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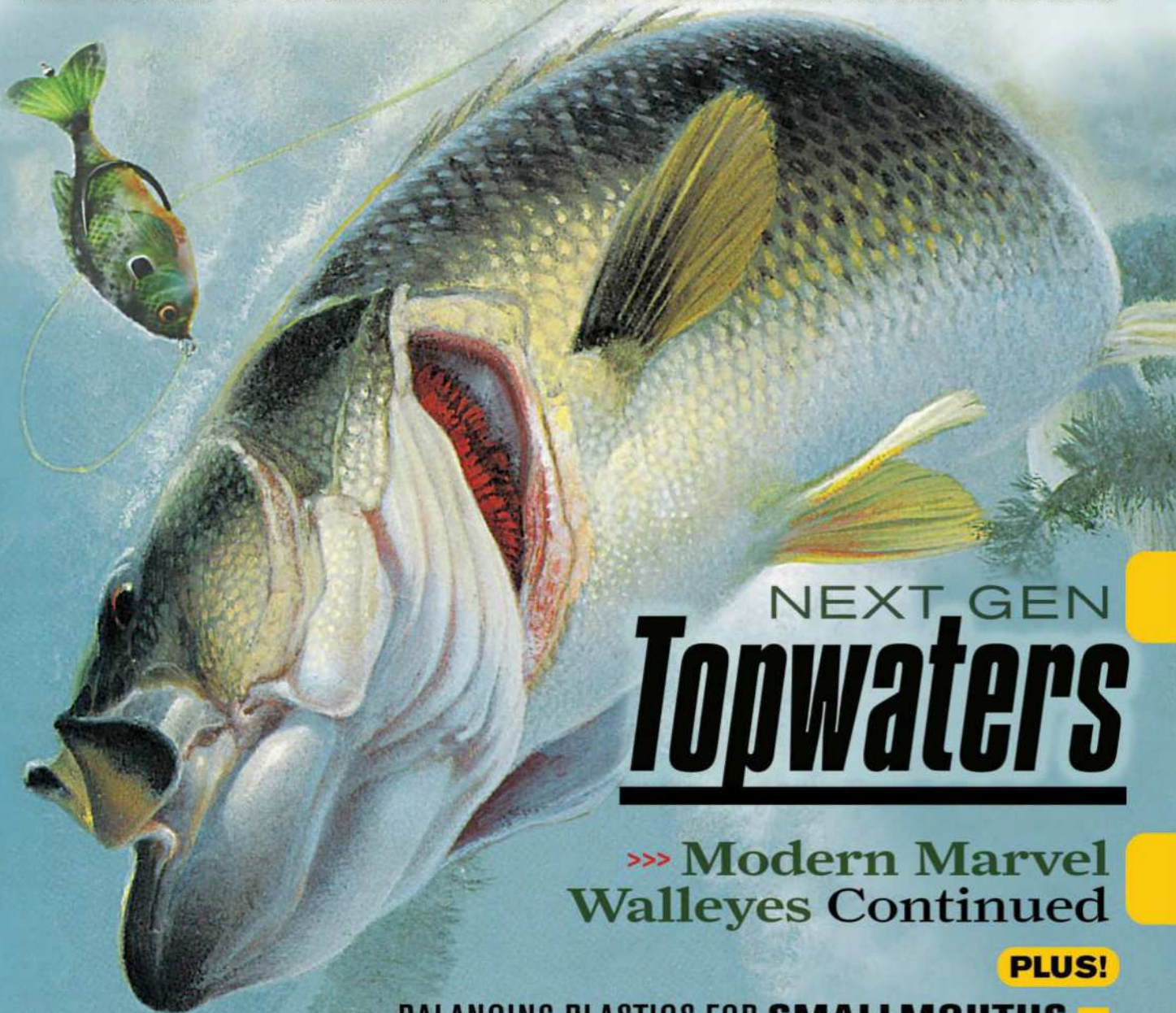
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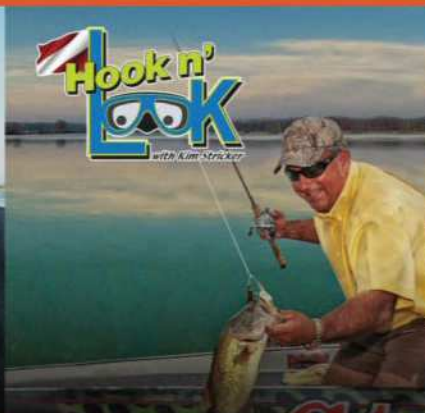
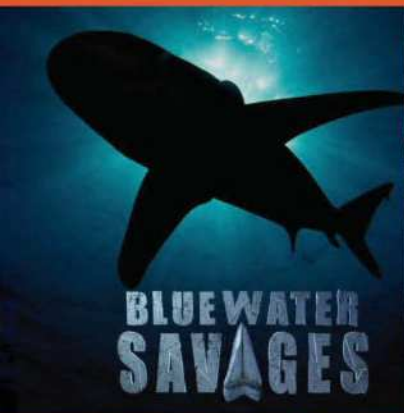
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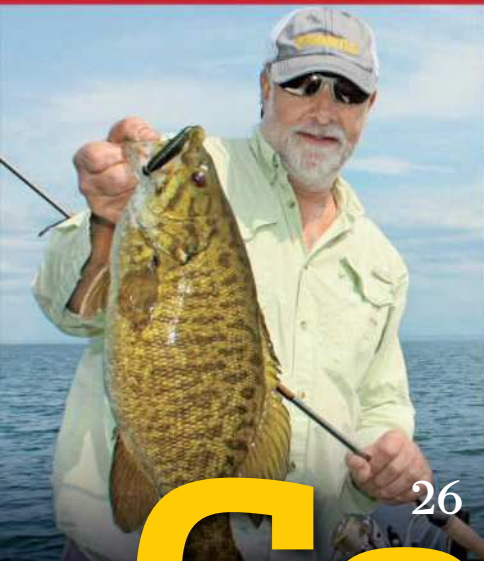
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- > Big Water Walleye Patterns
- > Spider-Rigging Crappies
- > Top Smallmouth Softbaits of All Time



JUNE 15

Prime Time Opportunities

- > Options for Mountain Lakers
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- > Retro Trick Worm Largemouths
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Enlightenment One “Bit” of Information at a Time

Feature articles in *In-Fisherman* take the reader well down a road to understanding subjects about specific fish species. The largemouth bass article in this issue, for example, digs deep into options for connecting with bass by using a new generation of topwater lures. As we so often say, a little tweak here, a little trick there, and soon enough you’re fishing better than you have before.

Topics in a column such as those in Bits and Pieces take a different route to enlightenment about more diverse topics. Many puzzling issues have been addressed in the 37 years the column has run. Like how much weight fish lose by being out of water or not being weighed promptly. As in, “The fish would have been a record if the angler hadn’t waited 8 hours to weigh the catch.” It isn’t uncommon to see suggestions that fish weight can drop by 5 percent to as much as 15 percent.

The column cited an instance of a marlin caught off the South Carolina coast which weighed 678 pounds (a state record) when it first hit scales, but 608 pounds 10 hours later, on an official scale. Apparently, the fish lost 70 pounds, or about 10 percent of its weight.

South Carolina biologists questioned the loss and tested two 400-pound marlin. One was left unprotected in hot sunlight, while the other was wrapped and iced. After two hours, the protected fish had lost 1.8 pounds (0.45 percent), while the other marlin lost 4.4 pounds (1.14 percent). The maximum loss after 15 hours was 2.1 percent of total weight.

So the near-record marlin should only have lost about 14 pounds. Later, a photograph revealed that the first scale had been misread by 70 pounds. In Texas, another test was made after anglers found a near-record largemouth floating dead in the water. Had the fish been a record before it died? Tests of dead bass held in water showed they gained only slight weight. So a dead bass would gain only slightly if held in water, and it would lose only slightly if held out of water, laying on a dock or placed on ice.

Among the most enlightening reports have been about fish tracking, something *In-Fisherman* pioneered. The first study ever written about anywhere

was about muskies in West Okoboji Lake, Iowa. This study, conducted in the late 1970s, revealed that after spawning, fish roamed open water until distinct weedbeds set up in about mid-July. No wonder fish were hard to catch until later in summer, as anglers of



the day usually targeted structural elements and generally didn’t consider that fish sometimes held in open water away from structure.

In another early report, largemouth bass were tracked in a lake in which weedgrowth was eliminated by grass carp. With little cover to relate to, bass used three depth zones: (A) inshore (0 to 7 feet), (B) middepth (7 to 11 feet), and (C) offshore (11 feet or deeper). Bass in each depth range used different types of cover and hunting tactics. Inshore bass usually stayed near shoreline trees and roots. One inshore

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fish stayed near piers. In contrast, four of the five middepth bass were near or under piers 40 percent of the time. These bass moved from pier to pier and aggregated with other mid-depth bass. Meanwhile, offshore areas were devoid of underwater structure. Bass there related to the bottom or roamed open water, suspending to feed on shad.

Thus, science indicated how bass might function after underwater vegetation is removed. It explains poor fishing after vegetation is removed, as many bass suspend away from obvious cover and are hard to locate, although "bank beaters" would still find some fish, as would anglers targeting piers and docks.

The report also affirmed information from other tracking studies—information largely overlooked or forgotten today—showing that bass (and other fish with large gas bladders) tend to stay in

the same depth range day after day. Bass move to feed in local home ranges, but seldom shift depth more than a few feet. That is, deep bass stay in deep water and their activity periods are established by conditions at that depth. Shallower fish stay put, too, and have activity periods based on conditions there. As we know, depth and time of activity are key variables in patterning fish.

Many studies also clarified how fish make food choices. Pike in one study were given a choice of yellow perch, dace, sticklebacks, and fathead minnows. The pike ate the minnows first, then switched to sticklebacks and dace. Perch were least often targeted.

So then why are yellow perch the predominant prey in many North American pike waters? Apparently, pike often create their own prey environment, selectively eating prey species until hard-to-catch species dominate baitfish populations.

Eventually, a somewhat balanced predator-prey population develops where harder-to-catch prey fish are most abundant.

Anglers often assume that it's best to imitate the predominant prey species when choosing lures. Science suggests why it may at times be better to do the opposite, choosing a lure that looks different than the predominant prey and may be judged easier to catch than the predominant prey.

The road to understanding may be straightforward. Other times, the routes are circuitous and counter-intuitive. Just "knowing more" about various aspects of a subject we love is satisfying for most anglers. And the more "bits and pieces" of science we know and can relate to our fishing the better we should be at solving the everyday puzzles that we face when we're on the water. ■

MEET OUR MACHINERY




Name: *Charlie Bolton*
Job: *Blank Specialist*
Service: *10 Years*

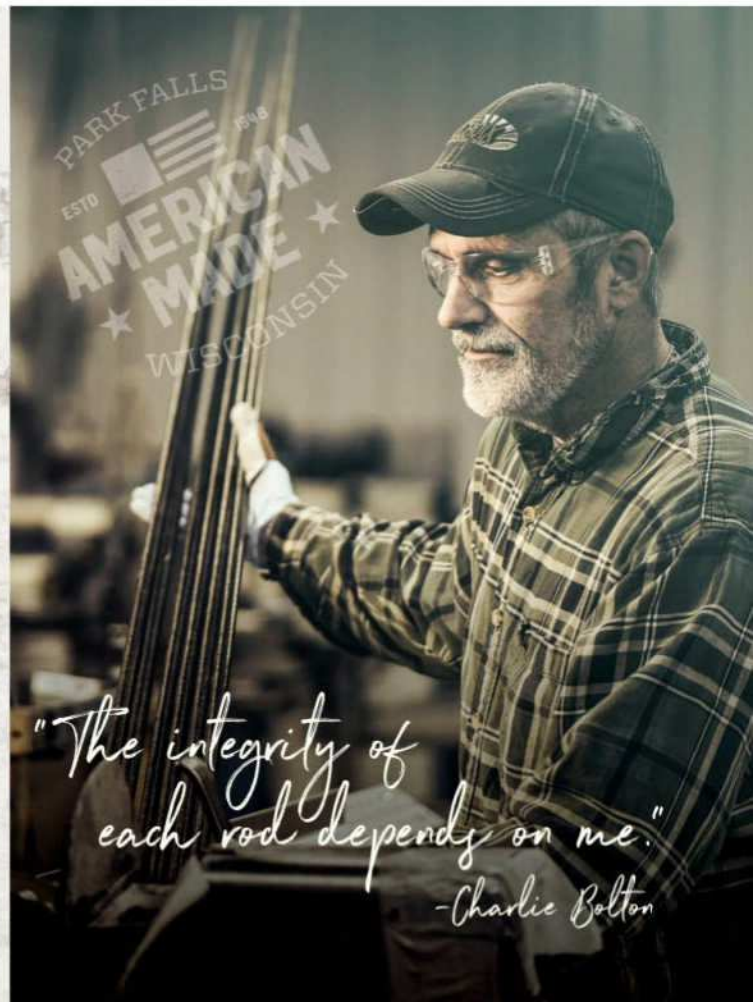
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Crayfish Connections

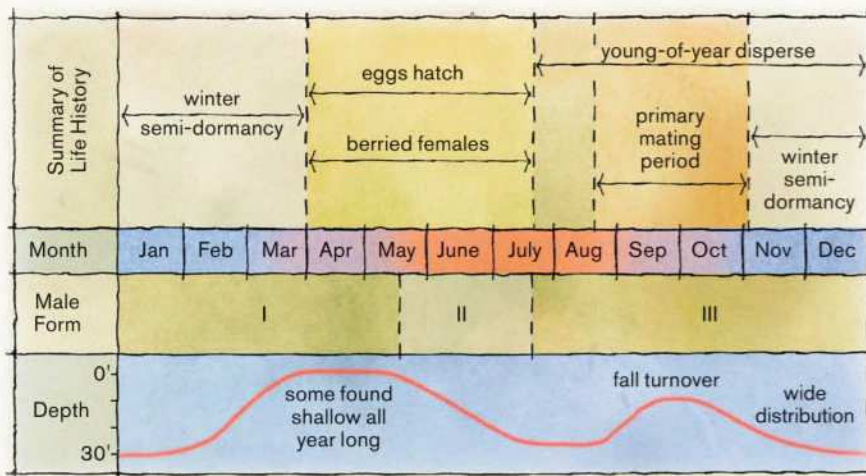
Life History Lessons—Many studies and practical experience suggest that various fish species often prefer to feed on fish instead of crayfish, probably because crayfish may be harder to catch and eat at times. Crayfish also are less nutritional. Still, they remain an important forage in some waters during some periods, so it pays to understand a bit about crayfish location in the waters we fish. This varies by species and habitat.

In-Fisherman



PHOTO // ERIC ENGBRETSON

Distribution, Life Cycle, and Reproductive Condition

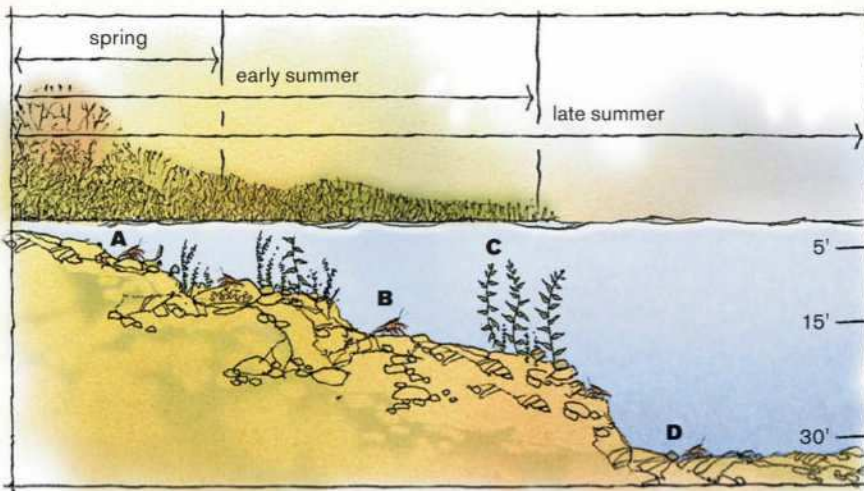


Young-of-the-year crayfish may molt 10 times before reaching sexual maturity. Females generally molt once after the young disperse, males usually twice, once in spring and again in late summer.

Seasonal Distribution

Crayfish distribution is influenced by habitat, which includes the availability of hiding places like woodcover, rocks, and vegetation. Generally, crayfish are found shallower during spring and deeper during summer.

In summer, they also may move from Positions (B) and (C) to feed in shallow water (A) at night. Crayfish hunt for food on open bottoms, too—at times in deeper water (D), although they usually aren't found below the thermocline in most lakes and reservoirs, even when sufficient oxygen is present. ■



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Contact: Capt. Marc Thorpe, 450/433-4784, marcThorpeguiding.com.

Steve Ryan

■ OTTERTAIL COUNTY MINNESOTA

Panfish » Trophy crappies and especially bluegills, with fish surpassing a pound, are the target all summer, with dozens of lake options, in an area stretching from Fergus Falls to Perham.

Contact: Guide Jesse Thalmann, 320/290-2035, Thalmann's Guide Service (Facebook); Guide Garrett Svir, 320/428-5174, slabseekerfishing.com; Gene's Sport Shop, genessportshop.com.

