

Crayfish Tales
by
Trapper Arne

#19
(4117 words)

A BLACK DAY AT BLACK CANYON LAKE

During long winter months, I look forward to dinners we have designated as crayfish dinners. Our freezer is filled with containers of frozen crayfish, the tasty result of several summer excursions to Arizona lakes. Especially the lakes on the Mogollon Rim just north of our home in Payson. One hour's travel and I'll be at one of these crayfish heavens.

So, when our families went to far away Hawley crayfish lake last August, I did not have the usual urgency to catch as many as possible while at this productive lake. I could just as easily catch them in my own back yard hills 'on the Rim'. So I satisfied myself with only 500 crayfish for cooking and freezing for the winter.

What I had in mind was going back to the crown jewel of them all, the Black Canyon Lake, where the crayfish had been not only plentiful to the extreme, but also had the delightful habit of presenting me with a high ratio of female crayfish. And all who know me, know why I am interested in females. The roe. Toward the end of the season, in August and September, the female crayfish not only go searching for food in Trapper Arne traps, but they also are full of roe. At this time of the year, my catch usually contains up to 90% females. Who knows what the males are up to.

So, just a few weeks after coming home from Hawley lake, I was on my way to Black Canyon Lake on top of the Mogollon Rim for a final catch of the year. This time my friend Howard had joined me, and together we had planned an overnigher using the little campground a few miles from the lake.

Going through Payson and up to the Mogollon Rim through dense Ponderosa pine forests only takes about 45 minutes; on to the turnoff to Black Canyon Lake a few more. I was early and prepared to wait for Howard. My old dad had long ago instilled in me the conviction that you should never let people wait for you. It may be considered an insult. So I was half an hour early and used the time to finish off part of my wife-prepared lunch.

Right on time Howard arrived. I made a favorable mental note of this as we continued toward the campground to make sure it was still open and not completely full. Fat chance for that as it was now after Labor Day and outdoors life was back to normal. At the campsite I left my two bundles of fire wood plus my hatchet just to

mark a site as being taken, then down to the lake another three miles down the horribly pot-holed road. The recent monsoon rains had made a mess of the earlier rather acceptable gravel road.

Shaken to the bones down a bad gravel road I feel for my vehicle. This time I also had to feel for my trailer and the boat on top of it. Here and there I could hear the rattle of some of the articles stuffed in the boat, like the oars and the trotline winch. At around 15 mph we crawled down to the lake at the bottom of the canyon with its blackened forest fire singed trees on each side.

With Howard following me down the dusty road, we soon saw the lake. It was low. It reminded us that we were still in a years-long drought, and the launching ramp did not even reach down to the water any more. No problem, though, and with Howard taking some movie scenes of the painfully neck-twisting trailer-backing maneuver, I soon had the trailer and boat down to the water's edge.

Time for baiting traps. This is the messiest part of trap preparations. And today I had decided to use two types of bait. As usual a piece of fresh fish, frozen whiting from Wal-Mart, and for a double whammy attraction, also a piece of my Southern artificial manufactured bait. Now that the lake temperature was at its annual peak, the manufactured bait should be just perfect. I had put this bait in little mesh bags attached to each trap, and with Howard letting the camera roll, I was soon finished with the baiting operation. Two types of bait - twice as much crayfish I figured. After all, the summer before, I had pulled up over 1000 crayfish, big ones, from this lake at about the same time of year. And this time I was going to show Howard how good this lake really could be. I thought.

Soon I had my twelve traps ready and loaded into the boat. As these traps are not collapsible, they take a fair amount of space in the little ten footer of a boat. But Howard had another ten traps with him that also needed space. Scratching our heads at the sight of the boat full of my traps, we soon realized that we had a problem. From earlier visits to the dam at the end of the lake, I knew that there was a road leading from the launch area down along the lake and to the dam. We decided that Howard would drive his truck and traps down to the dam, and after I had placed my traps, we would do the same with his.

Good thinking, we thought, and I took off rowing down toward the dam with Howard taking the road along the lake heading for the dam. Fortunately the day was perfect with no wind to impede my rowing progress. Soon I was down at the dam and started looking for Howard. So far nothing to be seen on the road leading over the dam. While waiting I decided to start placing my twelve traps along the length of the dam, about 200 to 300 feet of rocks that are just a perfect hang-out for big, hungry roe-filled female crayfish.

