the trip home. Fortunately Howard had this time brought his high rubber boots, so his was the job of stepping into the shallow water and pull the boat ashore. Soon we had all the traps out of the boat and stacked in a conspicuous heap on the shore. The few people who were already starting their fishing day, came up and expressed their oohs and aahs at the sight of all the crayfish.

With the traps emptied and de-baited I was ready for bringing the truck and trailer down the ramp to the boat. But backing up a trailer that you can't see behind you is quite a task. Without the boat on the trailer, there is nothing to see to guide you in channeling the trailer down the ramp. Finally I had to put the red cooler at the end of the trailer to give me something to guide me. Finally down, we loaded the traps and trailer, iced down the crayfish and, after a quick brownbag breakfast, we said goodbye. I thanked Howard for his help, and I was on my way down the Rim for home.

This time my crayfish had a dual purpose. Of course, primarily to be enjoyed at the table in the company of my dear wife and selected friends. But also as the prime actors of my crayfish movie epic in its phase about cooking crayfish.

So as I unloaded the crayfish from the car, and as I emptied them into the kitchen sink, rinsed, cooked and cooled the crayfish, I took lots of movie footage using my digital JVC camera to add more scenes to my crayfish epic.

By this time I had also counted the catch, and once I had discarded the real small ones, I counted about two hundred crayfish. Nothing exceptional for sure, but still an acceptable amount for this early in the crayfish season. As I still had lots of crayfish in my freezer, I really did not need any more. So I decided not to freeze this batch, but either to eat them or give them away to crayfish eating friends in the area.

Said and done. Steve down the road came over and helped himself to a fair amount and the rest I cooked while the JVC camera rolled.

After cooling them off and serving them cold as Swedes do, I enjoyed crayfish for the rest of the week.

End