Doug Stange



■ LAKE SAKAKAWEA

NEW TOWN,
NORTH DAKOTA

Walleyes » The walleye population is booming, with loads of eaters from 18 to 22 inches or so, along with an a shot at much bigger fish. The bite's good from June throughout summer into fall.

Contact: Guide Matt Liebel, 701/770-6746, liebelsguideservice.com.

Doug Stange



■ TOLEDO BEND RESERVOIR

TEXAS-LOUISIANA

Largemouth Bass & Crappies » Recent rains filled this massive impoundment (181,600 acres), which bodes well for bass and crappie. Bass are booming, with double-digit fish in the mix and lots of 4- to 6-pounders. Black and white crappies grow fast, with plenty over 2 pounds.

Contact: Guide Stephen Johnston, 409/579-4213, johnstonfishing.com.

Steve Quinn



**Feature Travel Tips
from In-Fisherman
Staff & Friends**



LAKE MILLE LACS

MINNESOTA

Muskies » Some of the best fishing of the season often transpires after the season opener in early June, with an ever-present chance for 50-inch-plus fish, and a chance for 40-inch pike.

Contact: Guide Steve Scepaniak, 320/253-7535, predatorguideservice.com.

Chuck Beasley



SUSITNA RIVER

ALASKA

Salmon » Fish near the lodge, a short float-plane flight from Anchorage, or plan a week-long float trip, keying on strong runs of all five species of Pacific salmon, during a season that runs from June 10 to August 25.

Contact: Wilderness Place Lodge, 907/733-2051, wildernessplacelodge.com.

Tom Quinn

CANDLEWOOD LAKE

CONNECTICUT

Largemouth & Smallmouth Bass

» This popular 5,400-acre lake fishes well for smallmouths up to 4 pounds and largemouths up to 6, with milfoil holding fish during summer.

Contact: Guide Paul Mueller, 203/910-3673, paulmuellerfishing.com.

Rich Zaleski



NORFORK RESERVOIR ARKANSAS

Stripers » Tap into a robust population of fish up to 25 pounds in the southern portion of the reservoir, with bonus hybrid stripers, all caught on artificial lures.

Contact: Guide Daryl Binkley, 870/499-7384, binksguideservice.com.

Doug Stange



in-fisherman.com/norfork

EMIQUON LAKE

ILLINOIS

Multispecies » There's about 1,000 acres of fishable water in this shallow lake that's part of Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge, just south of Lewiston. Renovated in 2007, it has a solid population of bass up to 6 pounds, plus crappies, bluegills, and bowfin. A permit is required and no gas motors allowed.

Contact: Experience Emiquon, experienceemiquon.com; Illinois DNR District Fishery Biologist, 309/446-9143.

Todd Kent

LAKE SIMCOE ONTARIO

Smallmouth Bass » Catches approaching the lake record and Canadian record for a 5-bass limit of 31.5 pounds aren't rare, with these big fish feeding extensively on round gobies.

Contact: Guide Greg Klatt, 416/580-2541, Profshnt Angling Services (Facebook). ■

Lonnie King



STAFF Noteworthy & New

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Stuff, as Reviewed by the
In-Fisherman Staff

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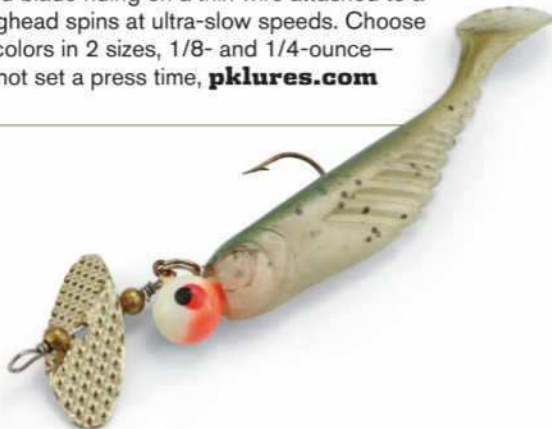
New Colors

Lake Clear Wabblers, used as attractors followed by a leader and a baited hook or fly, have 24K gold or genuine silver finishes, plus color options, including three new hues: Fire Tiger/silver back, Burnt Orange/silver back, and Yellow Orange/silver back—lakeclearwobbler.com



Spin-A-Jig

The PK Lures **Spin-A-Jig** adds flash and vibration to any softbait presentation, especially swimbait bodies like the Berkley Ripple Shad (pictured). A specially designed blade riding on a thin wire attached to a round jighead spins at ultra-slow speeds. Choose from 6 colors in 2 sizes, 1/8- and 1/4-ounce—pricing not set a press time, pklures.com





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Winch Spinner

With a gear ratio of 4.6:1, the Abu Garcia **Winch** spinning reel is ideal for fishing crankbaits and swimbaits, allowing for slow, steady retrieves that maximize sensitivity. She's a beauty to behold, too, and with 8 stainless-steel bearings and weighing 8 ounces, smooth and comfortable in the hand—\$159.95, abugarcia.com



Pocket Fillet Knife

The angler's version of the iconic Opinel knives made in France for 120 years, the **Slim Line 10** has a 4-inch stainless-steel blade that folds into a 5-inch bubinga wood handle to create the perfect pocket fillet knife—\$30, opinel-usa.com



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BY STEVE QUINN

>>> TOPPIN' <<<

Topwaters

► **Surface lures get old but they never die.** From wood whittlers of yore to the high-tech CAD men and 3-D printers of today, lures that scratch the water's surface have received plenty of attention. ¶ In part, that's because it's hard to design a topwater lure that won't catch fish. I've seen videos of bass slurping old wine corks, cigarettes, and other trash floating above. As opportunistic predators, they're attracted to things that look vulnerable on top of the water. ¶ While some anglers cling to old favorites, novel designs have come on the scene, offering new levels of attraction. The one that's received the largest notoriety is River2Sea's Whopper Plopper, designed by former TV producer, host of the TV Show "Hunt for Big Fish," and inveterate lure tinkerer Larry Dahlberg.

The first version, Whopper Plopper 190, measured 7.5 inches. "I worked with River2Sea to build a new version of a classic style of muskie lure," Dahlberg relates. "Early models included the Mudpup, Gooch's Tally Wacker, and Dick Gries' Top Kick. The rear portion spins and its curved blade throws a lot of water. We refined its construction and made the tail fin of tough plastic, which made it more durable and also produced unique sounds. But when testing early versions for muskies, I had big large-mouths and smallmouths attacking it."

Today, the 190 model is popular among lunker hunters in California, where deep structure, clear water, abundant rainbow trout, and giant bass make huge lures



of all sorts a good option. The 1½-ounce, 5-inch 130 model has found most favor, but all sizes have sold fast since the closely guarded secret got out. The expose came at the October 2015 Bassmaster Central Open tournament on Table Rock, as FLW Tour pro James Watson of Missouri realized the time was ripe as choppy conditions brought big bass onto rocky points. On Table Rock and Lake of the

Ozarks, big buzzbaits have long been favored for precisely those conditions, as big fish gravitate to main-lake coves with rocky banks. "It casts farther and more accurately than a buzzer," Watson notes, "and tends to call up bigger bass, perhaps due to its size and ability to work great at a range of speeds."



River2Sea Whopper Poppers

The following spring, I got my first Poppers and tried them once waters had warmed into the low- to mid-60°F range. I was a bit dubious as it's considerably larger than my usual topwater choices for a mixed population of largemouth and smallmouth bass in early summer in Minnesota: Heddon Super Spook, Jr., Rapala Skitter Pop, and such. But my casts were met with hard strikes from bass of both species and all sizes, from less than a pound to over four. On a calm morning, its ruckus seemed obnoxious and the speed I reeled it brisk to say the least. Indeed, I quickly determined that the sweet spot in retrieve speed, where sound and vibration seem most potent, is steady and considerably faster than a typical horizontal retrieve. It's continued to work well any time bass are gathered on shallow flats or along breaks with moderate cover of vegetation with sand or rock, from early summer into early fall. With its two imposing trebles, it can't negotiate grass once it thickens near the surface, as stalks wrap the tail section and catch dangling hooks.

The following May, Florida pro Chris Lane, now living in Alabama, capitalized on a shallow bite at Toledo Bend Reservoir on the Texas-Louisiana border to take 2nd place in the 4-day event on topwater lures. His lure of choice: 130 Whopper Popper. Many anglers rely on topwater lures primarily in low-light conditions, shifting to deeper techniques midday. While tournament winner Kevin VanDam exploited big bass in deep water with a Strike King 10XD that runs close to 30 feet deep, Lane fished topwaters from blastoff to weigh-in, sacking 20 bass weighing over 88 pounds. When the Popper bite is on, it's really on, though persistence pays off. Lane fished through hours without a strike to then encounter shallow lunkers on the prowl. With such successes, we've seen more large topwater lures equipped to produce extra sound effects with special features.

Propper Poppin'

With the emphasis on enhanced sound production, a couple of new poppers catch the eye and ear, and have proved deadly across the country. Lure designer Sean Ostruszka explains why novel poppers continue to appear, despite dozens of good ones on the market. "In lure design, the smallest tweaks can make the biggest difference," he says. "The mouths of different poppers

vary greatly in their shape and depth, which conveys a particular action and sound to each lure.

"Many of the classics like the Rico, Yellow Magic, and Rebel Pop-R have an oval mouth with a shallow cup. Minimal force is required to create a popping sound. And with a fast retrieve they spit water, imitating shad schooling on the surface. Lures with a deeper and more exaggerated mouth create a loud bloop and a trail of bubbles when pulled sharply. This can be a great trigger for bass lurking in bushes or other dense cover. That was the allure of the vintage Rebel P70 Pop-R, the 1/2-ounce model that was 3 1/8 inches long."

Long out of production, you can find original P70s on eBay in the \$50 range. But anglers have discovered that the 6th Sense Splashback has similar allure and size. Ostruszka initially designed it for his own use, and bass immediately signaled their approval. "I'd carved a few of balsa in 2009 and brought them along when I fished with FLW Tour pro Ramie Colson at Kentucky Lake," he says. "We got on a topwater bite and I tied one on. Right away I caught three in a row and Colson started looking over, as he was trying several of his favorite surface lures, but hadn't caught anything. Finally he asked, 'You got any more of those.' It stayed under wraps



6th Sense Splashbacks

Topwaters

until 2015 when I started working with 6th Sense on lure designs. It debuted at the 2016 ICAST Show and has proved popular."

The Splashback's body and mouth have a V-shape, wider on top and flat along its back. It's tail-weighted to provide a heads-up posture and the ability to walk back and forth when twitched. The belly is keel-shaped to pivot easily and its mouth has a deep cup to catch and throw water. These features make it a versatile option as it works well for target-casting to shallow cover and also walks the dog over expansive flats or open water, throwing water to attract attention. Two sizes are available: size 70 at 3/8 ounce and 2 3/4 inches long and #90 at 3.5 inches and 3/4 ounce.

Storm Lures pro staffer and Bassmaster Elite pro Ott DeFoe of Tennessee went through a similar thought process in working on Storm's Arashi Cover Pop. DeFoe knew he'd gotten the design right when he used it to land a 9-pound 9-ounce bass at the 2017 Bassmaster Classic on Toledo Bend, bringing him a 5th-place finish. It measures 3 3/8 inch and weighs 1/2 ounce and sports a generous hackle tail. Like the Splashback, it has no rattle chamber. "Its shape and balance allow you to work it in place, teasing big bass from cover," DeFoe says. "It's highly effective when fish are shallow around the spawn and



Storm Arashi
Cover Pop

postspawn, holding in brush. When it's on, nothing compares to it.

"I fish in on a medium-action 6.5-foot rod, the shortest I use for any technique, with 17-pound mono. The softer rod and mono work the lure slowly in place and let bass eat it before you set the hook. No need to overwork it, which can happen with braided line. It's built for precision casting and works best on short casts, 50 feet or less.

"We spent a lot of time trying different positions for the line tie and weight system, says Dan Quinn, field promotions manager for Rapala. We wanted a lure that landed softly, as the key is putting it near a bass in cover, so it has no choice but to bite. Placing the weight in the tail does this, and the Cover Pop sits straight up like a bobber. The line tie is high in the mouth, so it pivots 90 degrees right and left while lingering in the target area."

Though it's a walker, Bill Lewis' Stutter Step also relies on protracted action in a key area to draw savage strikes. One glance gives notice of its uniqueness. Instead of the usual

tapered tail, this lure has a broad paddletail that recalls a manatee. "Its banana shape makes it pivot easily," explains company president Wes Higgins, who's responsible for developing this plastic lure from a prototype made of wood by Zimbabwe tigerfish angler Greg Budd. "Instead of turning at a 45-degree angle like most walkers, it turns 90 degrees, so it can dance in a key spot where you know a giant lives. It allows anglers to execute at least four different surface moves that are all deadly, depending on the position and disposition of the bass. Demand for the original 5-inch, 1-ounce model encouraged us to add a 4-inch version that weighs 5/8 ounce." This lure has been a sensation from shallow grass lakes of Florida to timbered impoundments, drawing savage attack from surface predators of all sorts, in freshwater and salt."

Waking and Shaking

As a category of topwater lures, wakebaits seem underused and not well understood. The earliest versions in the modern era date back three decades. Most, such as Mann's 1-Minus, dive 6 to 12 inches on a moderate-speed retrieve or wake the surface at a slow pace. The latest wakebaits are designed to create serious surface commotion. A bill angled close to 90 degrees creates a wide hunting wobble.

New on the market are a pair of big baits—Chanwake from Jackall Lures and i-Loud from Megabass. The i-Loud is a 4.5-inch 1-ounce lure with four different sound- and vibration-producing features. Its jointed body clacks as the hinges pivot, while an internal sound system moves laterally, striking the inside of the body with every turn, producing a low-frequency knock. The bill gives it a rolling surface action, while the rear segment inclines upward, with a metal propeller at the tip.

"This is the lure you want when big bass are hunting around shallow grass, as its bubble trail and other features draw savage strikes," says California Elite pro Chris Zaldain, who has scored big with it on the California Delta, and found success in tournaments on other tidal systems like the James River in Virginia and Florida's St. Johns. "Seasonally, it's worked



Bill Lewis
Stutter Steps



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Topwaters



Megabass
i-Loud

great from the postspawn through early fall. It's especially effective around old bedding areas and where bluegills are nesting, when the bluegill-color bait is deadly. In summer, peak times are early and late in the day around clumps of vegetation. Fish it slow and steady," he adds. "I use a 7-foot 2-inch Megabass Destroyer rod with moderate action, along with 40-pound-test Seaguar Smackdown braid. The softer rod lets a fish engulf it better and keeps them hooked."

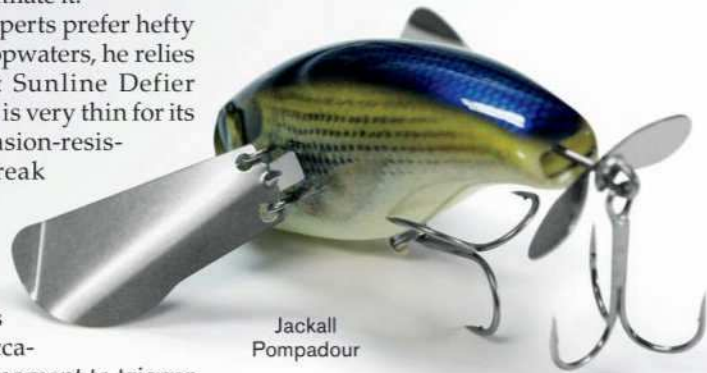
Company product development specialist Kenichi Iida says this lure has a Rudder Action Balancer (RAB) system, which contributes to the knocking sound. "It makes for an extremely loud lure," he adds. "We worked on the RAB system for several years, starting with the i-Jack in 2015."

Jackall's Chanwake is another multi-faceted option and Alex Davis, FLW Tour pro and Lake Guntersville guide, leans heavily on it in competition and when putting clients on Alabama giants. "When I tie one on, clients often ask, 'What the heck is that thing?'" he says about the 5.1-inch, 7/8-ounce lure that has a bill and rear propeller. "But they see soon enough what it can do. When I first tested it on grass flats at Guntersville, I caught an 8-pounder, then a 6-pounder. Few bass have seen this lure and they annihilate it."

While many experts prefer hefty braid for outsize topwaters, he relies on 19-pound-test Sunline Defier mono. "This mono is very thin for its strength, and abrasion-resistant. You won't break it," he says. As with the i-Loud, a steady, moderate-speed retrieve seems best, though he occasionally pauses a moment to trigger bass that may be following. Prime time is from around the spawn into fall, when bass forsake the flats to school in creeks.

Jackall's Pompadour is another outsize surface lure that creates a major disturbance. Its action is based on the metal wings that extend from its crank-bait-shaped body, reminiscent of Heddon's old Crazy Crawler. California Elite pro Jared Lintner has become a fan, fishing it at home waters like Clear Lake, the California Delta, and smaller impoundments, as well at tournaments around the country. "It's one of my favorite baits and I always have one on deck,"

Lintner says. "The first bass I caught on it weighed 9 pounds. There are two sizes and I like both, but favor the bigger one when big fish are abundant. It's a new face on the surface scene and lunkers can't get enough of it. Out here, Whopper Ploppers have gotten so popular, we've seen a decline in their effectiveness lately. The Pompadour's deadly after dark and toward evening. But one day on the Delta, I caught two 10-pounders on it, midday in sunny conditions." As with other lures, peak times are



Jackall
Pompadour

from the spawn to early fall. Like Zaldain, he favors braid, selecting Sunline 50-pound and runs it on a medium-speed reel (6.2:1 gear ratio), and a 7.5-foot cranking rod to keep from pulling it away from bass on the strike and to keep fish hooked.