Having finished placing my traps, Howard still was not there. What could be the reason? Had something happened? Had he not found the right road leading to the

dam? After pondering the situation for a while, I decided to row back to the launch area just in case Howard had returned there for some reason.

Yes, he had returned and stood by the shore waving at me as I approached the launch area, now with an empty boat. Soon I found out. The road leading down to the dam was closed to traffic, so Howard had no choice but to return to the launch and hope I would figure out what was wrong.

This time the boat had plenty of space for his ten traps, and off we rowed for the dam again. This time we brought my camera for taking pictures of me pulling up traps with lots of crayfish in them to add to my crayfish epic in the making.

But first it was time to place Howard's traps. I suggested the area between the dam and my favorite spot in a cove to the east of the lake. On a previous occasion I had here brought up several traps so full that I had to use both hands to lift them into the boat. This is where I had always had real good luck with catching the large females of Black Canyon Lake.

Soon we were there, and Howard's mixture of traps went in. There were a couple of Bullard sportsmen, some Trapper Arne Trappers and several traps Howard had made himself. All equipped with bait containers filled with sardines plus some fresh whiting. I had previously expressed my doubts about the sardines as a crayfish bait, but Howard insisted he had had good luck with that in other lakes. At least the sardines were not in tomato sauce or olive oil but rather in an more neutral concoction like water.

We both placed our traps using the trot-line method. All traps were connected to each other with a polyethylene line. Mine spaced about 25 feet apart, his about fifteen feet apart. I used my winch made with a plastic milk carton container with a crank; Howard let out his line by hand from a dangerously large bundle of rope lying in the boat. It reminded me painfully of my first attempt at using a trot line many years ago at Hawley Lake. I had prepared a line that was much too thin and with a tendency to get tangled before it went out with the traps. It had turned into a big mess that kept me from trying that method for several years until I read Bullard's masterly written description of how to do it right. With a winch or something to keep the line from getting entangled.

Even without a winch, Howard managed to get his line out without too much trouble. But we agreed to bring his line in using my winch just to make sure his line stayed untangled.

Now it was about two o'clock in the afternoon and our traps were all placed. Anxious as I always am to predict how the coming harvest would turn out, I usually peek into my first placed trap to see if it already has something in it. I did so with the trap of mine that had been in the water the longest, maybe half an hour. We pulled it up and to my disappointment, there was nothing in the trap. Oh well, I

thought, half an hour is not very much time to base a prediction on, so I kept my disappointment to myself and we went across the lake to try some luck at catching a few trout.

My plan was to leave the traps in for three or four hours. In the meantime we rowed to the opposite shore, pulled up the boat and I prepared my rod for some bobber fishing. Howard chose to watch me while I fought a few feisty trout, I thought, and soon I had pulled up a little bluegill much to my surprise. Waiting for my next bite we ate some of our brown-bagged lunches and enjoyed the balmy monsoon weather with its billowing nimbus clouds growing from the east.

Apparently I had not rigged my rod with the right combination. I had several bites, dragged a few fish up toward the shore, but lost them all before I could make them join my little bluegill. Oh yes, I did pull one up to shore. That was a sizeable female crayfish who had taken interest in my chewed up leftover of a worm. I added the crayfish to my tiny collection while feeling more confident about a coming good harvest from our crayfish traps.

Soon it was time to pull the first traps. It was now about four hours after I placed my traps and about three for Howard's. We rowed out to where I had placed my traps along the rocky dam. As usual I was full of anticipation and fear of what the fishing providence had in store for me. I always fear I will be skunked with not a single catch in my traps. It hasn't happened often, but the time it did happen, left a lasting memory of uncertainty in its wake. But Black Canyon had always been good to me. With the exception of the time early this spring, while the water still was below 50 °F. But that was understandable, I thought. Cold water makes the crayfish sluggish. But this was September, and the water was at its temperature peak for the summer.

Slowly we came up to the first of my string of crayfish traps. It was one of my Jumbo traps, the one that can hold tons of crayfish when cray fishing is good. I maneuvered the boat toward the end float of the trot line and swung the rear of the boat so Howard could pull it in. He grabbed the float and wound the end string onto the green, inconspicuous, float.

