

Number Crunching Summer Panfish

By Paul Bristow

A beer-battered bluegill fillet is dropped into hot oil. As it slowly rises to the top and turns golden-brown, the sweet smell of fresh fried fish fills the air. A moment you would like to share with your friends and family, but unfortunately, the dog days of summer prevented you from catching enough bluegills and crappies for the whole group. However, with just a little additional planning and rigging, you can fill the fish basket with slabs this summer.

Even in today's catch-and-release climate, there are still times you would like to load your stringer to full capacity for a fish fry. Bluegills, crappies, perch, and even rock bass are ideal for such endeavors. Most panfish populations can withstand sizable harvest and still maintain a healthy balance. Indeed, many populations can even benefit from such pressure when competition for food gets too high. Throughout the Midwest, state fisheries departments have set daily panfish limits much higher than numbers bagged by the average angler. Fortunately, with some background on panfish patterns and minor changes in technique, you can become one of the anglers consistently catching decent-sized panfish this summer.



Automatic Hook-Set Rod Holders Work!



In the spring and fall, panfish location in most Midwestern bodies of water is very predictable. In the spring, spawning activity allows anglers easy access to large numbers of aggressive panfish in the shallows. In the fall, the determination for fish to feed in anticipation of the harsh winter months combined with lower food levels again makes patterning panfish quite possible. Even in the winter months, the limited availability of food and protective habitat can concentrate panfish populations, and simplify the task of catching numbers of slabs. The summer, however, is often considered the most difficult season to post numbers of good-sized panfish.

After the spring spawning season, large bluegills and crappies will abandon their shallow-water haunts. Their location will be scattered at this time because weed growth is at a peak and good cover is generally available through the entire water system. The boom of many food sources will accompany the weed growth, and make it even tougher to isolate populations of large panfish. The positive point in the equation is that there will often be intense feeding activity of most panfish species throughout even the warmest months.

The actual presentation for fish like bluegills and crappies does not need much adaptation to increase your numbers this summer. The wide variety of reliable panfish presentations, such as the many fine jigs designed by Custom Jigs & Spins, or a traditional live bait rig will all produce. The key is to maximize your catch during the times feeding activity is up or when you have found a prime location.



One sure-fire approach to boat more panfish without altering your presentation is the use of multiple rods or multiple rigs to the extent allowed by local law. Rigs employing two or more small jigs can be extremely effective when fish decide to feed aggressively. Indeed, one lucky angler recently stuck the new Illinois state record muskie with just such a rig. Even when panfish scatter in the summer months, often three or four larger fish will

remain in the same general location. The ability to take two of these fish at the same time can pay large dividends in stringer size by the end of your fishing day. In addition, multiple rods in a “spider” type of system (made famous on legendary crappie waters like Kentucky Lake and Reelfoot Lake) can be equally effective on Midwest bodies of water.

One problem accompanying any multiple-rod system is the ability to hook fish on rods that are unattended. The new *Lightnin' Strike*™ *Automatic Hook-Set Rod Holder* is a well-built and durable rod holder which will set hooks on unattended rods with even the slightest tap of a large panfish. The rod holder can be used in boats, or on shore with the addition of the Sand Spike attachment. These rod holders can be made even more effective for panfishing when used in combination with slower action rods, such as many of the fine Ugly Stik Rods available from Shakespeare. Adding a rod holder / hook setting system to your panfish arsenal will definitely add numbers and weight to your stringer by the end of the day.



Logging numbers of fine-eating panfish need not be limited to the spring and fall seasons. With a slight change of tackle to increase your odds during the times you've located actively feeding slabs, you will be eating more tasty bluegills and crappies this summer. Remember that catch-and-release is still appropriate for the largest panfish in any body of water. Such fish are as just valuable as trophy muskies or walleyes. It is best to keep the nice-sized fish for the pan and let the monsters live to fight another day. With the increased numbers provided by the tactics and tackle addressed in this article, you'll still have plenty of fillets for the pan.

