

Crayfish Tales
by
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#13

Breaking records at Black Canyon Lake

A rather detailed description of a great crayfish catch

By Trapper Arne

When a fisherman has a fish on the line, his worries disappear. All his attention is focused on landing that fish. I have experienced it many times; it is an exhilarating, almost rejuvenating feeling. The same thing happens when you bring up a trap filled with crayfish. All your troubles disappear – at least for a while.

I experienced that feeling several times during my August visit to Arizona's Black Canyon Lake, a small lake up on top of the Mogollon Rim north of our home in Payson. I went there to replenish my supply of frozen crayfish for my winter consumption and to entertain occasional visiting Swedes from the old country.

This time I decided to go it alone and to make it a one-nighter spending one night in the nearby campground. And to make sure I caught as many crayfish as possible, I decided to be up at the lake by noon, so I could take advantage of the afternoon hours for one harvest before setting out my twenty traps for the night harvest. I figured that, as crayfish are less active during afternoons, I would set out my Trapper traps with both manufactured bait and some enticing fresh fish from our grocery store. At the same time I would test how productive manufactured bait really is by setting out ten of my old Jackpots with nothing but manufactured bait in them. Probably this would be a lot of work with meager results, but, I had to do something to make sure I had crayfish during the winter months. After all, a Swede without crayfish is not a happy Swede.

Said and almost done. I packed my old Nissan truck with camping stuff, hooked up the boat trailer with my son's ten foot aluminum boat, and off I went waving goodbye to my wife Joyce and puppy dog Nikki. After an hour's ride I turned in on the gravel road leading to Black Canyon Lake and the campground up on a rise in the tall pines. As this was labor day weekend coming up, I was a little concerned about how many people I would have to fight for a campsite and for boating space on the little lake.

I did not have to worry. The campsite was practically empty and so was the lake. Fortunately, for me, this lake is out of the way for most people, especially those who don't like dirt roads. I don't like dirt roads either, but that's the price you pay for what I would soon experience. The labor day crowds would come later during the week. After all, today was only Wednesday.

Down at the lake I launched the boat and loaded it with twenty traps. The Trappers take a lot of space, but Jackpots, which are collapsible, can be stashed under the seats of the boat. But first baiting the Trappers. I brought some frozen trout pieces that the local grocery store had decided were gone beyond the time limit for freshness. I hoped that crayfish would not mind. Crayfish are picky about bait too far gone. Because

crayfish are less active during daytime hours, I also put in a piece of manufactured bait as an added incentive. Even if the natural bait were eaten, the longer lasting manufactured bit would still be there. Together the two baits might overcome the afternoon lull.

The Jackpots, the collapsible old Swedish imports with individual floats, were already baited before I took off. They had only one piece of artificial bait in each trap for my planned test. With all these traps in the boat I set off for the other side of the lake with the dam, the rocks and the crayfish.

Finding a rocky shoreline which promised a rocky lake bottom where crayfish like to hang out, I set out the Trappers on a trot line using my home made cranking device to reel out the trot line with each trap separated by twenty feet. Most traps ended up at a depth of between ten and twenty feet, I estimated.

Then around a bend in the shore line, I set out the ten Jackpots, with nothing but manufactured bait, making me wonder if I was asking for trouble. How well would the manufactured bait work in the cold waters of this trout lake especially as I did not augment this bait with some natural bait as I did with the Trappers on the trot line.

That done, I left the traps to their fate along the shore line of the lake and tried to hook some trout in the meantime. My plan was to leave the traps in for at least three hours during the afternoon, followed by rebaiting of some of the traps for the second phase which would last overnight. As Jackpots don't have escape stoppers, I usually empty them every three or four hours. Leaving them out in the lake overnight usually results in losses. After the crayfish have eaten the bait or simply are satisfied with what they just ate, they start looking for the exit of the trap. They are not dumb. They usually find the exit after searching for a while.

Now I had three hours to try to catch some of the lake's trout. I had some doubts about my success as there were practically no other fishermen on the lake. Could it be that they knew something I did not know? Maybe the Ph value of the water was so bad that fish just did not bite. A recent fishing report had mentioned that there would be no stocking of trout in this lake until the Ph went back to normal.

Letting out my lure with a trailing Z-ray after it, I slowly rowed back and forth in the neighborhood of where I had placed the traps. I like to do this as a precaution against unwanted interference with my traps from longfingered folks. Of course, this time I did not have to worry. There was nobody else there this Wednesday afternoon, a few days before labor day.