Then the trap came up. Empty! I could not believe my eyes. An empty crayfish trap in Black Canyon Lake! There must be a mistake. Maybe the trap had landed on edge in the water, making it impossible for crayfish to enter it. Yet, even then, some should have been able to enter the trap. But no. Not one.

The next trap down the trot line was the same. My heart sank even deeper as it also came up empty. And these were the traps placed along the rocky dam area which should be the perfect hang out for crayfish. Then the third and the fourth up to the end of the line. All empty. Not even a one in them. What had gone wrong? And all traps had a full complement of the fresh bait still hanging from the bait hook. Obviously, no crayfish had been in there feasting on bait and then left. They simply

had never entered the traps.

Then we went over to Howard's string of traps, the ones that started where mine ended and then down to the west of the lake. To facilitate the trap pulling we used my trot line winch winding his line on top of mine. There was plenty of space for both lines on the winch. The first traps also came up empty. Six empty traps until finally one came up with a few crays in it. And then, the next four of his traps had almost a dozen crayfish in them. The further away from the dam we came, the more crayfish the traps had. Yet, in total, we had not picked up more than maybe two dozen crayfish. A dismal result compared to what we had anticipated. And this from the lake that had produced record catches previous years. What had happened?

But this was only the afternoon of the first day. Our plan was to re-bait the traps now, if they needed it, and then place them further west of where the dam had totally, almost, failed us. A few of Howard's traps needed some more bait, but most were still full of the original bait.

So as we continued further west along the shore we placed his traps in the little cove that had been so productive the year before. After leaving his ten traps on his trot line in the cove we came to my choice for the coming night. This stretch of lake has never failed me. This is where I first experienced traps so full I could not lift them into the boat one handed. The shore is rather steep here and probably so is the bottom. Soon I had the trot line in the water with the same bait as before, fresh whiting and manufactured bait in all. At each end of the line I placed a Jumbo trap with its own float, somehow to mark the beginning and end of my trot line.

Originally I started using the trot line technique in order to hide my traps from uninvited 'visitors' who may also be cruising the lake. But this time we had no such fear as we were the only ones left on the lake this late in the afternoon, actually early evening. The sun was about to set and we were ready to return to the launch area to continue up to our camp site for a late picnic dinner.

So with the last Jumbo trap in place, we rowed back and prepared for a night of camping. Just as we drove into the campground we found the camp host, whom I recognized from earlier visits to the camp ground. We presented our fishing credentials and I my Golden Age card which qualifies me for staying at the camp for half price. As we chatted, we mentioned that we had very poor luck catching crayfish down by the dam. Eddie, the camp host, became animated as he then told us that he had talked to other people coming up from the lake with the same problem. Poor crayfish catches. But then he really added the clincher to our crayfish catching confusion. One of these guys, he added, said that the Arizona Game and Fish Department has stocked the lake with large mouth bass. "That's why you won't find many crayfish in the lake any more."

Not that I liked to hear this statement, but it certainly removed some of the

confusion about why we had not caught any crays down by the dam. Could it really be such a dramatic difference in less than a year? Well, the camp host Eddie seemed to be convinced and I guess he convinced us. In a way, I began to feel better about it now. At least our dismal luck was not because of the traps or the bait. It was because there were fewer crayfish in the lake than there used to be.

With that information to chew on, we went on to our camp site, designated with a hatchet and some camp fire wood, and prepared for a pleasant dinner and a cordial chat in front of a roaring camp fire.

Change of plans! The hatchet was gone as was the fire wood I had placed under the table. With a few well chosen words I accepted the fact that someone had helped himself to what I thought was an acceptable way of marking a camp site. I was glad I had not left any more valuable items on the table for some jerks to help themselves.

With that smoldering instead of a camp fire, we had our dinner, chewed the fat for a while as the stars appeared in the sky and the moon rose fat and sassy. We compared notes, debated about what we had heard about the large mouth bass and the poor crayfish catch before we decided it was time to call it a day and catch a few winks before the sun came up again.

Early to bed makes for an early riser. Before the sun was peeking over the horizon, we were up, had our quickie breakfast and were on our way down to the lake again. As I had left both the boat and the trailer at the lake, I had some concern about what we would see, or not see, when we got there. All was fine, though. The trailer was still chained by its wheel, and the boat lay there nicely on the shore. When we had left the lake, nobody else was there, and as we arrived, nobody had beaten us to it. So all was where it should be.

