

Crayfish Tales
by
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Black Canyon Lake revisited – with more mysteries
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With the warm days of June sending crayfish waters up to the 70's, crayfish would be active in any of the Arizona Mogollon Rim Lakes. I chose to return to the lake of my great success – and failure – of last September.

Black Canyon Lake had grown big since I last saw it. In September last year, it suffered from the drought that decimated all the Rim Lakes. The boat launch was way above the lake's water level then, but now, after a very wet winter, there was water everywhere. The spillways were relieving the lake of excess water.

So on a Wednesday afternoon I hitched the boat trailer to the truck and started filling them with camping paraphernalia. As usual I brought twelve traps, ten for the trot line and two large ones for the usual float-and-string presentation. Planning to be up at the lake at around five, I left a hot, simmering Payson around four. The truck pulls the little boat trailer nicely, and except for a crushed ice stop in Payson, I went straight for the lake's campground and arrived on schedule.

For the first time I now took advantage of my maturing age and used the Golden Pass card which lets me camp for only \$6 instead of twelve. (Last year it was \$10 vs. \$5.) The campground was practically empty, but the camp host recognized me and asked me about my crayfish plans. I took the same site as last fall.

Then down to the lake three miles down the bumpy and wash-boardy road. Yes, the lake had grown substantially and look quite impressive. Only a few shore fishermen were wetting their lines, and the lake was empty of boats. With some difficulty, and this is getting harder each year, I managed to get the boat in the water. Filled it with twelve baited traps, oars, tackle box and the life saver.

With a few strokes of the oars, and I was in deep enough water to start fishing on the way out to the dam at the other end of the lake. That's when I realized my fishing rod was still in the truck. Oh, well, there is always something I forget. Such as, my warm levi pants which were still lying on the sewing machine table at home. But I had no fear about freezing today. Even up at this altitude the temperature was still in the low eighties.

Rowing out to the place for placing the traps is a perfect time for catching a few of the trout the lake has plenty of. And even the shore guys were picking up fish,

I could see. So I just made a beeline for the other side of the lake, near where I had my disastrous loss of five traps last year. The reason for that loss still puzzles me and I have been searching for an explanation all winter. I would soon find another plausible reason for that loss.

But I was going to make two new mistakes today that would cost me some of the quantity of crayfish I would pull up the next morning. When I baited the traps, before heading for the dam side of the lake, I noticed that I had not enough bait for more than a skimpy application of bait to each trap. I had a feeling there should be much more. I had brought only one package of pre-frozen salmon trimmings from the grocery store. I should have brought two.

Another problem emerged as I started placing the traps. Believing I had found a good rocky and crayfish harboring area from watching the shoreline, I started letting out my trot line. But after a few traps were out, further on the area turned into a sandy, smooth shoreline which is not conducive to harboring large amounts of crayfish who need hiding places in the water. But now I was committed to the trot line, so I had to continue letting out the rest of the rope for the remainder of the traps.

I was now getting close to the dam, which is indeed very rocky and promising for crayfish hideouts. But I had already placed the eleven traps. And the trot line had ended before reaching the dam area. So that was that. All I now had left was one large float-and-string-loaded trap which I placed next to the boulders by the dam.

I realized now that I should have rowed over to the other side of the dam which now looked much better for keeping crayfish happy. It looked much more like the area I tried last fall with such fantastic catches. But now it was too late. Maybe next time.

So I rowed back, still no fishing rod to try the trout population of the lake. This year there was no algae bloom as in September, and the water was clear and fish were making rippling rings on the surface here and there.

Back to the launch area, I secured the boat with a chain and lock, emptied it of anything stealable, and drove up to the camp for dinner.

My concern of leaving the warm levis at home were unwarranted. The temperature was pleasant, and I had no fear of being cold in shorts in the sleeping back that night. Just before retiring for the night, I noticed that the few clouds that made for a pretty sunset in the west, had disappeared. But during the night increasing rumblings woke me up, and suddenly a strong thunderstorm over the campground sent noisy torrents of rain onto the reverberating aluminum roof of the camper shell. But even that went by.

In the morning, at 5 o'clock with a rising sun in the east, I ate a quick breakfast and was down again to the lake on the horribly bumpy road. At this time rain was actually sprinkling lightly, and I was glad I had brought a wind jacket in case the rain persisted. The boat had a small amount of water in the low part, but not enough to need bailing. Besides, I did not find anything to bail out the water, so I readied a fishing rod and took off as the only person braving the waters at this early hour.

I already had the Cowbell troll rigged with a trailing Z-ray lure, so I let it out behind the boat as I slowly rowed toward the other end of the lake. Shortly after I got my first strike. This time I had the rod sitting in a rod holder on the boat left side. The tip jerkily tipped several times to indicate I had something on. Yes, and this time I even had the landing net ready, but the landing was somewhat of a disappointment. A rainbow trout, yes, but it might as well have been a sardine. Not over 8 inches long and something you would normally throw back in. But as it was the first for the day, I kept it. Now I realized I had no stringer, so the trout had to share the milk carton holder with the trotline crank.

