

Crayfish Tales
by
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CATCHING CRAYFISH FOR HUNGRY SWEDES

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Mist was still shrouding the contours of the distant shores of little Hawley Lake as I walked down to my boat. In the east, a deep red, heralding a new day, had turned into orange, and the sun was half an hour away from peeking over the distant wooded ridge of the White Mountains of Arizona. It would soon start warming the chilly waters of my favorite crayfish lake.

This would be my last chance for emptying crayfish traps before members of the VASA lodge arrived for the weekend. I still had over a hundred crustaceans to catch to reach my estimated goal of four hundred. We were expecting about twenty-five hungry, crayfish eating lodge members, many of them well versed in the art of shelling and downing two dozen crayfish per person at one sitting.

Pushing out from the misty shore I could not yet see the other side of the lake where I had set the traps the previous night. A few slow pulls on the oars and the aluminum boat started heading out on the still unrippled surface. The day before my crayfish catch along the shore of our camp had been disappointing. Those traps contained only half a dozen medium sized crayfish each, compared to the twenty-five and even thirty we had caught at the beginning of the week.

So, the night before, I decided to drop the Swedish crayfish traps at the opposite shore instead. We had never tried our luck there. Its rocky shore seemed perfect for harboring an untapped supply of crustaceans. Soon I would find out if my theorizing was correct.

The surface of the lake was still like a mirror. Maneuvering the boat to the first of the traps was easier now than in the brisk wind the night before. As the trap float lightly bumped the side of the boat, my subconscious recalled other occasions of getting ready to pull up the first of a string of traps in a new lake. How often had I pulled up a trap with great expectations of fabulous fishing luck with dozens of crayfish in every trap, only to have my hopes crushed at the sight of a skimpy catch.

Leaning over the side of the boat, ready to start pulling the first

trap, I could see the string from the float leading down to the trap. On the bottom was the vague outline of the Swedish-made collapsible crayfish trap. I could not make out any details in the dark of the water. My lurking pessimism momentarily overwhelmed me, and I heard myself muttering, "I bet there won't be a one in it."

Starting to tug at the string I first thought the trap had caught on something. After some extra hefty pulling, the trap slowly came up from the depth of about five or six feet. Maybe, I thought, I am pulling up some waterlogged branches stuck to the trap. Or could it possibly be so heavy because it is full of crayfish?

Yes, it was that full! It was fantastic! The whole trap was crawling with crayfish. As the trap broke the surface I could clearly see I was finally having a bonanza. Lifting it carefully inside the boat, I knew I had a record catch. The trap counted out to forty-five crayfish!

The lakeside crayfish party was saved. Obviously this morning's catch from a dozen traps would amount to more than enough to supply all the demands that twenty-five crayfish hungry campers could muster. Many of the remaining traps had respectable amounts of crustaceans, and when all the traps lay dripping in the stern of the boat, the total catch amounted to over two hundred good sized crayfish.

For a person steeped in the Swedish crayfish eating tradition, Hawley Lake is nothing short of heaven. In these waters on Indian reservations live untold numbers of large crayfish. Each night these shellfish emerge from their daytime hideouts to prowl for food. Although they eat lake vegetation, they get ecstatic about meat of any sort. Leaving a stringer of trout hanging from a boat by the shore is asking for trouble. Crayfish love trout. Strangely enough, trout also love crayfish.

The crayfish of the high elevation lakes of Arizona are similar to those you find in Europe and Scandinavia. The color of these crayfish is a dark brown to dark green that turns bright red when cooked. Crayfish in Arizona all occur wild in numerous natural or artificial lakes. But in Louisiana, a large portion of the annual yield of thousands of tons of 'crawfish', is harvested from rice ponds and lowlands. The Cajun's love for crayfish rivals that of the Swedes' and they display their love for crustaceans in numerous recipes. My ethnic bias favors the Scandinavian recipe. Maybe also because such a recipe is the essence of simplicity. Crayfish, salt water and dill.

Catching crayfish is a lot of fun. Most people catch Arizona crayfish without traps and have a ball doing it. All you need is a pole, a string and a

piece of bait. During camping we enjoy seeing young and old alike walking along the shore of the lake after dark, bucket and flashlight in one hand, pole with bait in the other, searching for the critters. The crayfish are everywhere and all over. As you see a good sized crayfish on the prowl, simply lower the bait in front of him. After a few seconds he will 'smell' it in the water and make a dash for it. Holding the bait in its powerful claws, he will start eating it. Now, slowly raise the string and slide a dip net under the crayfish and drop it in the bucket. You have just caught another tidbit for your table! In less than two hours my son and I caught 150 crayfish that way, and we had a delightful time of male bonding doing it.

The next day the crayfish destined for the Scandinavian camp were ready for the Saturday night feast. The long row of picnic tables was set, Coleman lanterns were hissing, schnapps glasses and frosted beers waiting next to overflowing platters of red boiled crayfish. To add atmosphere, the moon rose over the horizon of the pine scented Arizona woods. Soon the Ponderosa forest by the lake reverberated with gleeful singing of traditional drinking songs. By the flickering light of a bonfire, four hundred crayfish were slowly reduced to a heap of red broken shells while the bonds of old world heritage grew stronger among the Arizona pines.

The End

For more information about crayfish and how to catch them, visit my web page at WWW.TrapperArne.com.

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