

Crayfish Tales
by
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Crayfish tale #8

Mystery at Black Canyon Lake

What happened to the crayfish traps?

For over thirty years of catching crayfish I have tempted fate. The fate of losing traps to thieves. Each year I have fished for crayfish in several lakes and a few rivers, yet not once did I lose a trap due to thievery. And this in spite of using the conspicuous string-and-float method of marking my traps. Most of the lakes with crayfish have also been favorite trout fishing spots. Many people have seen my trap floats bobbing in the waters, tempting the longfingered to help themselves.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I have lost traps alright. But not to thievery. Some traps were lost for other reasons. Once or twice a trap got stuck in unknown debris on the bottom causing the string to tear apart from the trap. A few times the string was apparently chewed up by marine animals. In a few cases, knowing where the trap was lost, I managed to bring it up again with a grappling hook constructed with a clothes hanger that is usually part of my fishing equipment.

But over thirty years of crayfish catching, sometimes using up to thirty traps at a time, I have not lost more than two or three traps.

Then came the mystery at Black Canyon Lake.

Black Canyon Lake was a new crayfish lake for me. As soon as I turned off Arizona Rt. 260 onto the Mogollon Rim road beginning the 6 miles to Black Canyon Lake, I realized I had never tried this lake before. Dirt roads are a pain and I feel for my truck's tires. They had seen a lot of service and I was afraid of exposing them to the hazards of a gravel road. Although a dirt road, it was in fairly good shape, and at times I could get my truck up to 40 mph.

The campground for the lake is situated on a wooded knoll three miles from the lake. That's another nuisance as I would soon discover. Selecting a campsite in the campground was easy as I was one of the only two there. I marked my campsite spot with the cooler, a chair and a few others items and went down to the lake with the boat sticking out from the back of the truck.

Black Canyon lake is rather small but trees surround the lake making it look pleasantly secluded and protected. The dam is located at the other end of the lake from the boat launching area and turned out to be the only place with stones and rocks for a good crayfish habitat. That's where I would

place my crayfish traps.

However, first I had to bait my traps. I brought 12 traps; 10 regular TRAPPERS and two of the extra large Jumbo traps I once made as an early experiment. But I could not find the crayfish bait of fresh cut salmon trimmings. It was still in that cooler I left as a marker for the camp site. So, back the three miles to the camp ground, much to my irritation.

Finally back with the bait, I baited the traps while inspecting the lake area. Only another half a dozen cars or trucks in the parking area and a few people fishing from the shore here and there. The lake was quite low in spite of a three inch rain the previous week end. However, I had no problem launching the boat, and off I rowed to the other end of the lake where the crayfish habitat of rocky shores beckoned. As there were practically no fishermen on the lake, I had decided to use the easier float-and-string method of placing the traps. In other words, not the trot line I use when too much fishing activity makes me fear for their safety. With a trot line you don't see any of the telltale red painted floats. This decision I would come to regret.

With daylight slowly fading while rowing toward the dam, I let out my cowbell with a few salmon eggs attached to a hook. It took about 20 minutes

to get to the intended crayfish hangout, but in the meantime I had not one single strike. I noticed that the water was murky from algae, kind of greenish, so I saw nothing below half a foot or so.

At the dam area I found the rocks that are usually the perfect hangout for crayfish. I started placing the traps in water about ten feet deep. One of the traps, a Jumbo, I had baited with the bait the Cajun Crawfish Festival at Willow Springs had used. This is a bait, they say, which is used by the crawfishermen in Louisiana. It's a compressed mixture of grains and something that adds scent to it. At first sight it did not impress me much as it looked too much like compressed horse manure. The other traps had an assortment of salmon pieces and leftovers from a butchered hen.

After placing all 12 traps, I rowed back to the first trap, the one with the compressed horse poop. Just for fun I pulled it up to see what it had in it after about 20 minutes in the water. It had one lonely crayfish looking at me, but it was big and boded of more. But on the way rowing over to this trap I noticed that the float of one of the other traps was nowhere to be seen. This has happened before, the trap moves a bit so that it sinks a little big deeper and the float goes under. Well, I thought, I will find it in the

morning with a grappling hook. I had the land mentally marked where it was originally placed.

Back to the campground for an evening meal of a sandwich, an egg and some yogurt and a beer. Not in that order. Rigged up the propane lantern and sat reading my book about the Second World War until it got too cold and I crawled into my sleeping bag. Slept quite well. After all, it was as quiet and still as you could possibly want. No wind, a few clouds and later on, a moon to light my way when I went out for midnight relief.