This time we used Howard's electric motor to get out to the traps. No movie making this morning, and our only concern was, "would there be any crayfish in them there traps." We were convinced that our bad luck the day before must have something to do with the rumor that the lake was full of large mouth bass. What other explanation could there be?

This time we headed for my traps first, the twelve I had placed where the year before I had brought up record big catches of big female crayfish. Still, I was full of my traditional worry about how good or bad the catch would be. I could not for my life believe that the western cove would fail to respond the way it has had in the past. And Howard's traps were just close to mine, also where great catches had been made in the past.

Switching from electric power to oars, I backed the boat up to the first Jumbo trap at the end of the trot line. As usual I wound the line on the float, and the trap slowly came up. It seemed it was rather heavy so I began to hope that maybe, after all,

there would be lots of crayfish in it.

It was empty! Great disappointment and huge consternation. Even Howard showed disappointment although it wasn't his trap..

Then we started lifting up the traps attached to the trot line. My home-made cranker worked just fine and soon trap after trap came up to the surface - full of untouched bait and totally empty of crayfish.

We expressed our dismay in several well chosen words, not quite suited for mixed company. It was absolutely unbelievable. My best crayfish lake of all the Rim Lakes had this time totally forsaken me and left me steeped in frustration and bewilderment. Last year I had brought up over 1000 crayfish in less than 24 hours with the same traps. Experiences like these really test a guy's mettle, whatever that is. But tested it was.

Then round the next corner to Howard's traps. He had his ten traps of mixed heritage, Trapper Arne, Bullard and his own well designed and manufactured traps. They were also on a trot line, and we used my half filled reel to winch in his line.

By golly, there were some crayfish in his traps. Not many. Not as many as he and I had expected and hoped for. But he was not skunked. After we got all his traps up in the boat, and it was getting filled to the railings by now, he had added another sixty crayfish to his previous twenty. A mere smidgen of what we had expected, but much better than what I had to show for.

We grumbled about it for quite a while. Hypothesized about this and that and large mouth bass before we decided to call it a day and go home.

At first we had decided to go back to the launching ramp with my 'catch' and then go after his traps in a second run. But with my traps all empty, and his not far from it, we scrounged up enough space in the boat for all the twenty-two traps as long as we did not move around much in the boat during the passage back to lick our wounds.

Before we were ready to call it a day and go home, Howard was kind enough to donate 15 big female Black Canyon crayfish to me, as salve on my wounds and enough for at least one decent crayfish dinner the coming weekend.

Back home at my computer I made a bee-line for Google to find the Arizona Game and Fish Department web site. There ought to be something about stocking the lake with large mouth bass. I found not a single word about it. Scratching my head in frustration, I finally called the fish department's editor, Rory Aikens, and told him about our experience including the rumor about large mouth bass stocking.

"No stocking of large mouth bass in that lake" was his emphatic answer. "And even if there had been one, it would not effect the crayfish population that much that soon."

So there. Apparently, what the camp host told us was just a rumor that he presented as plain fact. Then what was the reason for the obvious decline of crayfish in the lake? Obviously not the traps which were the same as the year before. Obviously not the bait, the Whiting filets, that I had also used during previous successful sessions at the lake. Was it the manufactured bait I had in a mesh bag in every trap? And this was the first time I used this variety of manufactured bait. Could this manufactured bait have deterred the crayfish this time? After all, none of Howard's traps used the manufactured bait. Could it possibly be? And I was selling this type of manufactured bait. I'd better find out about this real soon.

The following week I baited four traps and went to Payson's East Verde River, known for its plentiful, but small, crayfish. I baited two traps with the suspect manufactured bait, and put whiting filets in the other two. Setting out the traps late one evening, I left them in for the night. The following day, even before the sun was up, I traipsed down into the rattle snake infested bushes around the slowly running river, and pulled my four traps.

The two traps with manufactured bait had 82 crayfish in them. The two traps with fish filets, by now all eaten up, had 12 crayfish in them.

The manufactured bait was obviously working! I drew a sigh of relief and went home to cook this catch while trying to sort out the still remaining mystery about the black day at Black Canyon Lake.

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