

DOES CAT FOOD REALLY WORTK AS BAIT?

YOU BET!

Rowing backwards, my row boat was slowly nearing where we had placed the last crayfish trap in a trot line with eleven traps. At the end of the line I had tied a string leading to a dark colored plastic float. That float was going to be our indicator for the end of the trot line the next morning.

Well, this was the next morning, and Tracey, sitting in the rear of the boat, could not find the float. Of course, it was inconspicuous, so that unfriendly and nosey elements would not find it and wonder what it was. Or what it was attached to. We both scoured the waters along the little lake up on the Apache Reservation in Arizona. As usual in August or September, I was there to refresh my supply of frozen crayfish for the coming winter.

But the float was nowhere to be seen, and I was getting nervous. I did not want to lose eleven traps in one fell swoop. But then Tracey, who has sharper eyes than I do, found it. Not in the water, where it should have been, but up on the shore, about 15 feet away from the water's edge.

And it was no longer connected to the end of the trot line. The line was severed and lay in ringlets on the ground, far from where we had placed the last trot line trap. I inspected the end of the rope and found it was not cut clean off, but was obviously frayed, as if someone, or something, had gnawed on it. But what?

Well, we recovered the float and the severed string and grumbled about the fact that we now did not know where the end of the trot line was located. We knew the general area, about 20 feet away from the shore somewhere, but as the water was rippled by the morning breeze, we could not see down far enough to locate the yellow polyethylene rope. This is the rope that connects all the traps in the trot line. A rope that is boyant and should be floating slightly above the bottom of the lake between the traps. But how to find it?

Fortunately, I had anticipated this dilemma. Way down in my box of doo-dads needed when catching crayfish, lay my home-made grapple hook. Made from cloth hangers and a lead weight, it had four prongs that would easiliy connect with a buoyant rope hidden under the surface ripples. I estimated where the rope would go from one trap to the next, and threw the grapple hook a few feet across this estimated line. Slowly I dragged the grapple hook across that line, and immediately I felt I had something caught and was coming up. Yes, that was the trot line OK, and I felt real clever having been able to locate the submerged line so easily. Our dilemma was solved and we could start pulling up the crayfish traps.

But what had pulled the float up on the shore and severed the line? As It was not cut but was gnawed and frayed, maybe an animal was the culprit. But animal? What animal would do that? Then I remembered having seen an otter swimming in the last light of the day on another occasion. Maybe an otter had become ensnared by the line in its search for something to eat, like crayfish. In desperation, maybe it had run up on shore to get rid of the line and finally decided to free itself by chewing it off. Maybe that was it. Anyway, I was sure no human being was involved, and somehow I felt better with that thought.

Our annual trek up to Hawley Lake had started a few days before when Peter and his family arrived at our home in Payson. He hooked up his camping trailer from behind our garage to his truck and I fastened the boat trailer to my old Toyota motor home. For the umpteenth time we were heading for our favorite lake on the Apache Reservation. A lake that had presented us with numerous trout and thousands of crayfish. This time Peter was even bringing their two dogs, a Doberman and a black lab. In addition he brought a tent to house the dogs and to also contain the porty potty. No need to run out in the woods this year.

After our three hour ride up across the Arizona Mogollon Rim, through Show Low and Alpine and Lakeside, we came to little McNary. This town used to be populated with African Americans working at the saw mill until it closed. Since then, the African population has slowly changed to Native Americans, most likely Apaches from the nearby areas. That's where we look for the turn-off to the nine miles up to Hawley Lake, a winding road that takes us up to the 8,600 foot elevation of the pearl of a lake surrounded by aspen and ponderosa pines.

A little late in the season we had no problem finding a good camping site, and soon we were settled with dogs, tent, camping trailers and my old motor home. And ready for catching crayfish. Within minutes I had one Jumbo trap baited and ready for its intended job. I just walked over to the point ending in big boulders, and there, where in previous years I had caught hundreds of crayfish, I sank the first trap.

But the main schedule for catching crayfish was three nightly sessions setting out my eleven-trap trot line with the help of my modified apparatuses for keeping the trot line from getting all entangled in the boat. Until now I had used my home-made cranking affair, using a plastic milk carton container and a crank made from an abandoned real estate sign. This time, watching a video from the Trappy people in Sweden, I realized I could do the same in a much easier fashion. A plastic gallon jug would hold the line and the trap clips just as orderly as the milk carton crank affair. As long as you coil the line into the jug so that when you reversed the action letting out line for traps, it would come out nice and easy and without any kinks and problems.

This year I had decided to determine if cat food really made good crayfish bait. I had my doubts. My mentor, Terry Bullard had written some years before that cat food was 'crap' and not to be depended on when catching crayfish. He knows his stuff, and I accepted his edict. Cat food is crap. Or is it?