Flappin' Frogs

Seeking to find space in our already bulging "frog boxes" are a couple models that bring a new dimension to this weedless presentation. Booyah's Toad Runner incorporates the weedless floating body of the Pad Crasher with a large flapper at the rear. Oklahoma pro Jason Christie was the force behind this one, and he's had great success already, with a top-10 at Sam Rayburn Reservoir in Texas at last year's Bassmaster Texas Fest tournament. "It has a wire insert in the tail, which allows you to shape it, which affects surface action," Christie says. "Point the end of the tail upward to increase splash and vibration or flatten it for a more subtle approach," he recommends. "Its tail is a flexible but tough



Jackall
Chanwake

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Topwaters

Booyah
Toad Runner



material, attached with a ball-bearing swivel and split ring, so it can swivel 360 degrees. It's clear so bass target the body not the tail, so hookup ratio is high. It has a special Trokar double hook and weighs 7/8 ounce so it has great casting range."

Meanwhile David McDonald and the Lunkerhunt staff introduced the Prop Series of frog-style lures. "The Prop Fish includes two

versions of these lures before we got it right," he says. "They've proved popular so far, exceeding our expectations."

At the finesse end of the surface spectrum, Lunkerhunt adds the Dragonfly, an unweighted life-like dragonfly made of highly buoyant and durable TP Foam. "Texas-rig this 4.5-inch lure with a 4/0 extra-wide-gap hook and shake it on the surface in holes in vegetation for



Lunkerhunt
Prop Fish
Sunfish

body shapes," he says, "the Sunfish and Shad. Both are compact and weedless lures with a single prop at the rear that sputters subtly as it's steadily retrieved. It passes through vertical vegetation easily and over surface plants as well. Each of the Prop Frog's feet has a flapping foot that rotates out to the side, kicking water and making a surface commotion. This one comes rigged with a single stinger hook that rides behind and helps to lift the frog over grass clumps. It's positioned to not contact vegetation.

"The Prop Turtle is flatter and weighs 3/4 ounce and also has a double-prop system and a stinger hook. It works best around vertical cover or over open water. We tested many

explosive strikes from bass that feed heavily on these insects in early summer," McDonald says. "It works best on heavy spinning tackle with 30-pound braid."

Surface Sounds

By their nature, topwater lures produce sounds likely to lure bass to attack. The softer spitting sound of a small popper imitates a school of threadfin shad sipping on top, while the loud bloop sound of a deep-cupped model makes bass think another fish is feeding, spurring a competitive drive. A

walker, on the other hand, mimics the aimless meanderings of a sickly or wounded bigger baitfish. The erratic movement and sudden stopping of weedless frogs create the illusion of a tasty amphibian.

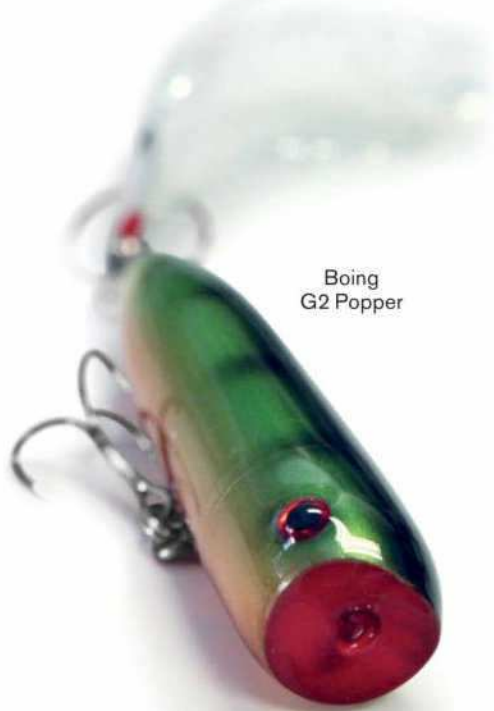
Two companies offer designs that add a sound element beyond splashing or interior knockers. Livingston Lures has been devoted to incorporating a sound-producing device to their hardbaits. The heart of this system is a circuit board in the body that produces sounds that peak in the range of 200 to 600 Hz, within the hearing range of freshwater predators. They term this device, EBS Technology, short for Electronic Baitfish Sounds. Erick Arnoldson, National Sales Manager, calls this system, "a duck call for fish." "Emitted through the belly of the bait, these sounds reach far and wide," he notes. "Under water, sound waves travel over four times as fast as in air, due to the closely packed molecules of water, compared to air. They're based on recordings of baitfish, so bass are drawn to it. Our pro staff and the angling public have enjoyed great success with them." Three topwater designs have been available: walking-style Pro Sizzle, Walk N Pop popper, and Spin Master with a pair of propellers fore and aft.

"The latest in Livingston's line is Freddy B," Arnoldson says, "a weedless frog introduced late in 2017 that produces a froggy croak, imitating the vocalizations of a male bullfrog, both those to attract females and warning sounds to other males to avoid the area. The sound chamber is located between the line tie and hook, and is activated when it lands."

Instead of an electronic chip, Boing lures rely on a mechanical



Livingston
Lures Freddy B



Boing
G2 Popper

noise-maker—a small metal bead on the end of a thin tungsten wire (think light bulb filament) inside the lure that vibrates to create a unique low-frequency sound when it's moved, sounding like *boing*, hence its name. This innovative concept goes back 20 years or more as well known custom lure painter Tim Hughes got the idea from an angler in Arkansas who made one by setting a guitar wire within the body of a Zara Spook. Hughes and partner Bill Pacota began mass-producing them, using nitinol wire instead. The company is now owned by Jason Yocum of Indiana and he's expanded the lure line beyond the original walker, including the 3½-inch Boing G2 Popper and G3 Prop Bait. They have a long tail hackle to add to the allure as the lure's paused and allowed to settle in a key area.

Hughes sent me one years ago and I've found it amazingly effective any time bass want a slow walk-the-dog cadence. Largemouths come unglued in their aggression. I'm eager to try the new Popper and Prop Bait, as extended pauses work best, especially for smallmouth bass in rivers and largemouths in deep clear lakes. As I write this in late winter in Minnesota, I'm longing for a warm summer with luxuriant vegetation to try these new topwater options. ■

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Rating of A+

► Head first, casually swimming along, balanced, symmetrical, sipping plankton yet poised to flee for cover in an instant. When a minnow descends, it descends nose down or dorsal-side up—not sideways. Movements are smooth and balanced. Live preyfish tend to be graceful. Even a crawfish doesn't wobble, turn sideways, or swim upside down. ¶ So why do so many softbaits falter, spin, or swim off to one side? As the years march on, it never ceases to amaze me.

BAL

Balance is the goal when tipping jigs with trailers. A trailer can't be overbearing or the package rolls out of control. Hook-sets become problematic. Few anglers would look at a 1/16-ounce jighead in the nose of a 7-inch soft swimbait and think it looks right. It certainly won't fish right. The jig can't sink or swim the lure fast enough to make the tail work. Try to swim it fast enough and the package spins or turns on its side. And a trailer can't be too small for the head or it looks and behaves unnaturally.

Yes, human sensibilities have something to do with it. For me, a jighead should be proportional to the body, with approximately the same head-to-body-length ratio as a minnow. It might be more of an aesthetic than a requirement, but the result seems more natural. There are requirements when matching trailers to jigs, however. If the trailer has an action tail, the weight of the jig must be sufficient to make the tail work on the drop. Otherwise it won't move on a slow retrieve and the lure may list to the side.

Trailers too big for the jig hook interfere with the hooking process. Before rigging a softbait, check if it fits inside the gap of the hook. The plastic body should slide between the point and the shaft of jig hook—if not top-to-bottom, on its side. It's not a requirement, but a rule of thumb.

The new Storm 360GT Searchbaits (which turned out to be one of our hottest river options last fall) come with trailers designed to fit seamlessly with the jigheads. Is designing jigheads meant to only fit and



balance perfectly with specific trailers a new trend? Or a ploy that keeps us from buying other trailers to rig on those heads?

Regardless of how we may feel about that, one thing is certain—the 360GT Searchbait is perfectly balanced. It has realistic eyes that seem to see and avoid snags. The head, perfectly fitted to a flat-backed, keel-shaped body with a thumper tail, helps the package glide along. It

pulls the bait away from the head. Place the jig against the plastic before threading it on and mark the spot where the hook should exit. With grubs and worms, the point should come out on the seam. If the lure is bunched up despite that effort, do it over. If the hook comes out short or long, pull the point back into the plastic and bring it out so the lure lies straight on the hook. If the hook is too close to one side, try again. Bunched up or poorly hooked

ANCING

>>> SMALLMOUTH <<< Jigs & Trailers

seems ideal in current areas. It can be fished on a dead drift and catch fish.

The body is wider than it is deep, enhancing its gliding effect. It slips over rocky substrates, hanging up less often than most other combinations of lead and plastic. It slides to the bottom like a sculpin, and has a rattle for creating an effective shaky presentation.

The Searchbait has a small circle on its dorsal side—a target for bringing the hook point out at the precise point for balance, which is critical when threading softbaits onto a jig. When finished, the shaft of the hook should be exactly in the center of the bait, equidistant from both sides and equidistant from back and belly. This is especially true with action-tail plastics. A poorly attached swimbait or grub can turn a jighead on its side or cause it to spin, yielding an unnatural, unbalanced presentation.

Hook Sense

All kinds of anglers climb aboard my boat each year, from kids to professional guides. I often see softbaits threaded on wrong—unbalanced, bunched on the hook, or with the hook brought out short, which eventually

pulls the bait away from the head. Place the jig against the plastic before threading it on and mark the spot where the hook should exit. With grubs and worms, the point should come out on the seam. If the lure is bunched up despite that effort, do it over. If the hook comes out short or long, pull the point back into the plastic and bring it out so the lure lies straight on the hook. If the hook is too close to one side, try again. Bunched up or poorly hooked

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Speed Limits

In my universe, every soft-plastic trailer has a speed limit; maybe not “limits” so much as optimum speeds. A 4-inch ringworm is a dependable trailer on 1/16- to 1/8-ounce jigs. Others may disagree, but a 1/32-ounce jig is too slow and gets overpowered even by the small auger tail, creating a floppy, twisting, unnatural drop. And a 3/8-ounce jig is the opposite, overpowering the plastic. It’s too heavy and too fast—even in current. For me,

>>> SMALLMOUTH <<< Jigs & Trailers

the optimum speed range of a classic ring worm is about .4 to 1 mph. Not that it won't catch fish moving faster or slower, but optimum effectiveness seems to occur within that range.

The ringworm has proven so successful for smallmouths and walleyes it's been hybridized. The Northland Impulse Core Minnow, Berkley PowerBait Beat Shad, and Lunker City Swimmin' Ribster are examples of hybrid ringworms, with slightly heavier bodies and thumping swimbait tails instead of curly tails. So they can be fished faster. In fact, incrementally heavier heads are required to pull them through the water fast enough to make the tail work. Optimum efficiency ranges from 3/32 to 1/4 ounce for 4- and 5-inch baits that are so effective for smallmouth bass.

Other softbaits with larger or thicker action parts have a broader "sweet spot." Optimum efficiency for a 5-inch grub can range several miles per hour. Threading a Kalin's Lunker Grub on a 1/4-ounce Kalin's Ultimate Darter Jig creates a kind of bladeless spinnerbait effect in shallow water. Ripping that combination over shallow rocks as fast as we could turn our reel handles won a smallmouth tournament for us on Rainy Lake. The nose on a darter head gets pushed a bit to one side, then it overcorrects and so on, creating a wobble. But to achieve that kind of speed, the hook has to be centered perfectly in the lure and the point has to come out on the seam or the package turns sideways or spins out.

Forward speed and drop speed are important factors. Jig weight is merely one aspect of presentation speed. A trailer with a heavy thumping or twisting tail slows the drop. A trailer with a straight or forked tail allows the same jig to fall faster. The shape of a jig has some influence. And the weight of the head is only part of a jig's weight. Jigs with thick hooks fall faster than those with light hooks on the same heads. A 1/8-ounce Z-Man Headlock Jig (which balances perfectly with

Z-Man SwimmerZ swimbaits), with its thick hook and lead keeper falls faster than just about any other 1/8-ounce jig. So it requires faster forward speed, unless paired with a thick, heavy-thumping tail (such as on the SwimmerZ).

In clear water with spooky fish, the package should move slowly. Everything should be subtle in terms of size, color, and action. That's when ringworms, grubs, and small swimbaits shine. Balance requires light line and

> Balanced Softbait Selection

■ SWIMBAIT ■ SYMMETRY



Storm 360GT Searchbait



Z-Man SwimmerZ/Z-Man Headlock Jig



Kalin's Sismic Shad/
VMC Half Moon Jig



Jackall Glossy Shad/
3/32-ounce Gopher Tackle
Mushroom Head Jig



Jackall Rhythm Wave/
VMC Darter Head



Yamamoto Hula Grub/Eagle Claw
Trokar Shell Buster Jig



Strike King Baby Rage Craw/Deener's
Jigs And Things Fox Hair Jig



Case Plastics Ring Worm/
Owner Ultrahead Jig



Z-Man Ned Rig (TRD/
Finesse ShroomZ)



Berkley PowerBait Beat
Shad/Picasso Jig

RINGWORMS ■ AND ■ HYBRIDS



Lunker City Swimmin'
Ribster/Keitech Tungsten
Super Round Jig





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>>> SMALLMOUTH Jigs & Trailers

thin-wire hooks. Most smallmouth zealots have tried Z-Man Ned Rigs, composed of Finesse ShroomZ Jigheads and Finesse TRDs. They're designed for light line—like 4- to 8-pound Berkley FireLine or 5-pound Seaguar InvisX fluorocarbon. The low-action TRD performs best when dragged, deadsticked, or shaken in place on bottom, and they balance best with the medium-shaft hooks on the Finesse ShroomZ.

In cloudy water, bright colors, bottom contact, and crawl imitations or swimbaits with rattles become more important. Jigs are heavier to increase drop speed, not forward speed. Football heads with spider grubs excel for this situation. Trokar's new Shell Buster coupled with a Yamamoto Hula Grub is a prime example.

Tried and True

Almost any softbait trailer in the 3- to 5-inch range can catch smallmouths, but some jigs and trailers have been phenomenally effective. Last year, the 4-inch Strike King KVD Swim-N-Shiner, coupled with the new 1/8-ounce VMC Boxer Jig, proved deadly for river smallmouths. Like the Storm 360GT Searchbait, the "peduncle" leading to the tail on a Swim-N-Shiner is super thin, producing a good thump even at slow speeds, adding vibration that calls out to touchy bass through current and cloudy water.

The Boxer has a thick, strong hook. Compare it to the thin wire of a Gamakatsu jig hook on a 1/8-ounce Gopher Tackle Mushroom Head Jig. The Boxer requires at least 10-pound line, preferably monofilament or fluorocarbon, or the hook won't set. The Boxer's hook is too heavy to balance well with thin worms and 3- to 4-inch grubs. Dense hooks add weight to the package, too—forcing combinations to be fished at the faster end of

the spectrum. Thicker lines slow the drop and forward speeds, however.

I like Trokar's Shell Buster football head, which has a strong, light, super-sharp hook and a helpful keeper on the shank. It balances with every kind of spider grub—the 1/4-ounce best with 4-inch grubs and the 3/8-ounce best with 5-inch grubs, though any combination can be effective. A rod with 10-pound mono tied to a Shell Buster was on my deck—and caught bass—from ice-out to ice-up last year.

Other combos that worked well last year: A 3.8-inch Jackall Glossy Shad on a 3/32-ounce Gopher Tackle Mushroom Head Jig; a TightLines Lures UV Beaver on the new 1/6-ounce Z-Man Nedlock Jig; a Jackall Rhythm Wave swimbait on a VMC Darter Head; and a 3.8-inch Kalin's Sizmic Shad on a 1/8-ounce VMC Half Moon Jig with its larger Barbarian Hook. And when smallmouths get crazy, nothing works better than a Z-Man SwimmerZ swimbait on a Z-Man Headlock Jighead because

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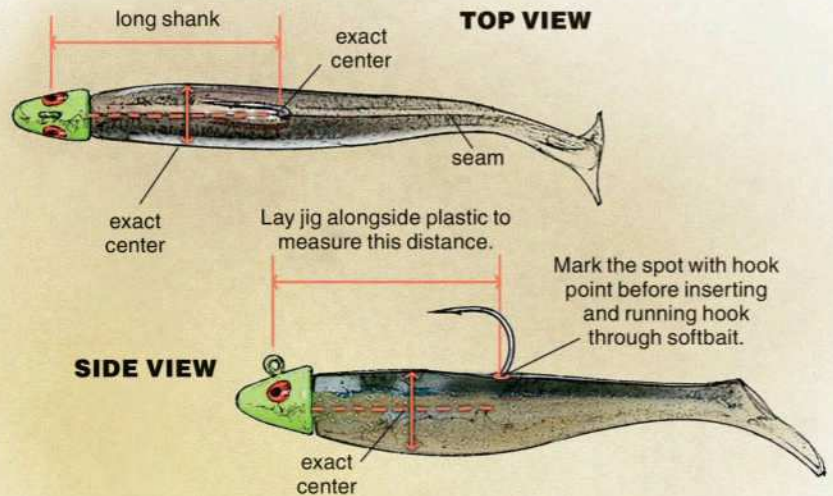
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ElaZ Tech plastics are all but indestructible. Glue one to the head and it can boat 100 bass.

