



the CRAYFISH TALE

SEARCHING FOR A BETTER LAKE...

Ever since I first discovered crayfish in Phoenix irrigation canals, I have been on the prowl for bigger and better crayfish waters. My catches along the canals were meager, but they enticed me to start scouring Arizona for bigger and more plentiful crayfish lakes.

When visiting the Navajo Indian Reservation and their Wheatfields Lake, I thought I had found what I was searching for. That lake, north of Window Rock and Gallup, presented me with the biggest crayfish I had so far seen. And there were trout too in numbers. But to get there from our Phoenix home took far too long. I had to find a closer lake for my favorite crayfish source.

Another Indian Reservation, the Apache Indian Reservation with its Hawley Lake, proved great for both crayfish and rainbow trout. At night we fished for crayfish. During the day we tried to lure some rainbow trout while trolling. In addition, this lake, at 8000 feet, was beautiful and offered lots of interesting experiences for my whole family. Watching bears at the local dump impressed our kids; climbing McKay's Peak with its fire spotting tower took our breath away. Hawley Lake kept me enthused for many years although many other lakes in the White Mountain area and above the Mogollon Rim also helped keep me in crayfish.

Then one day I heard rumors about a lake just north of Payson that was reputed to have not only large amounts of crayfish but also having some exceptionally big ones. My friend Dennis wrote glowing reports of this lake and its crustaceous denizens. I paid attention. But where was this lake? He would not say.

Now started a search for this lake that kept me poring over Arizona maps in attempts to locate it. I took my little Toyota motor home over rutty and dusty roads that made me feel sorry for the old faithful putting up with pot-holy and washboardy surfaces just for my craving for crayfish. I went to lakes with funny names, Kinnikinnick, which unfortunately turned out to be a disappointment. I went to Blue Ridge Reservoir, Payson's intended future water supply, but was dismayed at the steep sides of this lake, squeezed into an arroyo of the West. Yes, it had crayfish, but even close to the shores the crayfish were small and not very impressive. Regrettably my traps were placed too deep to come up with much of a catch.

Searching the maps again in the area north of my town, I finally came to the conclusion that the only lake left that could possibly have all these large and numerous crayfish, was a lake served by a primitive dirt road of seventeen miles, probably full of pot holes and teeth chattering washboards.

I mentioned this lake to my son Peter who was ready for another camping trip after the previous one to Hawley Lake. Actually, as I had already caught over a thousand crays from that lake, why would I want to go to another lake for more? Well, that is probably a personality fault of mine. Catching crayfish, whether I need them or not, is a desire that apparently was genetically instilled in me from my father. At one time he used to catch them by the thousands.

So, needing more crayfish or not, Peter and I set out for this elusive lake which I will call Dennis' Lake. With the boat on top of the truck and a camping trailer in tow, we took off for the dreaded dirt road leading to the mythical crayfish lake. Actually, the dirt road was not as bad as feared, and we made it to the lake in good time. On the way in we spotted an elk and soon realized that elk season was nearing with several prospective hunters churning up dust ahead of us.

Finally we reached the lake and found a fine site for a camp among junipers. Our boat was soon in the water. I had brought only five traps, the big jumbo traps plus one Trappy XL. As usual I was gripped by fear that this would become another wild goose chase ending up with empty traps. Yes, it has happened. So for a test before the first overnight session with my 200 foot trot line, I threw in one trap from the shore with a can of fishy cat food as bait.

After two hours we pulled the test trap to see if this was the crayfish Eldorado I had hoped for. I pulled the trap and was, as I had feared, disappointed. There were only five crayfish in it. Maybe we had found the wrong lake. Or did I place the trap too close to shore?

We rowed out a bit further, maybe 25-30 feet from shore this time and about ten feet deep. It's a shallow lake. We left the trap there for another two hours' test before placing the whole trot line for the night.

We all know how fishermen brag when describing their catch. Did Dennis paint the fish tale of this lake in too rosy colors? Did he really catch as many as he said? Were the crays of this lake really as big as he claimed? But pictures don't lie, do they? His coolers seemed filled to the rim. Or were they?

Finally sunset. Time to place the trot line with my 5 traps. But first we wanted to pull the test trap again that we had placed a little further out from the shore. We rowed out to check on it first. Peter rowed and I looked for the float. I grabbed it and slowly started pulling up the trap. It seemed unusually heavy. Could it be? Could it be heavy because of many crays? I had been overly hopeful before; was I building up my hopes too high again? The trap slowly came up. It was a jumbo, the larger than usual trap I had discontinued building. It felt heavier the closer it came. Would the string hold? Just then the trap broke the surface and, to make sure the string would hold the obviously heavy trap, I grabbed both ends of the trap and heaved it up in the boat.

Jubilation! It was so full of crayfish you could barely add one more. I had never seen a trap so full of crayfish. It was a jackpot! It had a reason to be heavy, and both Peter and I let out yells of glee. Peter doesn't eat much crayfish, but he sure likes to catch them. And catch them this time we did.

Later I counted the catch and found we had hauled up over 70 crays in this trap. Including the original five.

Dennis was right. This lake had a lot of crayfish. The whole trot line would most likely catch some good amounts of crays this night. After emptying this test trap, we attached all traps to the trot line and placed it along the shore at about the same depth and distance from the shore. All traps baited with fishy cat food cans.

We went back to camp in good mood and with great hopes for a good catch the following morning. We feasted hungrily on our camp dinners and enjoyed an evening with spirited conversation, a few beers and watching Jupiter rise over the lake in the east.

After fighting off a chilly night in sleeping bags, we had a quick breakfast and went down to the boat ready to pull the traps on the trot line. Rowing out to where we had placed the float marking the end of the trot line took us only a few minutes. Now we had five traps to pull, but this time we had no doubts. They would have some crays in them. But how many is always the question. With the sun just over the horizon and sometimes in my eyes, I started pulling the trot line rope for the nearest trap. It came up, and as we now expected, it was full of crayfish. And they were large. Strangely, very few small ones; most were bigger than I had ever seen before. (8 to the pound) All the traps were as full as they could possibly be. All of them had at least fifty crays in them. Later checks would show that one trap was filled with 80 large crays. A record for me. Earlier catches had averaged around fifty per jumbo trap. Years ago I remember how delighted I was if a trap had as many as 30 crays in it. This was a crayfish catcher's paradise.

We came back with our 5 traps and over 300 large crayfish, practically all keepers. Both Peter and I were on top of the world. As my cooler now was overflowing, we decided to cancel the following night's trot line session. Just one more trap during the day and we had almost 400 crayfish from six traps. I was satisfied.

I had finally found my crayfish Eldorado, and any other new lake will most likely be a disappointment.

Thank you Dennis!

Trapper Arne