But when George, my ham amateur friend and newly converted crayfish fan had showed me that he could catch more crayfish in two traps with fishy cat food than I could with tilapia in eleven traps, something had to be done. So here I was, ready to find out the truth of his findings. This time I had brought several types of crayfish bait, but mostly the canned Friskies cat food made from ocean white fish and tuna in small cans that I purchased at Walmart for 50 c each. I also brought a package of frozen wild salmon, a ring of sausage, two packages of baloney and some bacon. All of which had at some time or another been praised by some customers of mine as THE crayfish bait to use.

For the first and second nightly sessions I baited every other trap with cat food and assorted baits in the other traps. For the third nightly catch I would use whatever bait had caught most in test one and two. The assorted baits were

stuffed into a plastic bait box (that comes with the Trappy trap) while the cat food can was simply placed on the bottom of the trap with part of its lid opened. During the first two sessions, the lid was opened only half-way which resulted in some cat food remaining in the can after the night session.

As I was trying to prove one thing or another, I kept records of how much I caught with each type of bait.

First Night:

Total catch 289 crays

Trap average 26

Traps with cat food 185 crays (64%)

Traps with other baits 104 crays (35%)

Second night:

Total catch 293 crays

Trap average 26

Traps with cat food 177 crays (60%)

Traps with other bait 116 crays (39%)

No question about it. The cat food had a decided lead over the wild salmon, bacon and baloney baits. So, as I had decided in advance, the third session was going to be nothing but cat food in all the traps. As all the cans in these two tests had almost half the contents left in the cans, I decided to open up the lid more in the third test. This turned out to be a mistake as all the cans in test #3 were totally cleaned out at harvesting time in the morning.

For all the test runs I used different areas of the lake, but always where I had in earlier years had good catches. Of the eleven traps in each trot line, I used four of the old, discontinued but still perfectly good Jumbo traps which proved to be outstanding catchers as they all turned up with around fifty crays in each.

Last night's result with only cat food in all traps:

Total crays 406 crays

Trap average 37

The last catch was even more remarkable as two of the traps came up practically empty. Later I found they had holes in the funnel netting making it possible for the crays to escape. Another reason for possible escapees was the fact that all traps, all, had totally empty cans. This means that the crays ate it all and after the bait is gone, there is no more of that attraction emanating from the cans which draws crayfish into a trap. Consequently, no more crays would come into the trap and more were likely to try to find an exit, which they usually are able to find. The average catch of 37 was in addition to four Jumbo traps with around fifty in each. And compare this to a notation I have of catching over a thousand crays at Black Canyon Lake in one afternoon and one night with a trap average of only 25.

Obviously the cat food had done its job. You don't catch an average of 37 crays per trap with poor bait. At least in this lake, and at this time, and with this kind of cat food, I had a tremendous catch. Of course I realize that I could have caught a lot of crayfish this time using some other baits like e.g. chicken parts. But one thing was for sure, fishy cat food is not 'crap'.

As soon as I have enough crayfish caught during these camping sessions, I cook a batch of crayfish for all of us to taste. George, who had led me to this cat food discovery, visited us at the camp and joined us in eating the first sampling of Hawley crayfish. As he is a spicy devotee, I had cooked the sample with Zatarain's crab boil, and we all enjoyed the fifty crayfish I served. We ate lustily, drank a lot of beer and enjoyed the nearby camp fire that Peter was a master at providing for us. Fortunately, the monsoon held off during the evening, and we were able to enjoy the meal in perfect weather.

Hawley Lake is also a trout lake. As we had brought the old row boat, an aluminum boat I bought about thirty years ago, Peter had brought an electric motor, and with that he traversed the lake with his family several times looking for the elusive rainbow trout. Some years we have had good luck, and I remember the years when we always had trout for lunch or dinner interspersed with some crayfish of course. This year was not quite so productive, and the only member of the crew who brought in a trout was Annika, my grand daughter. She proudly presented a fine trout which Peter later cleaned and ate for lunch. The rest of us had to satisfy ourselves with whatever else the camp scullery had to offer.

Each day I took my traditional siesta in the back of my motor home. That usually is also the time for the daily afternoon showers, and one day it was really coming down in buckets. Actually we even got some hail, and I found it somewhat difficult to catch any cat naps with the drum beats of hail pounding on the aluminum camper roof over my head. Fortunately the showers were short lived, and soon the rain stopped and we could again enjoy some sunshine before the evening breeze came up from the lake.

As usual I had brought two large camping coolers for the crayfish. In each I placed a gallon container with frozen water to keep the crays in shape until we broke camp and headed down home again. Before we leave, I go down to the nearest spring water faucet the camp ground offers here and there. Rinsing the crayfish before we go home is a way to make sure the crayfish have a fair chance to survive the trip and arrive in good shape. As the crayfish all tend to relieve themselves while crawling around in the cooler, rinsing them off reduces the not so pleasant smell they create. This year I had apparently treated them well as there were very few DOAs in the coolers before I dumped them in the bathtub at home.