For a quarter century, fox hair tied on an Arkie-style jig with a brush-guard, such as Bert Deener's Jigs And Things 1/4-ounce Fox Hair Jig, has been a mainstay for bottom-oriented, craw-crunching smallmouths. Other fine products have come along, like Jimmy D's River Bugs. Lately I've been tipping them with a 3-inch Strike King Baby Rage Craw with excellent results. Fox hair undulates as the claws wave—but only if the bait is threaded on right, with the hook extending through the middle and out at a precise distance from the head. Whenever smallmouths are looking down and feeding on craws, it's best to walk, drag, and hop on bottom with a football head like the Shell Buster or a brushguard hair jig.

Every season I fish with folks who don't know how to rig softbaits correctly or get in too big of a rush to do it right. It's the reason for this piece. The difference between catching many

➤ Making Swimmers Track Straight



or few—small fish or large—often depends on how well you focus when threading on a lure. Like a basketball player at the free-throw line, you have nobody else to blame. ■

**In-Fisherman Field Editor Matt Straw is an ace smallmouth bass angler who seeks to match presentations to the position and mood of the fish.*



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Paddletail

SWIMBAITS

MODERN WALLEYE MARVELS

>>> CONTINUED <<<

► **Paddletail or thumper-style swimbaits** are a fundamental walleye lure category on par with crankbaits, livebait rigs, and other classic presentations. *In-Fisherman* has long championed paddletails, chronicling the latest baits, applications, and benefits of these hard-thumping, versatile softbaits. ¶ In the May issue, we looked at the paddletail's rise to prominence. The lure's storied history sets the stage for this discussion with top anglers on how they're using them to catch more and bigger walleyes.

Northern Exposure

In-Fisherman contributor and guide Jeff Matity says he's been following *In-Fisherman* Editor In Chief Doug Stange's swimbait teachings for nearly two decades. "It's paid off," he says. "What began as Stange's summertime weedline patterns has evolved into an all-season, open-water quest with a cast of different baits that possess varying qualities that best suit the changing habitats and forage needs of big walleyes."

During the 2017 season, Matity and his brother

Jason fished swimbaits from May until November, from Saskatchewan to Ontario. The number of 7- to 11-pound walleyes they caught was impressive, and the lessons learned were remarkable.

Spring—"The biggest walleyes in a system rub shoulders with big pike in order to have access to prime forage and warmer water," Matity says. "What that means is some of the biggest walleyes in a lake are in 'pike' bays. Whether walleyes are there to eat suckers retreating from

their spawning runs or to soak up the sun and boost their metabolism is yet to be proven. Still, the best walleye contact is made during the heat of the day during stable, warming weather, which suggests the latter."

He says top spring baits are deep-bodied, 5-inch paddlers like the Big Hammer Swim-bait and Berkley's now-discontinued Flatback Shad. "Since these bays often have an off-color stain or suspended sediment, the kick of a big tail is important, providing roll and creating flash from the deep-bellied bait," he says. "This draws fish in less-than-clear conditions."

Solid-body lures threaded onto 3/8-, 1/2-, and 3/4-ounce saltwater jigheads, such as the Hammer Head Jig or Owner Saltwater Bullet jig, are the primary presentation. "However, when conditions are flat calm and the water becomes increasingly clear, the sinuous swimming style and realistic look of a hollow-belly swim-bait like the Strike King Shad-alicious, again 5 to 5½ inches long, fished with an internally rigged jighead such as a 3/8- to 3/4-ounce Bass Magnet tube jig, seem to out-do solid-body lures," he says.

"As you progress from a 3/8- to 1/2- to a 3/4-ounce head, you can fish deeper or faster, or both," he says. "It's surprising how upping the weight and fishing faster can get the fish chomping—the opposite of what many anglers would think for triggering sluggish fish."

Summer—"As you progress from the shallow bays to main-lake rock and shorelines, newer shallow-belly swimbaits snake their way through the terrain and into the mouths of big walleyes," Matity says. "One such lure is the Storm 360GT Searchbait, which has a large paddle tail but a slim physique. With a prepackaged head that weighs 3/8 ounce, this lure is a shallow-water presentation, fishable down to about 15 feet. Wave action and wind spur the use of this shallow pattern and, unlike deep-bodied baits, that can be fished with a variety of retrieves, shallow-bellies



Storm 360GT Searchbait

perform best on a straight retrieve."

On main-lake reefs and flats, Matity's focus shifts back to deep-bellied baits. "If restricted to one size for trophy walleyes, 5 inches would be my choice," he says. "However, for open water, the 5½-inch Big Hammer and Shad-alicious get the nod. Upsizing bodies yields gains in tail size, action, and vibration. This, along with the deep belly, gives the lure thump and flash, and moves a lot of water as it's reeled along."



» Jeff Matity often catches big walleyes offshore where they feed on open-water prey and are vulnerable to paddletails.

The 3/4- and 1-ounce heads are right for 15- to 30-foot depths. He rigs the Big Hammer the same way as in spring, but says the Shad-alicious also fishes "right" with an external jighead like the Hammer Head, superglued in place. "An external jighead gives the bait a 6-inch profile and telegraphs bottom well," he says.

His go-to retrieve is stop-and-go. "After the lure hits bottom, raise the rod tip to 10 o'clock and hold it steady while the lure is reeled quickly about 10 feet, then stop to allow it to scurry to

bottom again," he says. "During this process, the lure sprints off bottom several feet, then stalls and swims back to bottom. Contact with the bottom are short or can be prolonged should the fish prefer to pin the swim-bait to the bottom. Any bump is telegraphed to the motionless rod and the hook is set hard."

Fall—Autumn walleyes may roam shallow bays when a warming trend draws them shallow or if they are congregating in current areas. "When this is the case, spring tactics apply," Matity says. "If the lake has large walleyes, however, odds are there's an open-water forage base that is both soft-finned and high in protein.

"Depending on where you are on the continent, prey may be alewives, shad, or ciscoes," he says.

"In the case of ciscoes, walleyes take advantage of the fall spawn to hunt prey that is vulnerable and focused on spawning. In this situation, walleyes eat ciscoes measuring a foot or longer, so 5½-inch swim-baits are superb."



Big Hammer on Hammer Head Jig

Paddletail SWIMBAITS

>>> CONTINUED <<<

More Matity Tips

"Anytime wind roughs up the shoreline, swimbaits are great to throw," he says. "They fish shallow to deep and catch everything that swims." He says that adding a scent product like Pro-Cure Super Gel gives following fish a whiff of something attractive. "Trophy Walleye and Anise Plus are my favorites," he says.

He says that paddletail swimbaits force you to fish walleyes as true predators. "Only by doing so do you realize how often the largest walleyes behave like any top predator, such as pike, muskie, or lake trout, aggressive with a big appetite."

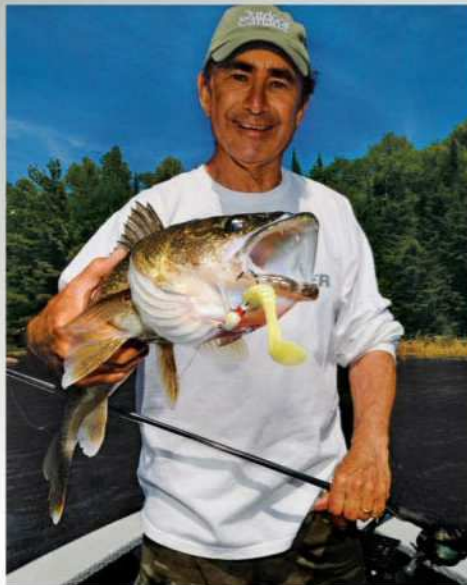
He rigs a medium-heavy 6½-foot rod with a medium-size Pflueger reel spooled with 20-pound Sufix 832 mainline tipped with a 25-pound Sufix Invisiline fluorocarbon leader.

Strolling and Downsizing

In-Fisherman Field Editor Gord Pyzer, long a fan of paddletail swimbaits, notes a few recent trends in his paddler presentations. "When we first started years ago, the bigger 5- and 6-inch paddletails were best because they generally targeted the biggest fish, often walleyes in the 8- to 10-pound class and better," he says. "Smaller walleyes hit them, but there are often better presentations for run-of-the-mill walleyes

"More recently, however, we've discovered that we catch more typical nice-size walleyes, those in the 16- to 24-inch range, by using smaller 3- and 4-inch swimbaits, and fishing them in shallower water," he says. "Regardless of the length and size of the fish, the key always is using a heavier jighead than you would expect for the depth. I often use an ounce for big walleyes in 8 to 10 feet of water. The heavy head forces you to fish swimbaits in the aggressive style walleyes often prefer."

Pyzer continues to promote paddletail "strolling." "As I've written about in the past, we often stroll the baits alongside the boat, in a modified snappigging sort of way," he says. "By strolling and not casting, you keep you lure constantly in the water—no time wasted casting, waiting for the bait to fall, and retrieving—it is always in their faces."



>>Pyzer prescribes smaller paddlers for eater-size walleyes, and "strolling" to keep your bait in front of walleyes of all sizes.

Not Livebait

In-Fisherman contributor Scott Glorvigen, a longtime professional walleye angler, advises anglers eager to excel with swimbaits to think beyond the connection to traditional livebaits. "I think the biggest mistake walleye anglers make is looking at plastics solely as a replacement for livebait in traditional presentations, like a jig and minnow," he says.

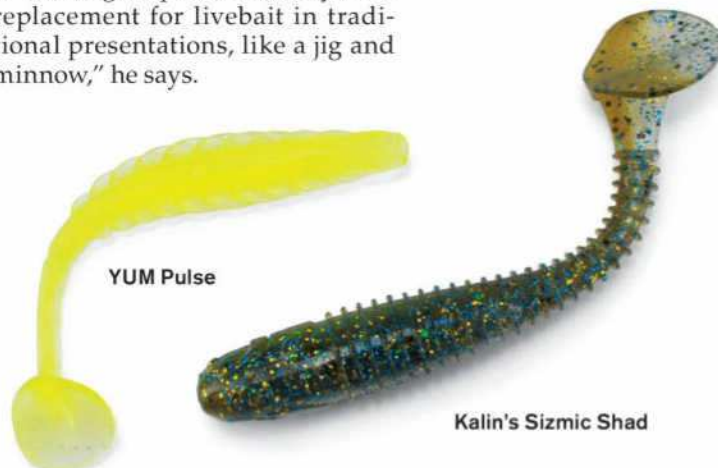
"There are certainly softbaits that serve as excellent substitutes for livebait—including split-tail smelt baits and nail-tail designs like the Berkley PowerBait Pro Twitch-tail Minnow. But a lot of different plastics, including paddletail swimbaits, work wonders on walleyes when fished as you would a crankbait or other artificial lure, not the way you'd fish livebait," he says.

Ever on the hunt for a better way to put walleyes in the boat, he experiments with swimbaits and other softbaits from a variety of manufacturers. "I'm not tied to any sponsors, so I try lots of options," he says.

To better understand where swimbaits excel, he compares them to the Twitchtail, which sports a thin, flexible tail that dances at the slightest twitch of the rod tip. He considers the Twitchtail a finesse bait. "It's one of the few softbaits that lends itself to a subtle approach similar to a shaky-head presentation. You don't hop it, just twitch it along bottom and let that magical tail do the work for you," he says.

Paddletails, in comparison, are higher-octane options. "They're great alternatives to hard-bodied, shad-style crankbaits," he says. "You can fish them anywhere in the water column, at a variety of speeds."

One of his top swimbait patterns is as straightforward as it is deadly. "I've been fishing smaller swimbaits on round jigheads, close to bottom with a steady retrieve," he says. "I've used them to catch





Megabass Spark Shad

Larew Sweet Swimmer



walleyes in areas where traditional livebait tactics fail—going back in with a paddletail after crawlers and leeches struck out.”

The presentation starts with a 3½- to 4½-inch paddletail. “The Megabass Spark Shad, Storm 360GT Searchbait, and Gene Larew Sweet Swimmer are great choices for this,” he says. Bait colors lean toward the natural end of the spectrum in clear water. “Minnow, smelt, and shiner patterns are effective in these conditions,” he says. “In stained or other low-vis conditions, try chartreuse, pink, and orange.”

Baits are rigged on a round-head, long-shank jig. “An extended shank, particularly with a wire keeper, helps hold softbaits in place,” he says. “Choose a jig that’s heavy enough to keep the bait near bottom given the water depth and conditions. I generally use a jig of the same weight I’d choose for a slipsinker if I was dragging a livebait rig in the same scenario. A jig box stocked with an assortment of heads from 1/4- to 1/2-ounce allows you to adjust to most situations.”

Glorvigen favors a 6-foot 9-inch to 7-foot spinning rod with a medium-fast tip for this paddletail presentation. “My mainline is a fused line like Berkley FireLine Crystal or a braid like Sufix Performance Braid, which lets me feel bottom, the lure’s tail action, and walleyes overtaking the bait,” he says, noting that braids also make it easier to cast in windy conditions. “Plus, they slice through weeds, which helps when you’re trying to wrestle a big walleye out of the greenery.

“High-visibility mainline helps you visualize where your bait is and detect strikes,” he says. He adds an 18-inch fluorocarbon leader to the end of the mainline.



»Scott Glorvigen favors a straight retrieve with paddletails like the Megabass Spark Shad on a ball-head jig.

DIY Paddlers

Longtime tournament pro and reigning Cabela’s Masters Walleye Circuit world champion Tommy Skarlis has fished paddletails since the early days. He’s a fan of their ability to put walleyes in the boat, especially when the chips are down. And while he’s fished virtually every swimbait under the sun, he’s convinced some of the best around are poured in garages, not on large-scale production lines.

“Lately, tournament partner Jeff Lahr and I have been using the Ripper, a homemade bait poured from a mold made by Do-it Molds,” he says. “The Ripper is a fat, ribbed bait with a large, round paddletail. The name makes people think you have to fish it aggressively, and you can, but it’s versatile enough to do just about anything.”

Available in 2½-, 3½-, and 4-inch sizes, the Ripper is the brainchild of Do-it Molds product manager Kyle Steinfeldt, an avid walleye angler. “I aimed it at walleyes, knowing bass would like it, too,” says Steinfeldt. “I began working on the Ripper two years ago, and let the fish tell me what they wanted while I went through about a dozen prototypes. The bait was finished in the spring of 2017 and quickly became our most popular selling lure mold.”

Steinfeldt says the Ripper was designed for both still and flowing water, with equally deceptive action on the fall and during straight retrieves. Its attributes, he says, include a large paddletail, ringworm exterior, and deep-bodied profile. “It produces a wide wobble and pronounced side-to-side rolling action that causes baits with different colors top and bottom to flash like a swimming minnow,” he adds.

As for jig pairings, he says initial experiments with teardrop-style designs proved promising. “A lot of anglers like the nose-first, bombing action created with teardrops,



Berkley PowerBait Ripple Shad



Cabela's Hand-Pour Shad

Paddletail SWIMBAITS

>>> CONTINUED <<<

but then we introduced a new design—the SwimBait Head Jig—that matches perfectly with the Ripper. It has a large eye, rounded head, double keeper, and the belly of the jig extends into the plastic body, so the bait matches the shape of the jig.”

While some anglers might hesitate at the idea of making their own softbaits, Steinfeldt says its simple, inexpensive, and offers a variety of benefits. “If you can heat something up in a microwave, you can make your own baits,” he promises. “All you do is heat up the plastisol for two minutes, until it reaches 350°F, add desired color and glitter, then inject it into the mold, where it sets up in 30 seconds. The process is a lot faster than driving to a tackle shop or waiting for baits ordered online to reach your doorstep. Plus, you can pour your own baits as inexpensively as 7 cents apiece, which is a lot cheaper than you can buy them off the shelf.

“Tackle crafting also allows you to customize bait color and action,” he adds. “You can create color patterns to match any species of crayfish or baitfish—or stand out from the crowd or environment. Different hardening and softening additives also let you adjust the bait’s action. You can loosen it up and widen the wobble, or tighten it to accentuate the tail thump.”

Skarlis’ strategies for fishing the Ripper are many and varied. “During the 2018 tournament season, I plan to pull it on three-way rigs along the faces of wing dams on the Mississippi River, slow-troll it on the edges and tops of flats on lakes like Mille Lacs, and vertical jig it on the Illinois River for monster saugers

and walleyes,” he says. “Plus a variety of pitching, dragging, jerking, snapjigging, and other presentations everywhere from Saginaw Bay, Michigan, to Cass Lake, Minnesota.”

His pitching program: “I cruise along at 30 or 40 mph, watching for fish on my Raymarine Axiom sonar. When I mark a fish, I touch the sonar screen to save the coordinates. Then I spin the boat around, come back, and pitch to the icon, right in the prop wash. High-riding fish are typically more active and apt to hit an aggressive retrieve, but

glide. Other times, you have to twitch and wiggle it along the bottom like a swim jig.”