Up at 6 AM and down to the lake. I was the first one there, so out with the boat and now I rowed fast without even trying to catch any trout. Noticing green patches of algae on the surface I soon reached the area where I had placed the traps. First I went for the big trap with the artificial bait. It had a lot of crayfish in it. At least about thirty. I was very pleased. Then the next Trapper trap. But now I also noticed that a couple of traps I had placed close to the first one did now show their floats. Strange. But the next trap I saw, I pulled, and it was a jackpot of crayfish. At least thirty in it, a real good catch. The same with the next one, very full. Not only that, it was full of large crayfish, dark in color and no small ones at all. The lake was obviously in algae bloom with large swatches of green floating stuff

here and there. Because of the algae, I could see nothing below half a foot, if that much. The water was green.

The next trap I found, was also shock full of crayfish. I had never seen anything like it before. Even Hawley Lake, my favorite crayfish lake until now, ranked second compared to this. At least thirty or more in this trap. Then a trap with very few, but I noticed that the netting in the entry funnel was open. The string that sewed together the sides in the entry funnel had loosened. Apparently either a work of anxious crayfish wanting to get out or a poor knot. Knots are not my strong point, so I blamed myself.

Bothered by seeing several empty spaces where there should have been a trap float, I came to the last trap which was a big one. Hauling it slowly up from the depth I could feel that it was heavy. As it came to the side of the boat I knew this was a record breaker. It was so full of crayfish I had real trouble lifting it into the boat. I have never seen so many crayfish in one trap before. It was indeed fantastic. Later I counted it and came to over 50 crayfish in that trap. The average was 30 in each trap - of those I was able to bring up.

But I was missing five traps!!! Yes, five trap floats were not showing up. And because of the murky green water I could not look into the water

hoping to spot a float a little under the surface. I was stumped. What could have happened? Could all of them have been at the end of the ten foot string length and then rolled over so that the float disappeared? Or had someone or something helped themselves to the traps?

Immediately I came to the conclusion that humans were not the culprits here. There was nobody in sight at this end of the lake while I put out the traps the night before, and the area beyond the dam is not suitable for human habitation, friend or foe. Could it have been some animal? Otters? Beavers? Remembering one time at Hawley Lake we found that raccoons had helped themselves to the bait in our traps one night. Could that be it? As I rowed back and forth in the area exploring the shore for signs of some of the trap floats that could have been dragged up. Nothing. Scrutinizing the other side of the inlet I saw no signs of floats or traps or of any animal tracks.

In desperation, although mixed with elation at the fantastic catch in the remaining seven traps, I started using my home made grappling hook all along the shore line. Nothing. I went over the area at least a dozen time but hooked up with nothing. The mystery thickened. Later, as I scrutinized the traps I had in the boat, I noticed one of them had a few feet of the trap

line inside the trap. It was even entangled in the escape stopper and one of the crayfish had some string wound round its claws. Later I began thinking of this case. Could it possibly have been that in their stampede to get in to the traps for the fish bait, they had, in five cases, become entangled in the float strings to the extent that they had dragged the float down with them below the surface of the water?

Or could it be that the traps, being placed on a sloping bottom, had simply rolled further down the slope and thus pulled the float with it. Thirty crayfish inside could easily have changed the center of gravity of the trap and caused it to roll further down the sloping bottom. Because I thought that theory was plausible, I dragged a little further out than where I had placed the traps. But if the floats did not show because of crayfish dragging the strings into the trap, then the traps would still be where they were placed. And thus I had dragged too far out.

Whatever. Now those traps were lying there in the lake, most likely full of crayfish, much to my dismay. Finally I gave up on grappling for traps and returned to the launching area where I counted the crayfish and found I had in the neighborhood of 250 crayfish from 7 traps. With that I went home and cooked 200 of them and gave away fifty to a neighbor.

Another observation. In this lake I had caught a larger percentage of females than in other lakes. Why? And, more strange, all the crayfish appeared not to have molted for this season. They were rather dark on their belly side and the shells were hard. But they were all big. When I prepared them for cooking, I did not have to throw away a single crayfish because of small size as I usually have to do. To make sure they still were in good eating condition I test ate five crayfish and found them full of meat both in tails, claws and with plenty of fat under the parapace. Sorry, shell. So after all, I was rather satisfied although the mysterious loss of five traps irritated me.

In view of the fantastic amount of crayfish in this lake, I would like to come back again some day. But that day I will use my trot line which will prevent any loss due to either of my loss theories. That day I hope the algae bloom will be gone and the water will be clear again.

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