Still overcast, so I had no problems with sun reflections in my aging eyes, and the sprinkling rain had almost stopped, but it never was a problem.

This time I easily found the marker for the end of the trot line. Nobody had moved or stolen it in spite of seeing two people at that end of the lake the night before. First a service truck driver had stopped and watched what I was doing, and after I had placed the trap by the dam, a fellow with a tackle box walked across the dam and asked how the crayfish catching was going. Then I realized there was a service road on this side of the lake.

But first I pulled up the trap by the dam, one of the large traps. It had a good amount of crayfish in it, later I counted over 30, so I realized the day would not be altogether lost. In addition, the crayfish were unusually large – apparently typical for Black Canyon Lake – and most of them had molted their shells. Later I also found out, much to my surprise that a large percentage, well over 50%, were females. This was in contrast to my experience a couple of weeks before at neighboring Woods Canyon Lake, where in a catch of over 200, NOT A SINGLE FEMALE was found.

Why this difference? The lakes are only a dozen or two miles apart, so why would one lake have lots of females while the other one have none? Obviously there must be females in the lake or it would soon be empty of crayfish for good. For years I have wondered why I had found so few females in my crayfish catches, especially early in the season. Even the great crayfish lake of Hawley Lake, had relatively few females caught as late as in August. But Black Canyon Lake in September had mustered large amounts of them. But why not Woods Canyon Lake and next door Willow Springs Lake?

But back to the beginning of the trot line. To make a long story a little shorter, I gathered a total of 240 crayfish in 12 traps, so they averaged 20 crayfish in each. Some had over thirty in them, but several were down to maybe only ten, especially in the sandy area. But they were all large, several had not molted, and there were females galore.

Some people wonder why I am so concerned about females. Well, I am a Swede, ain't I? Joking aside, as most crayfish in Sweden are caught in August, and as the females then have a deposit of roe under their shell, this is considered an added attraction if you like caviar tasting crayfish roe. And I do. But early in the season, the females have not yet developed their roe, so that part the incentive is not yet there to enjoy.

One of the float-and-line traps gave me a clue to what happened to the traps I lost last fall. The line leading up to the float had been pulled into the trap, probably by the activity of the crayfish fighting for the bait, and thereby they had pulled in a large length of the line. On this trap, not enough to make the float disappear from the surface, but certainly on the way. This could have happened when I was missing the floats of five traps last fall. Also possible is that the traps had rolled down a sloping bottom thereby winding the line around the traps until the float disappeared.

After all the traps were pulled and deposited in the boat, I resumed my fishing for trout on the way back to the launching area. Soon I had another little trout in the boat after a trailing Z-ray. This time I decided to let it go as the hook was barely caught in the mouth of the fish.

But not long after this sardine release, I had a large – maybe German brown – on the Z-ray/Cowbell combination, and this one I kept for a future dinner at home.

Back at the launch I unloaded the traps and started counting the catch while dumping them into coolers with ice. Now I also discovered the result of my bait mistake. **Every single trap was totally empty of bait. Totally.** Obviously the crayfish had finished all there was to eat, and, as crayfish tend to do, they started looking for the exit. And some of them found it in spite of the escape stopper. Here is when the funnel opening of 2" vs 2.5" makes a difference. If you have plenty of bait in the trap, the larger size trap catches and probably holds just as many crayfish. But when you run out of bait, then the two inch opening helps hold them inside until you pick up the trap in the morning. And the general statement 'the more bait, the more crayfish' holds true.

To summarize my experience: I chose a poor place for placing the traps. And I placed too little bait in the traps. I found that females are plentiful even early in the season in this lake, but I also found that while most crayfish were very large (about 7 or 8 to the pound compared to 12-14 to the pound for 'keepers' in Louisiana,) there were practically no small crayfish like you always find at other

lakes. Why? And, as I also found in September, a large percentage of the crayfish had not molted yet and were consequently dark on the bottom side. Sometimes un-molted crayfish tails are skimpy, but this time both tails and claws were well filled.

Getting the boat from the water and onto the trailer became a backbreaking problem this time, and placing the filled coolers in the back of the truck was not my cup of tea either. But on the whole, the crayfish affair had a happy ending, and I started home again at eight o'clock in the morning. A few rain drops were still falling from a cloudy sky which made the driving easier on the eyes. Listening to operatic music on the cassette player I was home before ten o'clock for practically a whole day of crayfish cooking. I even cooked a small batch, (the 40 remaining after two batches of 100's) in Zatarains crab boil from Louisiana instead the Swedish simple salt and dill recipe. Sure I am a Swede, alright, but no one can say that I am not open minded.

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