

Crayfish Tales
by
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Crayfishing in the Arizona Rim Country

Crayfish tale #9

1940 Words

People in the Arizona Rim country don't know how lucky they are. Not only do they have trout lakes galore all along the Mogollon Rim, north of Phoenix, they also have lakes and rivers full of that strange creature called crayfish. OK, some call it many other things, but 'crayfish' is the proper name if you want to be proper. Let the Cajuns call it crawfish or crawdads if they want to, but those of us who want to be linguistically correct will from now on call it by its official and scientific name, crayfish.

When I first found crayfish in Arizona, I found them in the canals that flow through Phoenix. At first I didn't associate this red shelled canal catch with what I remembered from my old country. Being a Swede by birth, I had been indoctrinated in the rites of eating gourmet crayfish in August under the lights of colored lanterns and a rising full moon.

It took another Phoenecian to show me that crayfish in the canals were about the same and just as tasty as those that I had left behind in Sweden. My outdoorsy friend, who liked anything he could catch and eat for free, cooked up a batch of canal crayfish, and I was sold. Yes, of course, this was the same delicacy I had become used to in the old country. And they were just as tasty, just as large and much more available and free for the catching.

Soon I graduated from Phoenix canals to Arizona lakes. Way up on the Navajo reservation is a wonderful little lake, Wheatfields Lake, where my family of wife and two children spent a few summer vacations. I'll never forget the incident when my son and I, while hoping for some trout to bite on our baited lines, suddenly saw crayfish crawling up toward the shore in the twilight of a setting westerly sun. Now I was mentally better prepared to accept that the new world also offered my favorite crustacean. I was exited at the prospect of finding other catchables in the lake than trout. Equipment-wise I was not as well prepared as I had not expected to find crayfish anywhere else but in the Phoenix canals. But necessity is still the mother of invention, and soon my dormant engineering instincts helped me solve the problem of not having a crayfish trap in my camping equipment. A wire mesh fish basket served as my first crayfish trap and my delight was boundless when I found I was actually catching crayfish instead of trout.

That evening I cooked my first crayfish catch with salt purchased in the little Indian

convenience store at the lake. The size of the crayfish was better than the Swedish ones I remembered and the taste was just as delightful. I was in near heaven as my family and I enjoyed our camp dinner that night.

Now that the ice was broken on what was to become a lifelong hobby of mine, I started finding crayfish in practically every Arizona lake we visited. Indian reservations everywhere seemed to have an abundance of crayfish. The next great crayfish lake became Hawley Lake on the Apache Reservation. Later I also found that Points of Pine on the San Carlos Reservation had great numbers of crayfish. For years, I and my Swedish fraternity club, the VASA Order of America, traipsed up the mountains to Hawley Lake for what we called crayfish campouts. We spent several days catching crayfish, fishing for trout and enjoying the pristine living at 8,000 foot elevation among Indians, fresh air and assorted wild life including enormous amounts of crayfish. Each campout ended with a big crayfish fest at the shores of the lake where the transplanted Swedes once more could enjoy their homeland's crayfish rituals in company of other traditionalists while eating crayfish, drinking schnapps and singing wild songs that echoed over the misty lake.

The latest chapter in my quest for crayfish took me to the Mogollon Rim. Fortunately for me, as I now had retired from the Phoenix canals up to the fresh air country around Payson, these lakes are a fisherman's paradise. At first I went up to the Rim Lakes for rainbow trout. Yes, there is trout in them thar lakes, but once in a while I found myself with empty fish stringers. That's when I discovered that the Rim Lakes are just as full of crayfish as the reservation lakes.

Woods Canyon Lake is one of the first lakes you come to when reaching the top of the Rim along route 260 from Payson. The lake has a store and boat rental as well as a ramp for launching fishing boats. In this 50 acre lake there are myriads of crayfish for the person with a lust for crustaceans. The lake is well protected from pesky winds by the dense woods that surround it. Several campsites make this lake a favorite for Phoenix fishermen.

Next to this lake is Willow Springs Lake. This also has a paved access road down to the 150 acre lake with launch ramp and basic facilities. No store here, which makes it a little less crowded, especially on weekends. But a comfortable camp ground just half a mile away is home for many overnights. This lake was the destination for at least two elaborate 'Crawfish Festivals' last summer; one at least rivaling those in Louisiana's Cajun country.

