

Crayfish Tales
by
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HAWLEY LAKE PRODUCES - AGAIN

Hawley Lake attracts. Unmistakably. That I am drawn to the lake can easily be explained. I love crayfish and Hawley has them in abundance.

But what about Peter, our son, and Ellen, our daughter? Neither is interested in crayfish. At least not in eating them. Peter gets a kick out of catching them in company of his old dad, who has now come to Hawley for crayfish for over thirty years.

Yes, it was while I was working for Motorola in Phoenix that I first heard about the attractions of Hawley, the little lake up at 8.000 foot elevation on the Apache reservation in Arizona. My co-worker Ken, also a computer programmer, described to me how the trout of the lake used to rise to the surface in the evening, creating expanding water rings while searching for morsels of food on the surface.

Yes, rainbow trout at Hawley brought me and my family up there to start with. I had no idea that the lake also held crayfish. And if it did, I probably would not believe they were they same I loved in my country of birth, Sweden. It took another work companion to set me straight. Outdoorsman Dave showed me how to catch crayfish in the Phoenix canals, and how to cook them. When I sat down with him to also eat them, I realized they were they same I had eaten back home before becoming an immigrant to the 'New World'.

So when I realized that crayfish in Arizona and Sweden, and most of the world for that matter, were about the same, a new hobby had sneaked in and joined all the other ones I had. From then on, each summer my family and I toiled up the highways to this beautiful hide-away up in the pine studded mountains. Each year I had a few extra crayfish traps in tow. My brother supplied me with the traps I would later call the Jackpot, a collapsible trap that takes practically no space among the other camping paraphernalia in the back of our Suburban truck.

After a few years I even got my Swedish Vasa lodge members to join me in visiting Hawley Lake during the August crayfish season, and we had great feasts at long tables at the edge of the lake eating crayfish and singing drinking songs much to the surprise of the local population.

So, 30 years later I am still heading for this outpost that somehow has adopted me and my love for crayfish. When I first started catching them in this lake, they were abundant. Thirty years later, they are still abundant. Not a single year at the lake has left me empty handed when driving back home. Often I had Styrofoam coolers with around one thousand crayfish in the back of the truck, and the many years of doing the same has not noticeably reduced the abundance. This lake is, in other words, the perfect crayfish lake.

There was a difference in the trek up to the lake this year. Usually, since I retired, I had driven up in my little Nissan truck, filled with camping and crayfish catching gear. But this year I had a new vehicle. Well, not really new. Only new to me. It was the first time I took my 30 year old Toyota motor home up the mountains to see if it would cut the mustard. Peter, with his family this time in addition to two new dogs, drove his truck, trailer and the boat on top to the lake. To make sure my old vehicle would make it safely up, I drove ahead with Peter and wife and daughter checking my progress.

Just north Payson we climb the Mogollon Rim up to 7,000 feet, go through Heber, Overgaard and Show Low before weaving through the increasingly busy towns of Lakeside and Pinetop before we come to the turnoff to Hawley Lake. I had planned to also visit Horseshoe Cienega, but this year it was closed for repairs to the dam and the campground.

The nine mile drive up to the 8000 elevation is pretty among aspens and spruces along the winding road. Crossing a creek we see fishermen wading the waters in search of the native and implanted trout. The road is paved all the way to the campground now, and the campground is huge. Not very elaborate, but filled with wooden picnic tables clearly marked that they belong to the White Mountain Apache Tribe.

As usual we were greeted by a strong and thunderous downpour. We were in the middle of the annual monsoon season, so heavy and noisy thunder showers are common. I don't like them. Setting up camp in the middle of rain is not my favorite pastime. But we made it. We found a nice camp site overlooking the lake, and not far from us was my daughter's family with grand daughter and dog.

But I was coming for crayfish, so I soon had unloaded my twelve traps from inside the motor home. Peter drove down to the water's edge and we launched the little 10' aluminum boat, and we were ready for fishing. Trout and crayfish.