When vertical jigging paddlers in rivers, he often slips downstream, executing classic lift-fall-pause routines. “You can also swim paddletails downstream about 2 to 6 inches off bottom, or drag them over the right kind of bottom,” he says.

No matter the retrieve pattern, Skarlis advises using a strike-detecting combination of a hyper-sensitive rod and line. “The ability to tell when a fish takes the bait is paramount,” he says. “Sometimes you get lucky and a fish that hits on the fall is ‘magically’ there when you go to rip the bait again. But most times, most anglers don’t feel the hit, they feel the spit.”

He favors a 7-foot, medium-fast St. Croix Legend or Legend Elite spinning rod, loaded with light superline mainline with a 2-pound-test diameter and 10-pound break strength. “Berkley NanoFil is a great choice, and hard to beat for long casts,” he says. “Fire-Line is good, too, and I’ve also been trying a new braid from Cortland.” He adds a 2- to 6-foot fluorocarbon leader of the same break strength to the end of the mainline.

“As soon as you feel something different or see the line do something different, set the hook. Hook-sets are free, and the action imparted by an ‘airball’ hook-set sometimes triggers a strike,” he says.

“Again, vary your retrieves at times. Always imagine a walleye is following your lure. Sometimes it just takes a change up to get them to bite.” ■

*Dan Johnson of Isanti, Minnesota, is a frequent contributor to In-Fisherman publications and director of All Creation Outdoor Media.



»Tommy Skarlis (seated) and tournament partner Jeff Lahr routinely tag-team walleyes with paddletails.



you need to figure out what they want at the moment.”

Skarlis cautions anglers against having one pet paddletail presentation or preconceived notions about what jigstrokes and other motions are going to catch fish. “You never get up in the morning and say, ‘This is how I’m going to catch them today,’” he says. “Walleye preferences change. One day they want you to rip the bait erratically with the rod tip as high as possible, and the next they prefer a steady lift and gentle downward

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BY **STEVE RYAN***

► **Northern pike are an early-summer gift to anglers.** Part of that generosity has to do with their abundance and general willingness to strike many presentations. Larger specimens grow more particular in their feeding habits but remain susceptible to a handful of exciting techniques that rarely fail.

All the Buzz

Daylight hours reach their peak during the summer solstice and water temperatures are on a steady climb. Shallow vegetation expands and shoreline grasses flood during high-water years. Pike enter these shallow flats to prey on anything that scurries, swims, or slithers within striking distance.

On lakes and rivers, there's no magical water temperature that draws pike to shallow backwater bays. They arrive prior to ice-out to spawn, and stay in the warm sheltered waters as long as food remains

present. The key is to find signs of life in these shallow expanses. A school of minnows breaking the surface, panfish plucking insects off the surface, wading birds stalking a meal, or a subtle wake along the shoreline are indicators that pike are likely nearby.

To catch pike on shallow flats, few lures perform better or generate more excitement than prop-style lures. It's a sensory experience like no other in pike fishing. Make casts to intersect visible cover. The spinning blade churns and sprays water into the air while

>>> *Never T*



**“TO CATCH PIKE ON SHALLOW FLATS,
FEW LURES PERFORM BETTER OR
GENERATE MORE EXCITEMENT THAN
PROP-STYLE LURES”**

MegaFrox
Slash Duck



a frothy trail forms behind. Vary retrieve speed to change the sound and surface disturbance generated by the lure. Watch for subtle signs of a following pike while you wait for the water to erupt.

Due to the flex in the wire arms of standard

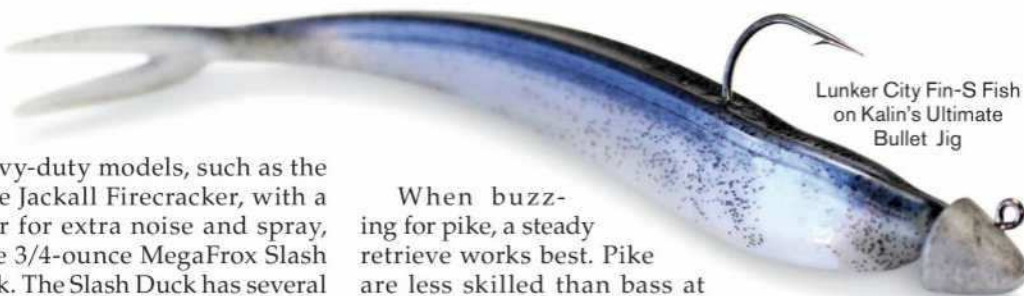
crushing, and pulling power than pike. Its casting dynamics also are superior to a bent-wire buzzbait. It has an extra wireguard at the front of the lure that helps to lock the blade in place during the cast, minimizing blade fluttering and helicoptering. The result is longer and more accurate casts. Slash Ducks move a lot of water and present a larger profile with their frog-like body. Their weight means they don't get blown out of the water on a strike. Equipped with a stout 5/0 Owner hook, they can easily withstand attacks by trophy pike.

Boil PIKE

buzzbaits, they're not the best choice for driving hooks into gator-size pike. Better options

include in-line and heavy-duty models, such as the 1/2-ounce Jackall Firecracker, with a clacker for extra noise and spray, or the 3/4-ounce MegaFrox Slash Duck. The Slash Duck has several features that make it my favorite for fishing emergent vegetation.

It was designed in Thailand to withstand strikes from toman (giant snakehead), a fish with considerably more striking,



Lunker City Fin-S Fish
on Kalin's Ultimate
Bullet Jig

When buzzing for pike, a steady retrieve works best. Pike are less skilled than bass at tracking baits on the surface and have a tougher time anticipating where and when a lure will exit thick patches of vegetation. Concentrate on working lures through clearings and along the edges of vegetation. As with any surface lure, wait until you feel the weight of the fish on the line before setting the hook.

To gear up for big pike in shallow settings, a stout frog-style rod, high-speed reel, and heavy braid dramatically increase hooking and landing percentages. Braided line is not only better than mono at withstanding the abrasion of running through vegetation, but it also slices through weedstalks when pike dash into them.

Follow-Up Lures

When pike boil behind buzzers but won't commit, soft-plastic jerk shads excel as follow-up baits. Large ones



Jackall
Firecracker

Never-Fail PIKE

like the 7-inch Lunker City Fin-S Fish, Zoom Magnum Super Fluke, and 7-inch Berkley Gulp! Jerk Shad can be rigged on a 5/0 to 7/0 weightless extra-wide-gap hook for a weedless and lifelike lure. Worked rapidly across the water with a walk-the-dog action, they draw savage strikes. Slowed to mimic a dying baitfish, they trigger tentative fish. With a snap of the rod, they dart and shoot off to the side. On the pause, they continue to glide and suspend in the water column before slowly sinking with a slight quiver.

Pike typically can be fooled by going through the lure's repertoire of actions. Tie them with a 40- to 60-pound-test fluorocarbon leader and attach to 30- to 50-pound Sufix 832 braid mainline with an FG knot. Hi-vis mainline assists in watching the line for any hops or jumps that signal a bite.

To cover large flats, try rigging soft-plastic jerkbaits in tandem in

each flick of the rod, the lures dance and dart independently of each other so the action is unpredictable. The presentation resembles baitfish chasing each other. It's a visually exciting rig. Lure position changes abruptly and pike respond to such erratic motion.

The rig doesn't tangle as much as one might expect and it's possible to catch two pike at once when they're concentrated and competitively feeding. Top color selections vary depending upon water clarity and light conditions, but white/pearl and bubble gum are easy to see in the water and draw reactions from pike.

Gliding for Bigger Pike

Under cold-front conditions or other dramatic weather changes, glidebaits trigger big fish when

Canada and relies heavily on glidebaits during summer and fall. He suggests that anglers watch for big pike seeking refuge in cooler areas of the main lake as summer progresses. "Pike relate to long tapering points and deep weededges," he says. "Here they hunt for prey rather than using the lie-in-wait ambush tactics you find in shallow bays. Look for larger pike on long tapering points that drop into deep water. Ciscos, whitefish and walleyes relate to these areas especially if scattered rocks are present."

Urbanozo chooses Sinister Tackle's 6-inch Natural, with its curlytail kicker, as his go-to glidebait. "This moderate-size glider was designed by Todd Cleveland and it has several advantages over other models," he says "First, it's made of high-impact



7-inch Berkley Gulp! Jerk Shad

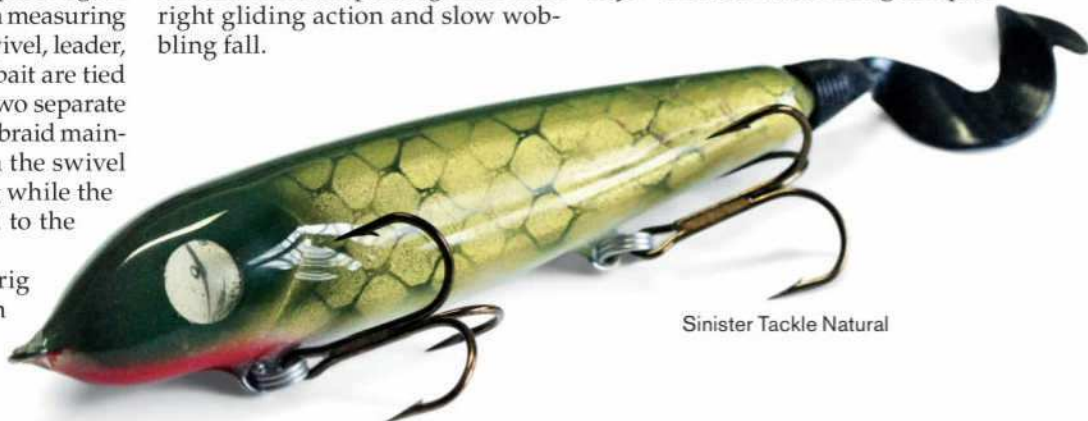


Optimum Baits Vagabond Glide Hustler

what's called a "donkey rig" in bass fishing. It consists of two 5- to 7-inch soft-plastic jerk minnows on 5/0 to 7/0 extra-wide-gap hooks, two barrel swivels, and two unequal lengths of 40-pound fluorocarbon measuring 12 and 16 inches. Each swivel, leader, hook, and Texposed softbait are tied independently to make two separate rigs. The 40- to 65-pound braid mainline is threaded through the swivel of the longer pre-tied rig while the other pre-tied rig is tied to the end of the mainline.

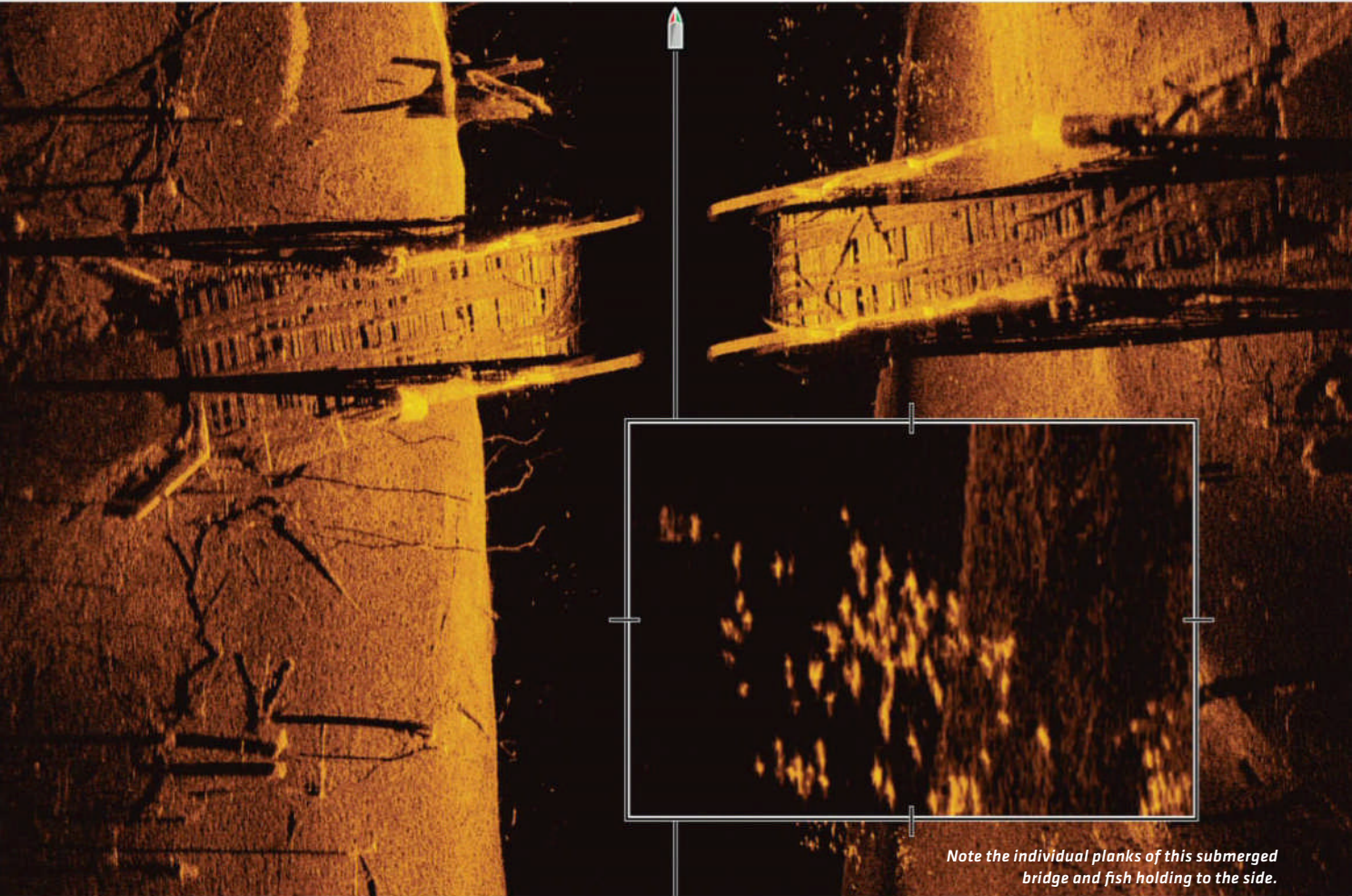
This rig allows one rig to slide up and down the mainline, while the shorter one slides on the mainline. With

others fail. Most glidebaits have an attractive S-curve action on a steady retrieve. But their appeal to big pike comes when worked in a slow deliberate fashion, imparting a left and right gliding action and slow wobbling fall.



Sinister Tackle Natural

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Note the individual planks of this submerged bridge and fish holding to the side.

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plastic and through-wire construction, ensuring uniformity of action and durability. No worries about tooth holes or chipped paint that can cause wooden lures to become waterlogged. The Natural also has transparent eyes that gather light, which pike key in on when lures move with a slow rhythmic action. As the name implies, they have a realistic appearance, thanks to the paint jobs of Greg Kos at RedEye Custom Baits, as well as natural action."

For best results, cast toward the deep edge of the target area—points, weed-edges, or saddle areas. Allow the lure to sink at a rate of about a foot per second and slowly work it back to the boat. Six- to 12-inch downward nods of the rod make the lure dart left and right. On a semi-slack line, each pull of the rod snaps the lure around and changes the direction of its glide.

"A twitch of the wrist moves the lure to one side, and when repeated in a rhythmic cadence, it darts back and forth nearly 180 degrees with minimal forward movement," Urbanozo adds. Glide-baits stay in the strike zone longer than crankbaits or bucktails. The Natural also is effective as it shimmies horizontally while it sinks, so watch your line for strikes as it falls."

This lure also excels when worked through sparse vegetation and above the top of deep weedflats. For lakes with clear to moderate clarity, Kos offers a series of Naturals that mimic walleyes, ciscoes, and whitefish. In dark or stained colored lakes, he has more visible "hot" walleye or perch patterns.

Magic Swimming

A never-fail technique popularized by *In-Fisherman* Editor in Chief Doug Stange consists of flat-rigging a Sebile Magic Swimmer Soft, with the hook exiting its side instead of the top of the lure. He's used this

"WHEN PIKE TURN TOUGH, REACH DEEP INTO THIS STASH OF NEVER-FAIL TECHNIQUES TO RESTART THE ACTION"



approach for trophy pike as well as other species. Flat-rigging gives the lure a slow fall and imparts a different triggering action when popped off the bottom with a quick snap of the rod. The lure's "magic" stems from its segmented body, a design unique among soft plastic swimbaits that brings the segmented action of a hard-body swimbait but with a more fluid action. Moreover, it has natural feel and can be rigged weedless. It's available in sizes of 5½, 6¼, and 8 inches. Upsizing and downsizing can be critical to success when pike get finicky.

Magic Swimmer Softs are packaged with a heavy-duty, weighted wide-gap hook, though Stange prefers the Trokar 170 weighted hook. When a more erratic or snapping action is desired, rig the Magic Swimmer Soft on a stout ¾- or 1-ounce Revenge Hedz jighead or Kalin's Ultimate Bullet Jig. Rigged this way, swimbaits can be worked deeper and faster than with a belly-weighted hook. The 7/0 Mustad Ultrapoint hook on the Revenge Hedz provides plenty of gap to set solidly on big pike that often inhale these lures as they rocket off bottom.