A little further up route 260, just past Forest Lakes village, you find the turnoff to Black Canyon Lake where I hauled out a record breaking catch of crayfish in one single trap. Well over fifty, and they were all big. This lake is six miles away from the 260 highway and reached by a dirt road that is usually in pretty good shape. The nearest campground, unfortunately, is three miles away from the lake, but is clean and comfortable.

The lake is 70 acres when full and has some big trout in it. And does it ever have

crayfish! I have only visited this lake once, but when I did, all my traps averaged over 30 per trap for an overnight try. Not only were the crayfish plentiful in this lake, they were also large compared to other lakes in the area.

Taking the Rim road past Woods Canyon Lake, you come to Knoll Lake after about 21 more miles of dirt road. This lake, completely surrounded by a dense pine forest, is full of both trout and crayfish. During my days with the VASA lodge in Phoenix, I found this lake perfect for group camping. When I also found out that it harbored crayfish, we went there quite often. This lake is also well protected from winds by the surrounding shore-hugging tall trees. One of my trap customers used this lake to test his trap purchase and reported overwhelming results. On the way to Knoll Lake you pass Bear Canyon Lake, one which I still have to explore.

Although I prefer catching crayfish in lakes, rivers are also good sources of this creature. One of my customers caught huge amounts in the West Clear Creek, west of the Mogollon Rim. As this creek originates in the Blue Ridge Reservoir, I am sure that this lake, which is somewhat secluded, is also a good source for crayfish. East Clear Creek also has crayfish, and, although both West and East Clear Creek are in primitive country, together they offer miles of crayfish waters.

Unfortunately, my wife can not share my delight in catching and eating crayfish. She is one of those who is allergic to anything crustaceous such as shrimp, lobsters and, alas, crayfish. Not unusual for people with a B-type blood. This has the sad effect that she hesitates going up to these headache producing altitudes that have all these stomach upsetting allergenic crayfish. So, again unfortunately, I often find myself going up alone catching my stash of crayfish, to be cooked and frozen for winter enjoyment.

Recently I added another hobby to all my previous ones. Calling myself Trapper Arne, I started building crayfish traps. Up to this point I had used mostly imported traps to catch large amounts of crayfish. For a while I made some boxy traps out of hardware cloth and, although they worked pretty well, they did not last long. But one day I found myself retired with nothing else to do. I started looking into the manufacture of these interesting contraptions. I bought a trap from a commercial crayfisherman and started analyzing how it was made. I found that it was essentially the same as my old Swedish collapsible traps. Trying it in my favorite crayfish lakes I found it was just as good. So why not make my own. In my Payson garage "Trapper Arne" now set up shop with trap materials like vinyl covered hardware cloth, fish netting, wire and bait clips and a large supply of J-clips to tie wires together. In practically no time I had a supply of crayfish traps that I started hauling up to the lakes in my little Nissan truck. Each trap with a ten foot nylon string and a wooden float painted fluorescent red to be visible at night. I have set out traps in most lakes on the Rim, anywhere from ten to 30 traps at a time in order to satisfy my craving for crayfish.

And did I ever catch crayfish? Soon I acquired experience in how to bait traps, where to sink them, when to place them and how long to leave them in the lake. I even learned how to put out the traps so no one could see where they were placed. After all, fishermen

also have their percentage of longfingered members who don't mind helping themselves to somebody else's fishing gear. With a home made trot line, I am now able to lay out traps with no visible floats and no fear of loss. I must admit, though, that during the 30 years of catching over 25,000 crayfish in Arizona, I have not yet lost any traps to thievery. I have lost them for other reasons, but not because somebody stole them. All my experience in catching, cooking and eating crayfish is well documented on my web site www.TrapperArne.com.

So why do I catch all these crayfish? Most people in the US aren't interested in eating crayfish. After all, crayfish are small making it a picky job to eat enough to satisfy a growing boy's appetite. True. But you can't beat the taste! Or the price! Lobster in the stores nowadays is selling for an arm and a leg. Not so crayfish. And the two are obviously closely related with meat that tastes the same. Analyzing the nutrients of crayfish or other crustaceans, you will find that the meat is very nutritious, low in carbohydrate, and the cholesterol is reasonable and the price is just right. It is free!

Deep down I guess I must be thrifty, maybe even miserly. Anything I can get for free has a great attraction for me. Crayfish easily fall into that category. Add to that that my ethnic background raised me in the company of crayfish aficionados and crayfish festivals every year.

Trying to convince other non-Cajuns that crayfish catching is a great sport, a super food with nutrients bar none, I built my web site that will tell you all about how, where and wherefore. So try me on the web. You may like to read what I have to tell you.

Trapper Arne

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