And home we went after three days of pleasant camping and fishing experience. At home I immediately started preparing for cooking and also freezing the catch. As I keep accurate track of how many crays I have frozen and stashed in the freezers, I now know exactly how many crayfish I caught during the excursion. This year's number was rather modest compared to other years, but I am proud of having put together a harvest of 800 of fine Hawley crayfish. They will keep me in crayfish during the winter with two or four crayfish dinners each month.

What more can a crayfish lover – and Swede to boot – wish for?

In the September newsletter I wrote about how my friend George showed that cat food made better crayfish bait than my frozen tilapia from Wal-Mart. As it was just time for the annual trek to my favorite crayfish lake, I decided to make this trek settle the question.

So early one September day, I packed eleven traps into my camper and went up to the lake in company with my son Peter and his family; including two dogs. I was intent on either proving or disproving that some cat food may be the crayfish bait we all have been looking for. To come to some conclusion I had purchased two cases of Friskies cat food – ocean white fish and tuna – and also one precooked sausage, some baloney and two packages of bacon. Oh, yes, I also included a package of frozen wild salmon filets.

We had scheduled to stay for three nights, so I had three nightly sessions planned for the traps. During the first two sessions I would bait each other trap in my trot line with cat food and every other trap with some of the other baits I had brought. For the third session I would use only the bait that had scored best in the first two test sessions.

A hefty monsoon downpour, typical for this lake, almost cancelled my plans for the first all-night trot line session. But the weather cleared up just before sun-set and my son and I braved the wet boat seats and placed the eleven traps, half with cat food and half with assorted baits.

To find the submerged trot line the following day, the last trap was attached to a plastic float left bobbing inconspicuously. As we were almost alone on the lake at this time, we had few fears of unauthorized interference with our traps. So we rowed back, ate dinner, drank some wine and slept well until next morning.

With the sun barely up over the mountain range to the east, Tracey, my daughter-in-law, and I rowed out to pull the traps. First, find the plastic float.

There was no plastic float to be seen! We looked all over the area where the float had been placed, but no sign of it. Then, suddenly, Tracey, with younger eyes than mine, found the float, up on the shore by about 15 feet. And the end of the string was no longer attached to the last trap in the trot line. Great mystery. Who, or what, would have pulled the float out of the water and brought it up by 15 feet onto the shore? Analyzing the end of the string, I found it was definitely not cut, it was frayed, as if chewed apart with teeth. But whose teeth?

Pondering this mystery, I located the grappling hook in the boat. With this home-made device, made from pieces of coat hangers and a long string, I quickly made contact with the main trot line, retrieved the end and we could start hauling up traps.

Now for an analysis of the first nightly catch.

Total – 289 crayfish, avg 26.3/trap
Traps with cat food – 185 (64%)
Traps with bacon/salmon - 104 (35%)

The second night's catch was as follows:

Total - 294 crays, avg 26.6
Traps with cat food – 177 (60%)
Traps with baloney/sausage –
116 (39%)

Based on this analysis, it was obvious that cat food was superior to other traditional baits even including the salmon filets.

Finally the last nightly session. As the cat food was clearly more successful, I decided to bait all traps with cat food during the last session. For the first two sessions I had opened the lid of the cans about half. As a result, those cans still had about half the contents left as the crays simply could not reach all of the bait. For the last session I opened the lid more than half, so the crays were able to reach more, if not all of the bait in the cans.

Needless to say, each time we placed traps, it was in a different area, but each in areas where I had had good luck with crayfish catches in previous years. Instead of my home made crank operated trot line, which had worked very well for me, this time I tried out a new and simpler method. Now the trot line was simply coiled by hand into a plastic gallon bucket with clips spaced along the line every 20 feet or so. This method worked so well and with no string troubles, that I will use it from now on. I recommend it for all who use many traps.

Here's the last night's catch:

All cat food 406 crays
Trap average 37

All the bait cans were totally empty in the morning. I now realized that some crays escaped after their food was gone. Empty bait cans don't attract any crayfish. I recommend either opening the lid only half way or maybe puncturing the can to make the bait last longer. Later I found some traps with small net holes along the funnel periphery that offered an escape. But traps with no net holes were full, and some of my discontinued Jumbos came up with over 50 crays in each.

Checking my records of successful catches of the past I found that when catching crays from Black Canyon lake using chicken parts as bait, the catches averaged 25 crays per trap. Although I considered that a fine catch then, it was still less than the 37 per trap when using cat food as bait now.

I no longer doubt the effectiveness of fish based cat food as bait. If cat food based on meat products is as good, I don't yet know. But this fish variant surely worked.

Summarizing my experience, I see no reason to use anything else but cat food in the future and at 50c per can it was worth it.