When pike turn tough, reach deep into this stash of never-fail techniques to restart the action. Savor the visual nature of these presentations and the exciting strikes they trigger from one of the world's premier freshwater gamefish. ■

In-Fisherman Field Editor Steve Ryan is a veteran pike angler, pursuing them from his home in the Upper Midwest and across the globe.



Sebile
Magic Swimmer Soft
rigged flat with Trokar
TK170 hook

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE



EAGLE CLAW
TROKAR®



BY CORY SCHMIDT*

► **The floating forest twitched,** slightly at first, and then an upward heave of an impending explosion. Something was in there. Something big and alarming enough to make other creatures in the area stop. Wending its way across the small oxbow flat, a serpentine shape shot ripples across the leafy canopy. Every few feet, something was producing sharp pop sounds, like miniature fireworks.

Other than the osprey perched in a towering pine, only a lone figure peering through polarized glasses moved in for a closer look. With a well-timed flick of the rod tip, the angler's jig entered the water just as the something arrived, producing an eruption of water and salad and scales.

Nearly impenetrable, vast green awnings of floating vegetation harbor swarms of big crappies, bluegills, and other sunfish, plus a thick stew of bugs, crustaceans, and minnows. Here, sun-protected panfish swim and forage in relative comfort. Bass, pike, bowfin, and other marauders occasionally invade this littoral safety zone that serves as panfish playgrounds.



LONG- PO



In certain regions, there's a perception that big crappies and sunfish move offshore and into deep water when spawntime wraps. That's true in many waters. But in other lakes, reservoirs, and slack-water rivers, the least persecuted fish are those hunkered under expanses of overhead cover—boat docks, downed trees, and emergent and floating vegetation, in particular. Plenty of fisheries host both shallow and deep patterns concurrently, though some larger crappies and sunfish choose the shallow option for its protection and infusions of food.

This scenario reminds me of the day a



friend and I discovered a gem of a panfish lake that occasionally produced colossal crappies, but also some frustration. We'd managed to work out a technique southern anglers call doodlesocking—quietly and precisely dipping jigs into small open pockets in floating vegetation, steering baits into place with 9- to 14-foot poles, or in our case, spinning rods—11-footers from Cabela's and Class Tackle, both European-style match rods, long discontinued. These days, B'n'M Poles owns much of the panfish rod category and offers two sweet 10- and 12-foot graphite rods for dipping little jigs.

cover, while the tips are sensitive and soft enough to protect braided line. Fine graphite tips help guide light jigs into tight quarters, such as tiny openings in vegetation or between tree branches.

Though most of these rods match 2000-size spinning reels, I often pair them with a 1000-size, such as a Shimano Sedona or Stradic. Since you're not casting—at least not beyond the occasional short pitch—a larger spool isn't needed and adds weight. Tiny 1000-size spools also couple well with 2- to 4-pound braid, important in this style of fishing.

LING FOR <<< Panfish

THROUGH THE ROOF

B'n'M's 10-foot Ultimate IM6 Graphite Rod and the Sam Heaton SS are two I've used.

Mostly, I continue to prize the light, sensitive, fishable qualities of St. Croix's Panfish Series, including an 11-footer for dipping jigs and a 9-foot version for short-pitching stealthy slipfloat rigs. These long rods are impressively light, due to wispy Pac Bay Minima guides wrapped on a convergence of premium high-modulus/high-strain graphite. The butt sections offer ample stiffness and power to set hooks and lift big panfish out of

The frustration in the scenario above was caused by pie-plate crappies and bluegills twirling light mono lines around plant stalks. Strong, braided lines didn't exist. Six-, 4-, and 2-pound mono don't play nice with slab crappies or bull bluegills in heavy vegetation. Some anglers use 8-, 10-, and 12-pound mono for crappies in heavy cover, but to me, a 1/16- or 1/32-ounce jig doesn't work right on heavy mono.

Joe Balog, an exceptional angler who moved from Michigan to Central Florida a couple years ago, has worked

LONG-POLING

out a crappie system on the St. Johns River that hinges largely on braided line. When he's not retracing the stomping grounds of the late, great Bass Professor, Doug Hannon, Balog's mission is searching for hubcap crappies beneath the St. Johns' endless shallow jungles. Perhaps more than any other tackle element, he believes braided line is key in his ability to precisely present jigs, detect bites, and extract fish from snarls of vegetation.

"Braided line is great," he says. "It separates most of the locals who use mono from those of us who fish braid because we can fish tiny jigs with stealth and precision and yet pull fish out of heavy cover. For me, 2-pound-test Sufix 832 matches perfectly with a 1/16-ounce jig and softbait."

Stirring the Brew

Coaxing crappies to bite in these cozy environs is far easier than finding them in most cases. Balog believes it's why many anglers create their own fishing spots, which I'll detail shortly.

He says that crappies in most systems—south and north—make two separate shallow movements. "On the St. Johns, groups of black crappies start moving into shallow floating cover during prespawn in November and December," he says. "Here, mats of pennywort, water hyacinth, and water lettuce are all attractive to crappies. We don't see a lot of invasive hyacinth in the St. Johns anymore due to spray-control. But I fish a lot of pennywort, and water lettuce can be a goldmine. All three species can entirely blanket the surface from a foot deep out to the channel edge in 12 feet of water."

During this first shallow movement, pods of crappies often tuck beneath the canopy but hold near a deep edge, he says. He reconnects with shallow crappies in mid-March and April after the spawn, finding smaller groups on shallow, vegetated flats. He's also found big coppernose in some of the same spots. The pattern may last into summer, though the oppressive Florida heat



»The author uses many of the tactics of southern anglers discussed here to catch crappies and other panfish in northern waters.

keeps a lot of folks off the water in June, July, and August.

"It's astonishing how much prey lives in these mats," Balog says. "Not just baitfish. I frequently clean crappies that are full of crayfish living on the vegetation. You also find mosquitofish swimming beneath the mats. They're 1 to 2 inches long and crappies eat tons of them. It's amazing when a boat goes by and throws a big wake and displaces bait. And you immediately hear *pop, pop, pop* sounds—crappies wolfing down mosquitofish. It's like shaking bushes, and a lot of local anglers have figured out how to take advantage of that situation as well."

He says many anglers use push-poles or lengths of conduit sharpened

at one end to push through shallow-water mats and open fishable holes in the cover. "Some anglers chop the plants, disturbing invertebrates and creating an artificial feeding situation," he says. You'd think this might spook rather than attract panfish. But Balog says chopping out holes in heavy veg-mats remains a popular local method for creating temporary feeding zones. "The first few minutes after I see anglers do this, everyone in their boat seems to be hooked up," he says. "After that, the fishing may slow considerably, since there are only so many active fish in an area."

Exploring Crappie Carpets

I've never been a fan of destroying vegetation. Perhaps Balog isn't

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LONG-POLING

either, which could be one of the reasons he prefers to stay on the move rather than pinning his hopes to a single spot or two. His active approach relates more to his bass-fishing background—fish fast and stay on the move for active fish. So he uses his trolling motor and works through expansive shallow flats.

“Earlier in the year, more crappies position beneath vegetation closer to the main channel, while after spawning they spread out more, and you’ve got to hunt them down,” he says. “I’ve noticed that most of the active mats I find are near feeder creeks or in old oxbows and other primary backwater areas. Big flats with 18 inches to 4 feet of water are ideal.

“Some of the pennywort mats I fish are as small as a coffee table,” he says. “Other beds are 4 or 5 acres. I look at the small mats as casting targets, often working around their perimeters, dipping a little tube jig into corners and protrusions along edges. When I work a large plant-covered flat, I use my trolling motor, fishing vegetation the way a bass angler might flip it with a worm or weedless jig.”

While small-leaved pennywort and other plants such as “gator grass” overgrow some of his best crappie spots, there’s something attractive to crappies about water lettuce, he says. “Other than the overhead cover, it’s the root system of water lettuce that attracts fish.” Indeed, *Pistia stratiotes* sprouts long, feathery root systems that appeal to a variety of invertebrates such as crayfish, which feast on the sweet plant flesh.

“Working through these expanses of matted cover, I search for targets—holes near thicker plant clumps, in particular,” Balog explains. “Even a small opening has potential. My Minn-Kota Ultrex is the best trolling motor I’ve ever used and moves my boat quietly and efficiently through these matted forests. Having spot-lock on a cable-drive motor has been a huge advantage for the way I fish. My 17-foot camo-green boat not only

doesn’t spook crappies, sometimes they relate to it like a mat. After I hook a crappie, I often sit in place and catch fish beneath my boat.”

Another key to his boat positioning is to work into the wind. Between spot-lock and floating mats that can temporarily hold a boat in place, he likes an upwind approach because it forces him to work slower and systematically through an area. Motoring downwind can move you too quickly through fish-holding terrain.

Buzzing through a veg mat with a trolling motor might produce the same effect as slicing it with a scythe. But trolling-motor noise and too much on-off turmoil can spook crappies, particularly in shallow, clear water. Thus, a shallow-water anchor can be a fantastic tool for dipping pockets.

Dipping Devices

Whether Balog’s snaking his way through a jungle of pennywort in Central Florida or I’m wending through a field of water lily on a Minnesota lake, we fish in much the same way. “Because I often fish in 4 feet of water and less, I peel 3 to 4 feet of line off my reel and let the jig hang,” Balog says. “When I spot a small clearing among pads, I move my rod tip into position and drop the jig into it, letting the lure

freefall to the bottom. If a fish is there, it often bites right away. Lift the fish to the surface, away from plant stalks, and either dip it up with a net or swing it into the boat with the rod.” A good panfish net is valuable, especially a long-handled, soft-meshed, tangle-free scoop like Erabill’s 9535 Conservation Series.

“I experiment with retrieves just beneath the mats, too,” he says, “especially when I hear crappies popping things off plants. Dip the jig and hold it within a foot of the surface. Feeding fish can be so close to the surface that you spot them with sunglasses. But if no bites happen within about 20 seconds, give the jig one hard snap. Lots of times, right after the lure comes to rest, fish eat it.”

Most days, Balog begins and ends with a 1/16-ounce ballhead jig inserted into a 2-inch tube. He prefers traditional tube rigging over threading the bait onto the jighead collar like a grub because it stays intact until fish rip the bait apart. “To me, a tube is the ultimate for dipping and flipping,” he says. “You get hung on something about every third cast—it’s unavoidable. You don’t want to constantly re-thread the bait onto the hook. A tube, however, is tough and efficient. I don’t mind jigheads with a cheap hook, either. You need a hook that straightens when

Long-Poling Lures



Lunker City Fin-S Shad



Akara Tungsten Sphere Jig/
Candy Plastics Domination Fry



13 Fishing Doug/
13 Fishing Bernie

Trigger X Nymph



Lunker City Ultralite Fin-S Jig/
Bobby Garland Scent Wiggler

Bobby Garland Mo-Glo Jig/
Swim'R



Strike King Mr. Crappie Tube

Akara Tungsten Jighead/
Z-Man Finesse ShadZ



“THERE’S SOMETHING ATTRACTIVE TO CRAPPIES ABOUT WATER LETTUCE”

you hit a bad snag. A #6 or #8 light bronze hook is ideal.”

As a lead jig alternative, a compact, heavy tungsten jig more easily pierces thick mats. Tungsten lets you maintain jighead and hook size while fishing heavier, like the difference between piercing a target with tin versus lead shot. My favorite tungsten crappie jig is an Akara Tungsten Jighead in 2-gram (1/14-ounce) and 3-gram (2/19-ounce) sizes. They match 1½- to 2-inch softbaits and have a fine-wire Japanese hook and keeper on the collar. For micro (1-inch) softbaits, Akara’s Tungsten Sphere and Teardrop jigs feature even tinier head sizes with hooks down to #16.

When crappies and ‘gills are extra spooky, such as in 2 feet of clear water, even a 12-foot rod might

not provide enough separation or stealth to safely deliver a bait. It’s here that my 9-foot St. Croix Panfish Series rod springs into action, rigged with 2-pound green Sufix 832 and a Thill Stealth or Mini Stealth slipfloat above a jig-softbait combo. I avoid pinching splitshot on the line so the float and jig can be delivered as one compact package, preventing snags. For accuracy, a combo side-arm swing and rod-tip flick usually transports the rig to the target.

Other than a standard tube, such as a Strike King Slab Hammer or Mr. Crappie Tube, Balog likes straight-tail plastics. The Strike King Shad Pole and Lightning Shad, Candy Plastics Domination Fry, and TriggerX Flap Tail Grub are other preferred softbaits. One of my new favorites is an Akara Tungsten

Jighead with the cut tail section of a Z-Man Finesse ShadZ—soft and lively yet durable.

Color can be a key factor at times. “Many days on the St. Johns, pink and white tubes blow everything else away,” he says. “I also like to start some days with a natural brown tube before moving to solid white, pink, or orange. Every waterway has favored color patterns.”

What doesn’t change is a crappie’s fondness for a roof over its head. Whether it’s a large dock on a Kentucky reservoir, lily pads on a Midwest lake, or water lettuce in Florida, some of the biggest crappies and bluegills are always there. ■

**In-Fisherman Field Editor Cory Schmidt is an astute multispecies angler and contributor to all In-Fisherman publications.*

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FROM THE ARCHIVES:
June 1990

The Golden Age of Flathead Catfish

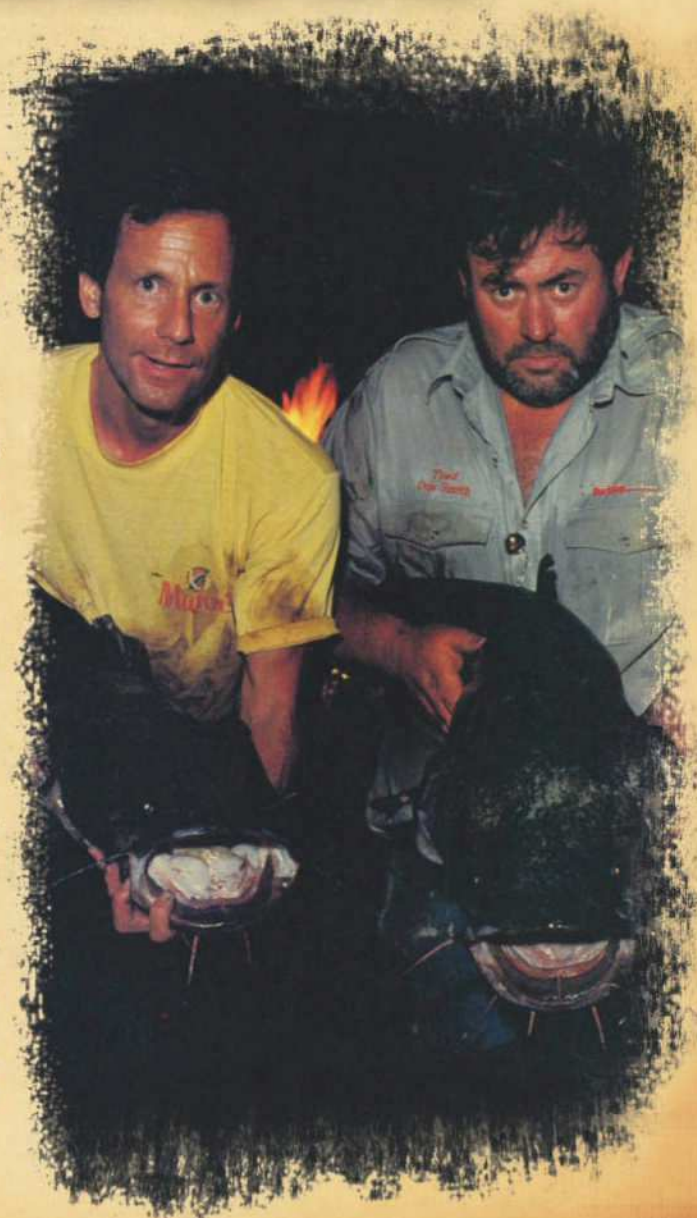
► **This one speaks for itself** with distinction, in favor of one of Stange's favorite fish. Many readers have noted it as the greatest flathead article of all time—especially as one of the first (probably the first) in-depth articles ever published about this fish and how to catch it. See what you think. The article also is the first to speak passionately in favor of conservation of a fish that at the time was being routinely targeted for slaughter instead of release. This article, which appeared in the June 1990 issue of *In-Fisherman*, is the beginning of slow but steady change in the way anglers and fishery departments view the flathead.

Piscator 1: *Catfish, say you? Flathead catfish? But what of my beloved bass, walleyes, muskies, and trout? Surely, you jest my good man, for these I cannot do without.*

Piscator 2: *I jest not, nor would I that you give up walleyes or other such habits. Nay sir, say not "instead of," but "besides."*

Piscator 1: *But why besides? This flathead fellow doesn't play well, I think. I see him not touted on pious pages of outdoor magazines. I see no fishermen dressed in nifty wear sporting odd patches, casting quickly for this flathead fellow.*

Piscator 2: *Ignorance, my friend. Ignorance. Most editors sell bear attacks and recycled bass baloney better than blessed truth. And there's no bounty on this fish, no fame in the catching. Who would wear odd patches and fish like they pursue a heart attack t'wer not for a fleeting sense of fame and fortune involved. Then too, heaven help us, fishermen tend to fish for that which other fishermen fish for. Alas, I fear men are like lemmings in some respects.*



Piscator 1: *But I must ask again, why? What, or should I say who, is this flathead fellow?*

Piscator 2: *Say this, my friend, he is a fish of character. Powerful, he is, and tenacious as a pit bull. Flippin' stick and 6 pounds of bass in brush, you say? Difficult? My good man, why not just tap dance with Pee Wee Herman? But a toe-to-tush tussle with a flathead? Sir, one could as well bark at Hulk Hogan's girlfriend.*

A mean sort he is, too, predator to the core. Flathead catfish kill things. The carp that disappear in a crush of jaws may weigh 5 pounds or more. Could as well be drum, gar, or shad. Bluegills. Bullheads. Bass pass, too. Even, I'm afraid, smaller channel cats and flatheads—crushed one and all like so many walnuts. One should bring a large and living sacrifice or bring nothing at all.