Nor did I have to worry about catching too many fish either. For 45 minutes I did not have a single strike. Maybe everybody else, but me, knew that this lake was no good just now, at least not for catching trout. But I hung in there and hoped for a first strike after all. While pondering my fish situation and wondering about how many, if any, crayfish my traps would catch, I decided to take an early peek in two of my Trappers just an hour after I had placed them. As I neared the two traps I had decided to try out, I had my first strike on the Z-ray. Unfortunately, I lost the fish before I could land it, but it buoyed my spirits. At least there was one fish in the lake that was hungry enough to try my lure. Before reaching where the two traps lay that I wanted to peek at, I had another strike and this time I landed a good sized trout. Ah, at least I wasn't skunked this time.

Reaching the two traps I swung the boat sideways so I could grab the float with my hand. Hoping not to lean too far over the railing to lose my balance and end up in the lake. With only me on the lake, who would listen if I cried for help?

Pulling up the first trap, which was lying about ten feet from the shore line and at about five to six feet depth, I found to my satisfaction that it had some crayfish in it already. And they were big. Typically Black Canyon crays. I counted fifteen crayfish in the first trap, and sixteen in the other. And that was after only one hour in the lake. I was satisfied. That promised, both that the lake still had plenty of crayfish in it and that they were interested in the trap offerings. I emptied the traps and returned them to the water. I felt immediately more sure of a reasonable harvest if I waited the three hours I had first decided to wait.

So I continued fishing for trout, and before it was time to empty all the traps after three hours in the lake, I had caught three reasonably sized trout to take home and impress my wife with.

Soon all the traps had been in the lake for three hours, just the right amount of time for the Jackpots to avoid having the catch start looking for the exit. The Trappers I did not have to empty, as they had escape stoppers, but decided to do that anyway and to add more bait if the fresh fish was eaten up by hungry crayfish.

First to the Trapper trot line. I quickly found the end of the line and its little float that is practically impossible for outsiders to locate. I hooked up the trot line cranker and started reeling for the first trap. Slowly the boat reacted to the pull and started moving toward the first trap of the line. The daytime breeze had died down, and the lake was now motionless. Feeling the crank pulling the line I noticed that it was slow in coming. Maybe, as has happened before, it was caught in some underwater brush or other debris. Soon the trap clanked against the side of the boat indicating it was up and ready to heave on board.

With one hand I tried to lift it up over the boat railing. I couldn't lift it. It was so heavy I had to grab it by both hands to get it aboard. I could barely believe what I saw. That trap was so full of crayfish I couldn't possibly have squeezed in one more. There were crayfish crawling all over the trap, from bottom to the top, from left to right. It was as full as any Trapper trap could get. At least 50 of them.

This is when I experienced that lovely, exhilarating feeling you get when you have a fish on the hook. Except this time it was a whole bunch of crayfish in a trap I had manufactured. I was relieved and delighted to see that today would not be a day to be skunked.

Soon I got the other traps up, and some of them were just as full as the first one. This was going to become a spectacular crayfish catch, and I would not have to worry about running out of crayfish this winter.

But there were some traps that gave me a surprise. The third trap up had only one crayfish in it, and all the bait was still there. What happened? And the following one did not have a single crayfish in it. And the bait was still there. As there obviously were plenty of crayfish in the lake along this shore, there must be some explanation to this mystery. Why would some traps have so many crayfish in them and some practically none? Could it be that some traps, as they are placed in the lake, land standing straight up on the bottom, something which would obviously make it difficult for a crayfish to crawl in? Or could it have landed straddling a rock so that both openings were far from the bottom where the crayfish walk around? I'll probably never really know, so my hypothesis is the best I can depend on.

But as the total number of crayfish in the ten traps more than filled my five gallon

bucket, I must have pulled up around two hundred crayfish anyway. I could not complain. I replaced the natural bait in most of the traps for the next phase which would be placing them in another location for the whole night.

Now I came to the ten old Jackpot traps with floats that were placed around the corner. These traps I have used for over thirty years and they have always worked well for me, especially if I empty them every three or four hours. And these Jackpots had now been in the water for a little over three hours.

Again I approached the first one with a lot of anticipation. Would these traps with only manufactured bait in the lull of the afternoon have much to show for?

Yes, they certainly did. Here again, I was totally overwhelmed when pulling up trap after trap with enormous amounts of crayfish inside. Once more I found that I could not lift a trap into the boat with only one hand, I had to use both in order to get it over the railing and onto the top of the other five gallon bucket. The first trap in the series of ten was so full I could not have squeezed in one more into it, it seemed. And they were all big, feisty and with enormous claws. Each claw in itself offers a tasty morsel of food on a dinner plate.