The least pleasant phase of preparing for crayfish catching is the baiting of traps. I had brought a box of frozen whiting from Wal-Mart as well as some salmon trimmings and a few turkey necks. Into each trap I also added a container with manufactured Purina crawfish bait from Louisiana. I figured that, if one scent does not attract the crayfish, maybe the other one will. Remembering my own advice on my computer website, I also made sure there was ample bait in every trap. "Double the bait, double the catch" I have preached.

Crayfish are nocturnal, they say. That's probably true although I have caught lots of them during daylight hours. This time I was planning to only set out traps for overnight soakings. My plan included using my home made trot-line with a crank made from a plastic milk bottle container. A 200 long polypropylene rope, for buoyancy, with loops added every twenty feet or so. Cranking up the rope kept it away from all the other fishing stuff in the boat. I'll never forget the mess I once made when trying to let out a trot-line without using a cranking device. Never again.

With the boat filled with twelve traps, a trot-line cranker, two oars, a couple of fishing rods and a can of worms, a battery and an electric motor plus at least two life jackets, there is hardly any space left for people. Trying to step into the boat without getting wet and without stepping on some trap, is quite a task. Somehow, however, Peter and I managed to wriggle ourselves in and we set off for a stretch of the shore line that looked like a good crayfish habitat.

When setting out traps on the trot-line, we use the boat's oars. While I un-crank the trot line device, searching for the next loop to hook on a trap, Peter rows slowly along the shore, about twenty or thirty feet out. As each loop on the rope comes off the cranker, Peter hands me a trap and I attach it to the loop and let the trap out into the lake. With this method you don't have to be very concerned about the depth of the lake. If you use individual floats for the traps, you have to be very concerned, or you may suddenly see the trap disappear as the float goes under the surface. After ten trot line traps are out, I prepare the end of the line with a sinker to keep the rope from floating to the surface, and with an inconspicuous bobber, we are set for the next morning's harvest.

This year I was not in a great need of more crayfish. Local lakes near Payson had taken care of that. So I did not have to maximize my catch by harvesting the traps every four or five hours the way I used to do it in my younger days. Then I caught lots of crayfish but lost lots of sleep. Instead we planned on leaving the traps in all night, hoping that the escape stoppers would keep the crayfish from escaping the traps. And they usually do.

The next morning, while the sun was still having trouble breaking through the residual thunder storm clouds and the heavy mists over the lake, we were out again. This time I invited Peter's wife to join me in recovering the traps. I rowed the short distance to the first trap, and then Tracey did the cranking, drawing the light weight boat to the nearest trap. Each trap came up with a good supply of Hawley lake crayfish. Some were really big specimens, most of them average, and as usual, many rather small ones that we usually threw back.

I can't keep myself from throwing the small ones back in the lake. Yes, I know, the Fish and Game authorities recommend that you keep all you catch, even those too small for eating, just to keep the lake from getting too full of crayfish. My indoctrination from way back, however, tells me that if a crayfish is too small to keep, you have to throw it back. So that's what I usually do.

One of the traps we had on the trot line was a Jumbo trap. This trap is extra large and can actually hold about twice the amount of the regular size Trapper or Trappy. But, in spite of its larger size, it holds the same amount of bait, so I theorized that, although larger in size, no more crayfish would decide to enter the larger trap, so Trappers and Jumbos ought to have about the same amount of catch.

Not so. To my surprise, I have noticed several times this year, that when using the Jumbo along with the regular sized traps, the Jumbos always contain more crayfish. Why is that? After all, how would the crayfish know or care about whether the Jumbo is larger

or not? And the entrance to each trap is identical! So why would there be more crayfish in a larger Jumbo than in the smaller ones? Maybe they find it so roomy and comfy that they don't even want to escape? Farfetched? Maybe.