*And there's more. 'Tis not mockery for fishermen to gush over 10-pound bass and walleyes; 20-pound pike; 30-pound muskies and king salmon. But should we not therefore worship *Pylodictis olivaris*?*

Size, man. Size. He's a monster. Twenties, said in today's lingo, are small change. Try 30s, 40s, even 80s and 90s. I swear it. Question not that 100s are out there, moving somewhere through the deeps. Even a 120 or, heaven help us, a 140 is within reason.

Piscator 1: *But why then such paltry information on how to catch this fine fellow?*

Piscator 2: *Say it, said before—ignorance. But say it thought elusive, too. He's thought a sly fellow. True. He trades in darkness, a Dracula of sorts, given his lust for blood. Catch him, though. Ah, catch him, man, and you stand apart. And 'tis easy, I swear it, although you will pay with sleep.*

Stars, damp darkness surrounding a small fire. The river moves somehow slower at night, heavier, with more character. Silence prevails except for carp sucking the surface film along a far bank lined with downed timber.

Suddenly, "Swaaboosh!" A carp meets his maker in a gruesome crush of jaws and a left-right headshake that rips flesh.

Flathead catfish test prey and fishermen alike, for Toad Smith, faintly lit by firelight, rod and reel and tattered 50-pound-test line in hand, is up to his knees in water flowing through a river hole.

"Manno-manno man," he says as he looks off into the blackness surrounding us. "Donald for sure—40 or 50 pounds—or the meanest 30 ever."

"Couldn't stop him, huh," I said, offering something, anything, the obvious.

"Naw. Gone!"

"Fifty-pound test?"

"Yeah. Fifty." He snaps the frazzled line dripping from the tip of his rod.

"Heavier?"

"Naw. Don't need more. Just gotta turn 'em right now. Keep his head pointed right at you all the time. Never give an inch in cover. Won't happen again."

Two days of scouting river and two nights of fishing all night. Fifty channel catfish and 10 pretty good flatheads had hit the bank. But not the illustrious Donald, Toad's name for, well—

We'd narrowed our search for huge flathead catfish to

one particular hole in a 10-mile-long section of river.

Problem. While the hole was deep and wide, indeed the deepest and widest hole in this section of river, it

was filled with drift timber.

"Trump Towers," Toad said when we'd found this hole of holes. "Donald lives here for sure. Maybe Ivana, too. Maybe even Ms. Maples."

"A Donald" is Toad lingo for the biggest flathead cat in a body of water. Might be an 80 in an Ohio reservoir. Might be a 100 in a Texas tailwater. Might be a 20 in a tiny Iowa creek. Could be a 150 in any state bordering the Mississippi, Missouri, or Ohio rivers. Toad guessed a 45 in the small Minnesota river we were fishing.

Big flathead catfish are something. The only North American freshwater predators that grow larger are alligator gar and sturgeons. Maybe blue catfish. But they don't equal the flathead as a predator. Nor do other freshwater fish, for that matter. We would have to enter the saltwater league to find a tougher customer.

At the beginning of summer, once the water settles in a river and flatheads settle into the biggest, deepest, most cover-laden holes, lots of carp will be working along cutbanks at night. A month later, if the water stays down, the hole will be silent. The carp are gone. Eaten. Along with bullheads and most other sizable prey in the hole. Won't catch many channel cats under 5 pounds in there either. Dead and gone except for a few smiling flatheads.

And they may be very big and definitely hungry. Get a bait in there at night and you'll catch them—most of them, I believe. A problem of paradoxical proportions. Four 20s, a 30, and a 40 from one hole in one night on a small river seems like a dream come true. But then you realize that if you've done your homework and this is the best hole in a long stretch of river, these fish may be the majority of what's available for many miles. And if you keep them?

But first a bit about how to catch a big one this summer. You already know that big fish in rivers shuffle naturally into the biggest, deepest, most cover-laden holes. Finding those holes is a first and vital step.

You must make comparative judgments about the quality of the holes in a section of river. To do that you must survey large sections of river. You won't know that you're fishing the best hole if you haven't seen the hole around the next bend.

Toad and I survey rivers while fishing for channel catfish during the day. We fish quickly, rarely staying for more than 10 minutes at even the best-looking spots. We catch the active fish and move on.

Occasionally we catch a flathead, too, but it's usually a jolly little small fish, may be a 4 or 5, sometimes a 12 or 14. But it won't be Donald. You might also be surprised how many channel cats we catch by using such tactics. The methods are discussed in *Channel Catfish Fever*, an In-Fisherman Handbook of Strategies.

One of the best holes we found last season was a big river turn following about four miles of relatively straight river. Lots of timber had washed into the turn area from the straight section above. The first night we

BY DOUG STANGE

fished this hole, we caught and released 15 flatheads over 20 pounds. The next night we caught 5 fish. And thereafter, fishing was difficult, which shows that flatheads smarten up. Let those fish rest for several weeks and some will bite again. But if we'd killed them all?

Muskie tackle works. Saltwater tackle is overkill except in unusual situations. Go with a rod 6 to 7 feet long, something with give in the top half and power in the butt. Better to cast with. Better to fight fish with.

The Abu Garcia 7000 is a wonderful big-cat reel. Holds plenty of 30- to 50-pound-test line. Has a "clicker" setting when the reel's on freespool. The clicker lets you know when a fish is taking line, plus keeps constant tension on the fish as it moves. A Garcia 6500 also sports a clicker and holds enough line to battle all but the biggest boys in the biggest rivers.

I usually use Dacron (Gudebrod or Cortland) line, which offers lower stretch and higher abrasion-resistance than monofilament—36-pound test in smaller rivers. Fifty for bigger fish in heavier cover.

Of course, monofilament works. Go for something tough. Toad and I used Berkley XT Solar (lime green) a lot last season. Easy to see. Tough. Good stuff. Stren Magnum is a good bet, too.

A 5/0 to 7/0 Eagle Claw 84 or Mustad 92671 is a good standard hook. Slipweights, preferably bell sinkers with swivel tops, should range in size from 1 to 6 ounces. Sharpen the hook and slip it through flesh just below and behind the dorsal fin of a baitfish.

Big, wild, lively bait is vital. Suckers raised in bait ponds don't last long and don't attract as many fish as wild 10- to 15-inch suckers. Green sunfish are wonderful bait. Drum work. Bullheads. Carp. Your neighbor's poodle.

Get set before dark. Set up on an inside riverbend, the low-bank side of the river, and set baits at the head of a hole, in the hole, along a snag, or near a cutbank along the

opposite shore. Each rod goes in a rod holder, freespool on and clicker set.

Build a small fire, break out a tub of Kentucky Fried Chicken and wait (you need a big tub if you invite Toad). It will happen. It has to. Flatheads can't help themselves.

If it's a fresh hole that hasn't been fished before, the action will probably start just after dark and continue throughout the night. If the hole has been pressured, it could happen anytime.

When a fish takes, wait just long enough to know the fish has the bait, has turned, and is moving away from you. Don't wait for the fish to swallow the bait. He could move into a snag by that time, and deeply hooked fish may be more difficult to release.

As the fish moves away, set hard, rod tip high, and hold on. Don't give unless you have to. Keep the fish right there. The left-right head rips are like body punches from Mike Tyson. Hold on.

Finding flatheads in a big reservoir is more difficult—more water—but still a sure thing. The next world-record flathead will come from a reservoir. It will weigh around 110. The present all-tackle angling record is a 98.

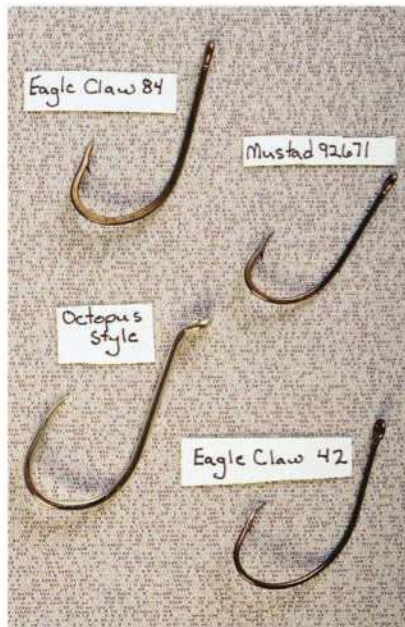
Plenty of baitfish in creek arms. During early summer, flatheads move into creek arms; set baits on flats along the creek channel. The water on the flat may be only 8 feet deep, while the channel runs 20. Bring friends so you can spread baits along the channel as well as over the flat. If the channel is too far to cast to, fish from a boat, or use a boat to carry baits out, drop them, and row back to a shore position. If you have lively baits and time, flatheads will happen.

Later in summer, if fishing slows inside creek arms, move to flats at the head of the creek arm where it meets the main reservoir.

That's all there is to it, except for specific patterns and details we'll hold for another day. You can certainly



» A 10-inch bully. Perfect! The bait's fresh and lively in the keep sack.



» Classic hooks for flatheads.



» Nighttime's the right time for flatheads!

break 20 this summer. And once you break 20, you'll break 40. Get a bait in the right place at night and you'll catch them. Perhaps most of them. Which, as I said earlier, is a problem of paradoxical proportions. Four 20s, a 30, and a 40 from one hole in one night—dream come true!

But big flatheads are *vulnerable*, based on hard statistics. May take 25 years to grow a 40-inch 35-pound flathead. And with eating habits like a Sumo wrestler, they just aren't hard to catch once you find them.

Fifteen + 15 + 15 + 15 + 20 + 30 = 110 years. There, strung on a rope draped over a board fence, are 110 years of fish history. Better save that photo, for the time soon approaches when you won't see those fish again in your lifetime. Your sons and daughters won't either.

But there are always more flatheads in the next hole, in the next river, in the next state. Today, perhaps. A handful of flathead catmen find good populations of big flatheads today because few fishermen know how to find and catch them—or, more the case, won't spend the time it takes to do it.

Keep the secret? There are no secrets. Men must tell. And then men must choose, in this case, hopefully, conservation.

This is but a step toward a new age in fishing for flatheads, an age where more fishermen do it. Fishermen must recognize how unique is this amazing predator, which grows so big and bold. With this realization hopefully will come widespread suggestions for regulations to sustain those populations, before we do to them what we did to big bass, walleyes, muskies, and the like before we knew better.

Traditions must change. Noodling, for example. Flathead catfish spend daylight hours in bank holes and crevices. Crazy men wading rivers reach into those holes, probing for catfish.

After finding a cat, noodlers block the hole with a leg. They must then corner the cat in the hole, get a grip on his lower jaw, run a rope stringer through the jaw, and finally drag a green and mighty mean fish from the hole.

But a big flathead will often nip a hand and hold on, and such fish can break an arm with a headshake. What

of snakes and snapping turtles? And what of the once-in-a-lifetime (literally) 80 that can drown you?

Change this tradition? Never. Except the ending.

Today, many noodlers don't wrestle flatheads solely to eat or sell them. They like the challenge, the thrill, the idea of being a down-home cat man.

Selective harvest applies to noodling and other traditional forms of fishing like limblining, spearing, snagging, can fishing, and jug fishing. Keep a few smaller fish to eat, enough for a meal or two, and release the hundreds of years of growth represented by what would be a stringer of 30s, a catch not uncommon

for noodlers when rivers are down during summer.

Traditions must change. Setlining (trotlining) for example. Setliners are like trappers. To be a successful trapper you must know the habits of your quarry. You must live the life, be outdoors, gather experience, think, and learn. Making skillful sets, tending them, and wrestling big fish in by hand is challenging and can be as exciting as catching a fish on hook and line.

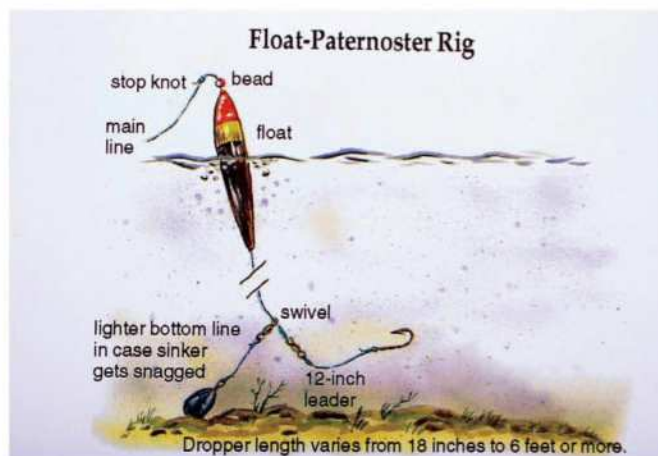
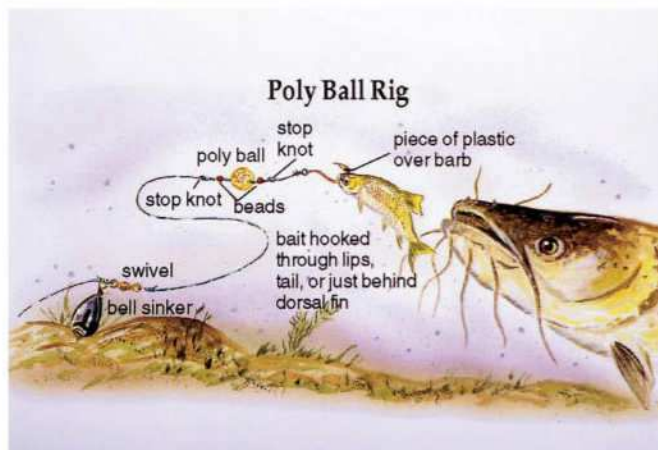
But setlining is by nature more deadly than fishing with hook and line. Setlining during summer when holes are obvious is like setting a land mine along a deer trail. If it's a good trail and you've made a good set you will score. And because you don't have to be there when it happens, it's more likely to happen.

Flatheads can't help themselves. Find a good

hole, make a good set with good lively bait, and you'll catch almost every fish that lives there. And the hours are attractive: Set the trap at sunset, pick it up next morning. No lost sleep. Big fish caught.

Successful hook-and-line fishermen pay for flatheads with sleep. The fact limits the catch. I love to set lines; it's the harvest part of setlining that needs rethinking. Harvest selectively. Time to push for regulations that dictate it.

Commercial fishing is a long tradition in most major rivers that hold flatheads. Fishermen seek them because of their high market value relative to drum, buffalo, and carp. Sportfishing for flatheads has increased in popularity, and catfish anglers are becoming more vocal about their favorite species. They'll make sure resource agencies don't slight cats in their population studies and management plans.



Conflict between commercial fishermen and anglers is inevitable, as it was for walleyes in the Great Lakes and elsewhere. In Oklahoma, blessed with probably the largest flathead population, fishery managers are pondering difficult allocation problems. The trend's clear. The social and economic importance of recreational fishing means inland commercial fisheries for gamefish are dwindling. And commercial fishermen are content to pursue more predictable and lucrative occupations.

And if big fish eventually die of old age instead of harvest, where's the waste? The payment is in the 40 years of being a big flathead, of being there to thrill men, not in the \$2 a pound the flesh is worth at the market.

We raise chickens and turkeys, dumb as a stump, for food. We can even take smaller, more plentiful catfish for occasional meals. If we protect catfish habitat, smaller fish remain readily renewable.

Seeking fame and fortune? Win a bowling tournament. Don't try to ride the backs of a bunch of big dead fish. Stringer shots of big cats prove stupidity, not prowess. Shoot a photo or 10 before you release big boy to continue to spark our existence with his own.

OK, so there probably were more and bigger flatheads a hundred years ago. By comparison to other populations of big fish, however, this is the golden age for flathead cats.

Fish of a lifetime on hook and line? Muskie, you say?