Just a few of these traps, and the other five gallon bucket began to overflow. Soon the whole boat was crawling in crayfish and I had to move my feet carefully to avoid stepping on them. At one point I felt something crawling inside my pant leg. It was a small crayfish trying to find refuge up my leg.

Having pulled up all the Jackpots for a new record of afternoon crayfish, I made ready to go across the little bay of the lake to place them in another spot for the overnight phase. As all of the Jackpots had only manufactured bait in them, which was still in good shape and about 90% of its original size, I simply dropped them without having any rebaiting to do. After these ten were in, I let out the trot line again with the other ten Trappers which now had new bait as well as the remainder of their manufactured bait.

By this time, around seven o'clock in the evening, it was getting dusky and I was anxious to get back to the launching area while I could still see. This time I did not have time for any trout fishing attempt as I wanted to get back up to the campground and dinner before it was really dark.

At the campground I was met by the now familiar camp host, paid my Golden Passport fee and went over to my already designated camp site. After a peaceful dinner session and a can of beer, I sat for quite a while enjoying the dark and the quiet and the brilliant display of stars on the firmament. Now and then I could see the blinking lights of an air liner going across the sky. Contemplating my unusually successful afternoon crayfishing, I squeezed into my little camper shell and soon fell asleep.

The next morning had barely heralded the coming day with a faint glow in the east when I crawled off my mattress in the back of the truck, ate my breakfast of cooked rice and raisins with juice, and went off the lake again, three miles down the hill. As I had been the last to leave the lake last night and now was the first to arrive in the morning, I was not surprised to see that the boat was still lying there unmolested.

This morning I was not in a hurry to get over to the traps at the other side of the lake, so I let out my Cowbell lure with a Z-ray at the end hoping to snap another trout or two. One in a while I had a strike and finally I hooked a trout well enough to land it. Now I had one more fish on the stringer. But soon I was over to the rocky side of the lake where the traps were positioned. The question in my mind was, how could I possibly

have any better catch now after a night's presentation than I had last afternoon. But crustaceans are nocturnal critters, and with manufactured bait that stays in the trap all night there ought to be plenty in the traps.

There were plenty, all right, but not quite as many as the previous afternoon. That puzzled me, but I didn't argue the point with fate or whatever decides how many crayfish crawl into crayfish traps. I started pulling the Jackpots and they all had a respectable amount of crayfish in them, although not equally as impressive as the day before. By this time, though, I began to realize that I had more crayfish caught than I had expected or needed to keep me in crayfish for the winter. So every now and then as I pulled up another trap full of lively big-clawed crayfish I could not help but muttering to myself, you must be crazy, Arne. What are you going to do with all these crayfish?

Indeed, what was I going to do with them all? I had brought three camping coolers and they were now filled to their rims with crawling crayfish. I even had a whole bucket full of crayfish which found no space in the coolers but had to put up with the more crowded existence of the five gallon bucket. Fortunately, though, I had brought enough ice to cover the crayfish in the coolers with, so that they would qualify for legal transport home to the waiting propane cooker in my garage.

Back home our guest apartment bathtub was soon full to near the rim with crayfish and the cooking started. But first I summoned some friends who also love crayfish, and fortunately some hundreds went into their brought-along buckets. Still, I had more crayfish in my bathtub than even after the regular three day outings at Hawley Lake, when I sometimes brought home over a thousand crayfish. How many could I possibly have caught this time? And this time after only one afternoon and one night?

After cooking batch after batch and keeping a tally on how many had turned appetizingly red, I came down to the final figure of how many crayfish I had caught in less than 24 hours. Over one thousand. Yes, one thousand and twenty-one to be exact. That means that each trap brought up an average of 51 crayfish. But as all traps were out for two sessions, dividing that by two it still means that each trap brought up an average of twenty-five crayfish each time. Not a bad number. And that considering that about three traps had practically none in them at all because of accidental positioning in the lake.

As each kettle came off the propane cooker, it was cooled in front of a fan until cool enough to go into the refrigerator. The following day the process of preparing the catch for the freezer started.

My wife, who can't eat crayfish because of her allergy, watched with concern as I filled every nook and cranny of all our freezer space.

We have one freezer in the garage, one top-of-the-fridge freezer in the kitchen and one oldie stand-by emergency fridge in the garage. Soon practically all available freezer space was taken up by crayfish to keep this crazed Swedes in his favorite food for the coming winter.

Finally the day was done and a totally bushed crayfish crazed Swede had to admit that a camping cot is fine but your own bed at home beats it hands down.

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