Coming back with a catch of crayfish, it is difficult to tell how many you have caught. I usually simply empty the traps into a five gallon plastic bucket. If it gets full, then I estimate I have about three hundred crays in it. Of course this differs depending on the average size of the crayfish in the catch. Not until I finally cook the crayfish will I know exactly how many crayfish I caught. When cooking them, I always count out the crays in order to know how much water to put in the pot. The standard number is 100 crays in a pot with three gallons of water with 1 ½ cups of salt. Plus either a bunch of dill or a package of Zatarain's crab boil.

This time I had an almost full bucket to dump into one of my coolers in the motor home. I guess I had 250 crays. But there were two more over night catches to add to them. And we did.

After I have caught crays along a certain lake shore, I look for another likely stretch of shore line for my next catch. As we only had to find three stretches for catching during three nights, we did not have to go far for placing the trots line. Each time ten traps on the line and then maybe an additional two traps on individual strings and floats. One day I had planned to put out a couple of traps during the day. But weather interfered with that plan. It rained for seven hours straight during which I, Peter's family and dogs and Ellen's family and dog cramped into Peter's pop-up tent trailer and made the best of a wet situation. The kids were playing all sorts of games, and the dogs were chasing each other between all those people legs in the relatively limited space in the trailer. A lot of snacks were devoured and lots of tales told, and amazingly we got along very well although wet, cramped and claustrophobic.

In spite of all the rain we had great camp fires every night. Peter, who learned the art of starting fires while camping in a wet Alaska, got fires going although everything around us was wet. Sooner or later the camp fire gathered all of us around it for comfort, warmth and camping atmosphere. The forests around us are full of 'dead and down' fire wood so there is no lack of burning supply. Father and son have developed a routine over the years consisting of going out in the woods in the morning for 'gathering fire woods' while at the same time taking care of other natural needs.

A camp fire has a fascinating drawing power on people. Each evening we sit mesmerized looking into the crackling fire while someone tells some story and listeners change their positions around the fire to avoid the blowing smoke. Fortunately, evenings turned out to be free from rain, so there was plenty of pleasant camaraderie around the blazing camp fires.

Two more overnight crayfish sessions, and the two coolers were full enough to consider going home. Before that, though, we took the coolers to the nearest camp faucet with liberal streams of spring water to rinse and rejuvenate the crayfish. After remaining in a

cooler for several hours, a certain odor rises from all the sand veins that have started purging in the community 'outhouse'. A rinse is mandatory for restoring a clean environment for the catch and before their final exit into a bubbling cauldron.

To ensure a safe travel back to Mom's kitchen, I usually sprinkle the crayfish with crushed ice in addition to one or two frozen gallon containers with water. This will both keep them fresh on the trip and it will also satisfy the Game and Fish people who take the icing as a sign that the crayfish are going into a pot and not into another lake or stream. Before the final cooking, several rinses will make sure that the crays are as clean as can be before they turn red and ready to eat.

While at the lake this time I tried to take several scenes for a possible future crayfish movie. The weather did not cooperate, and only one day did I get a chance to really add to the scenes I had previously gathered. Sitting at the very front of the boat, sailors call it the bow, I was perched high enough to aim the camera over Peter's shoulders to show how he cranked in the trot line or picked up a trap float. Some of the scenes had great potential had it not been for the invading lake humidity in the camera which caused some scenes to show ugly black stripes across. Those scenes have to be taken over again, so maybe this was fate's way of telling me that I had to come back to Hawley Lake another time for the finals.

In total we caught 735 crayfish during this crayfish outing. Some were eaten at the camp during our community dinner. Another 40 crayfish went to my mother-in-law in Phoenix and some of them were returned to the lake for being too small to impress my dinner guests in Payson. I cooked 300 of the largest crayfish using my propane turkey cooker and several packages of Zatarain's crab boil. (Our drought has made dill scarce.) When all crays were cooked delightfully red, cooled and later deep frozen in plastic containers holding at least 30 in each, both the freezer in the kitchen and the back-up freezer in the garage were overflowing. Just waiting for my next craving for crayfish to reduce the overflow a bit.

The end

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