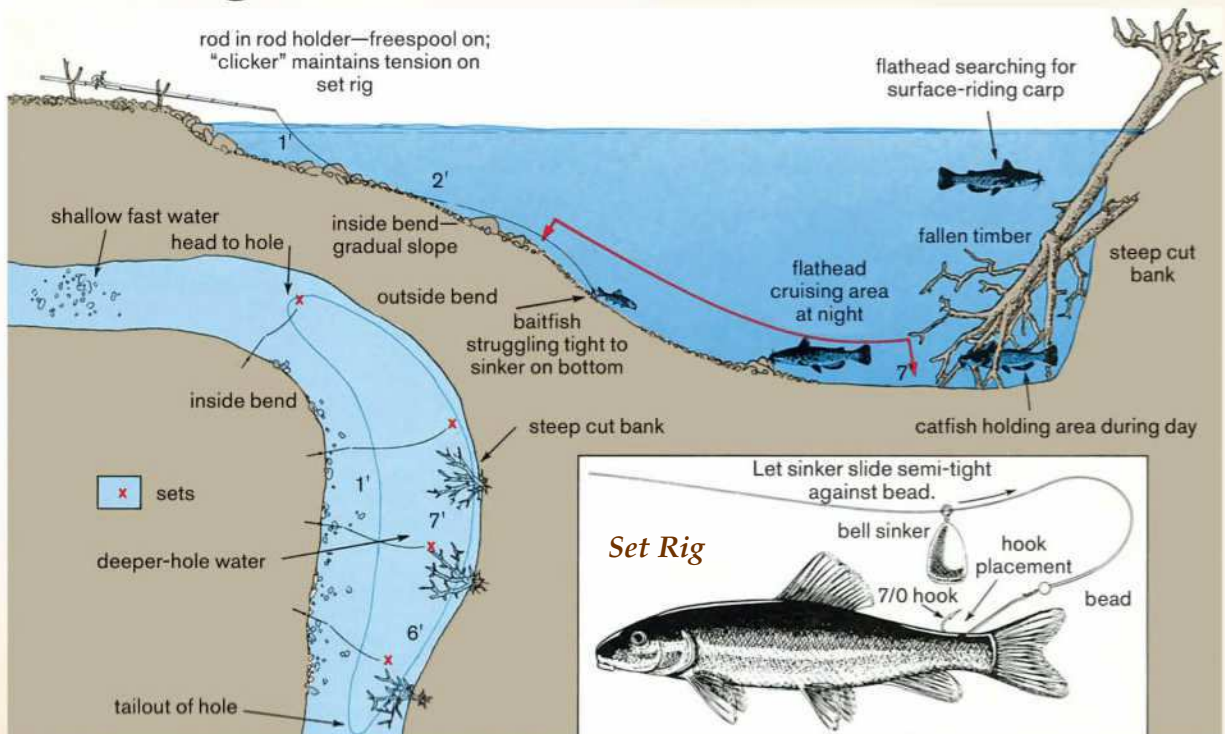


» No longer appropriate. Selective harvest, please! Our chance to "do for" flatheads before we "do to" them, and then have to try to undo what we've done.

Come on, man. You can fish a lifetime today to catch a 35. Muskies got popular first; we did it to them and then we learned. Now it's a very slow and perhaps impossible march to regulate impressive size back.

Flathead cats aren't widely popular even though they should be. Opportunity! I know how overused the word "unique" is today. But today we have the unique opportunity to "do for" a huge predator, instead of "doing to" them and then having to undo what we've done. ■

» The Big Picture



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Wrapping Guides

With various thread colors and combinations, wrapping guides can add a personal touch to your rod. Recall that spinning rods have the guides mounted on the opposite side of the spine while casting rods have guides lined up along the blank's spine.



Preparing to wrap—Use manufacturer's guidelines to accurately space each guide along a rod blank. If wrapping a double-footed guide, tape the forward foot in place first and then start wrapping. A single-foot guide can be secured by wrapping a small piece of tape around the center of the foot. As you wrap up the foot you can remove the tape.

Step 1—Start the wrap about 1/4 inch from the guide. Wrapping from left to right, start with one wrap around the rod blank. Then, place your finger where the two threads meet and rotate the blank while also crossing the running thread over the tag end. This forms a cross-stitched-like X pattern that locks the thread in place.

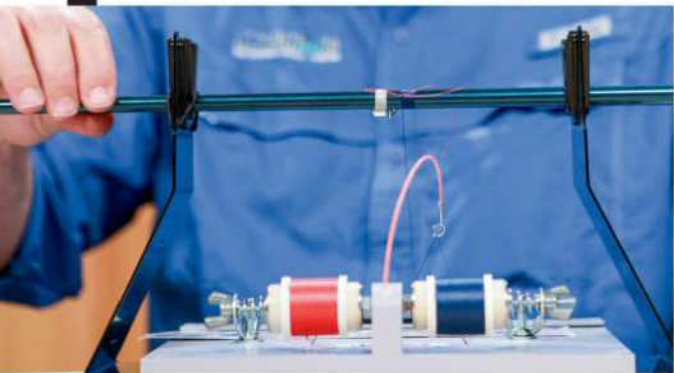
Execute about eight wraps before trimming off the remaining length of the thread's tag end. Trim the tag end as close to flush with the wrap as possible.

Step 2—Continue wrapping so that each thread is tightly placed next to the previous wrap.

Step 3—Once your wrap is about 1/8 inch from the end, use a small piece of thread folded over into a loop and slide it under the running thread. The loop goes in the same direction as your wrap. Continue wrapping over the loop roughly 8 to 10 more times.

Step 5—Use a razor blade and lay it flat against your guide wrap with the blade facing the thread's tag end. Pull the tag end over the blade to cut it flush with the rest of the thread wrap. Never use a sawing motion to cut the tag end because it will fray the thread, which could end in failure for that wrap.

Step 6—Check to make sure your guides are aligned with the spine mark. ■



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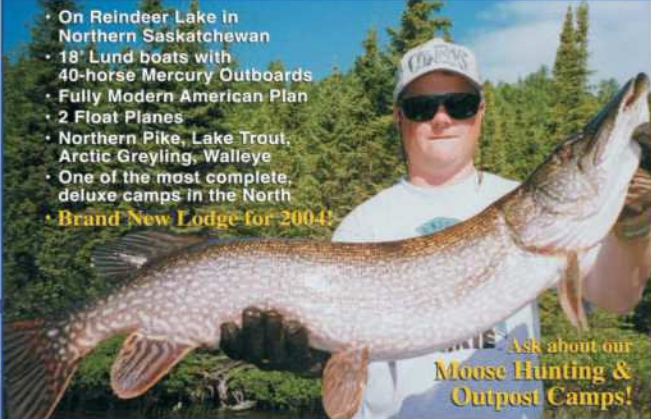
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SPECIES	Region 1		Region 2		Region 3		Region 4		Region 5		Region 6	
	KEPT lbs.	C&R inches	KEPT lbs.	C&R inches	KEPT lbs.	C&R inches	KEPT lbs.	C&R inches	KEPT lbs.	C&R inches	KEPT lbs.	C&R inches
Largemouth Bass	6½	22	10	24	6½	22*	6½	22	6½	22	-	-
Smallmouth Bass	5	20	5	20	5	20	5½	21	5½	21	-	-
Spotted Bass	3	18	5	20	5	20	-	-	-	-	-	-
White Bass	2½	17	3	18	2½	17	2½	17	2½	17	-	-
Striped Bass	22	36	28	37	28	37	-	-	-	-	35	40
Hybrid Striped Bass	9	24	10	26	9	24	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bluegill	1½	11	1½	11	1½	11	1½	11	1½	11	-	-
Redear Sunfish	1½	13	1½	13	1½	13	-	-	-	-	-	-
Crappie (Black or White)	2	14	2½	15	2½	15	2	14	2	14	-	-
Yellow Perch	1½	15	1½	15	1½	15	1½	15	1½	15	-	-
Sauger	3	21	3	21	3	21	3	21	3	21	-	-
Walleye	10	30	10	30	10	30	10	30	10	30	-	-
Sauger	6	25	6	25	6	25	6	25	6	25	-	-
Northern Pike	17	40	12	36	12	36	22	43	17	40	-	-
Muskellunge	28	46	28	46	20	40	30	48	28	46	-	-
Hybrid Muskie	18	38	18	38	18	38	18	38	18	38	-	-
Blue Catfish	40	42	40	42	30	38	-	-	-	-	-	-
Channel Catfish	18	30	20	32	20	32	20	32	18	30	-	-
Flathead Catfish	40	42	40	42	35	40	25	36	25	36	-	-
Chinook Salmon	20	36	-	-	-	-	-	-	28	40	40	45
Coho Salmon	12	32	-	-	12	32	-	-	12	32	16	34
Brown Trout	8	24	10	27	10	27	8	24	16	32	-	-
Rainbow Trout/Steelhead	8	24	8	24	8	24	8	24	14	30	18	38
Brook Trout	3	18	3	18	3	18	4	19	4	19	-	-
Lake Trout	16	34	12	32	20	35	22	36	16	34	-	-
Carp (Common or Grass)	25	34	25	34	25	34	25	34	25	34	-	-
Chain Pickerel	4	24	4	24	-	-	4	24	-	-	-	-

Rules and online entry form at **in-fisherman.com**.

*California and Mexican largemouth bass must be 10 lbs. or 24 inches.

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North with Doc

BY GREG KNOWLES*

Illustrations by Peter Koblsaat

Doc Gets Physical

Doc stayed behind in the cabin to finish the breakfast dishes while the rest of us walked down to the office to help a just-arrived party of fishermen unload Knobby's plane. The eight men looked like Seal Team Six. All 6-foot 3-inches, muscular, trim, Paul Bunyan shoulders.

"Where you from?" the kid asked one of them.

"Milwaukee," he said.

"You plan to do any fishing?" the policeman said, nodding at a growing mountain of cases of adult beverages.

"In the daylight," he said.

"What do you do in the daylight back in Milwaukee?" the attorney said.

"Same as nighttime," he said.

"On duty 24/7. Firefighter."

"Are all of you firefighters?"

I said.

"Yup, but from different stations," he said. "That's how we get away at the same time."

"Welcome to Paradise," the banker said, shaking the guy's hand. "You earned it."

We humped their provisions and gear for a while, and loaded quad-towed carts for the short run to their cabin.

"Maybe see you later," the kid said. "Enjoy your stay."

"Thanks for the help," he said.

We stomped back to our VIP accommodations on Bamaji Lake. When we got within 50 yards, a sound stopped us in our tracks.

"Music?" I said.

"Coming from our cabin?" the banker said.

"Olivia Newton-John?" the attorney said.

"Who?" the kid said.

"Singer from the '80s," the policeman said.

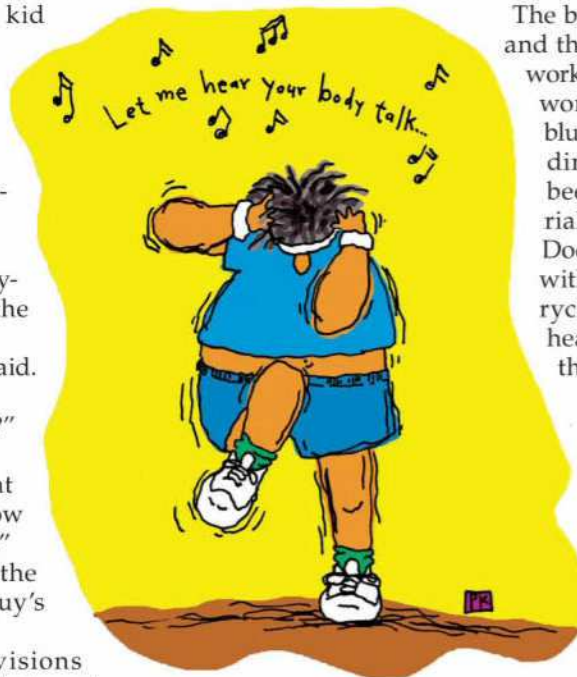
"Eighties?" the kid said. "That's, like, last century."

"In fact," I said, "it was."

"Newton-John was an Australian import," the banker said. "A real dish."

"Dish?" the kid said. "Dish of what? Jeez. Would you guys please speak English once in a while?"

A long-standing yet unwritten rule of our annual trips to the Northwest Ontario Bush was no recorded music. We preferred Nature's melodies: the wind in the pines, the haunting call of the loons, and the snoring that sounded at times like a herd of musk oxen giving birth.



The banker pushed open the door, and there was Doc. He was doing a workout to the beat of the music. He wore snow-white tennies, XXXL blue satin shorts, and a color-coordinated tank tee that must have been made from the same material as Superman's cape, because Doc's belly stretched it to the max without it ripping. There were terry-cloth sweatbands around his head and wrists. He looked like the Michelin Man in drag.

I'm not entirely sure, but I think Doc was attempting an exercise that involved alternately touching the right elbow to the left knee, then the left elbow to the right knee. His elbows and knees never came within two feet of each other, but his rhythm was pretty good.

Olivia was wailing, "Let me hear your body talk, your body talk..."

If Doc's body could talk, it would be a whole new category of disgusting.

The banker hit the OFF button on a small cassette tape player that was decades older than the kid.

Doc stopped in mid-twist. "What?" he said. "Can't a guy work on his fitness regimen in peace?"

"Peace is the key word," the attorney said. "Loud music is not it."

"But it helps me get my groove on," Doc said. He gave his ample hips a wiggle that set up a seismic roll that lasted about nine seconds.

"I think I'm gonna puke," the kid said.

"When did you start this so-called regimen?" I said. "And why?"

"About five minutes ago," Doc said. "I've been a widower for a while, and I'm thinking about dating again. I want to be a sexy hunk for all my women."

"You got the hunk part already," the banker said, "except it's a hunk of lard."

"I don't appreciate being fat shamed," Doc said.

After a serious pause, Doc and the rest of us laughed until we almost fell down.

"Doc, you have been a pork sandwich since 1977," the policeman said. "But I can see where a prospective relationship would be quite a powerful incentive to get in shape."

"Do you have to exercise to music?" the attorney said.

"I don't know," Doc said. "It took me a long time to find the proper attire, so this is my first try."

"Where'd you get that outfit?" the kid said. "The Halloween costume section at Goodwill?"

"I'll have you know this is top-of-the-line fitness wear," Doc said. "From the Salvation Army Thrift Store."

"I was into fitness videos for a while," the banker said.

"You exercised in front of the TV?" the policeman said.

"No, I drank beer and watched the models dance around," the banker said. "Made a lot more sense than sweating up the living room."

"Let's take this discussion to the lake," I said. "The Mr. Big I'm interested in isn't Doc, it's a fish."

The other two boats were fired up and out of sight before Doc changed and joined me.

"Where to?" I said.

"How about the rapids above Roadhouse?" Doc said.

I moved the shifter to forward, and away we went.

That year had seen a better-than-average snowfall, and the first week of June was barely after ice-out, even though the temperature was near 80. Inflowing tributaries of the Cat River were roiling torrents, and high water made the fish scatter. Slow-moving pools adjacent to fast water were productive, but it took some work to find the honey holes.

A mile from the outflowing rapids we paused to watch a bald eagle snatch a dead fish from the brown water, and fly it high into its nest.

We sat there for 20 minutes with our binocs trained on the majestic bird as it dismembered and fed the fish to its young.

"Makes this trip even better," Doc observed.

Underway again, I said, "Some years ago in high water, didn't we have good luck on the right side before the rapids?"

"More pike than walleyes, as I recall," Doc said. "Let's give it a shot."

The current accelerated to the point I had to gun the engine to steer clear of the beginning of the rapids, and we entered a flat, swirling pool.

"There's a trench about 12 feet deep along there," Doc said, pointing.

About halfway in, Doc said, "Let's try some heavy spoons. Need the weight to get down to where the fish are."

I snapped a vintage Professor #3 onto my baitcaster rig, and tossed it to the edge of the pool. Doc tried an equally vintage Ruby-eye.

A dozen casts later, I hooked a pike about the length and girth of a bamboo backscratcher.

"Nice one," Doc said.

A few more casts, and Doc's rod bent double.

"Snag?" I said.

"With teeth!" Doc screamed, and began to fight a monster pike.

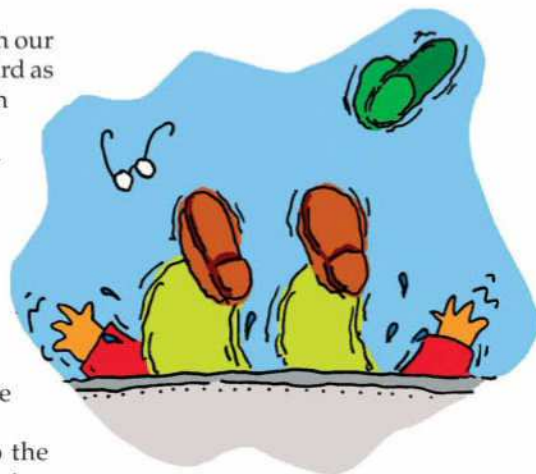
The current had sucked us closer to the shore, so I slammed the shifter into reverse, and backed off quickly, trying to give Doc room to operate.

The pike rolled to the surface, and took off. Doc's drag sounded like a full-on weed wacker as the big boy ran. My focus was on the fish, and I didn't pay much attention to our boat movement.

"What shall I do?" I said.

"He gets in the fast water, and he's gone!" Doc said. "Back into the shallows!"

The engine was near max revs when the prop slammed a rock, and the little Merc was abruptly dead. I shifted to neutral, and panic-yanked the rope a dozen times, but no luck. Worse still, we immediately crossed the lip of the vortex, and the boat spun like an amusement park ride. Doc's line dragged against



the gunnel and snapped on an oar lock. He tossed the rod into the boat, sat down, and hung on.

I have captained boats of many sizes through tricky Mississippi locks, the severe tidal variances of the Sea of Cortez, and dozens of storm-churned lakes including Mille Lacs, but I had never, ever seen anything like this.

"Brace yourself!" I yelled as we were swept southward.

To this day, I don't know how it happened, but BANG! The stern hit a rock like an explosion, and I went over backwards into the water.

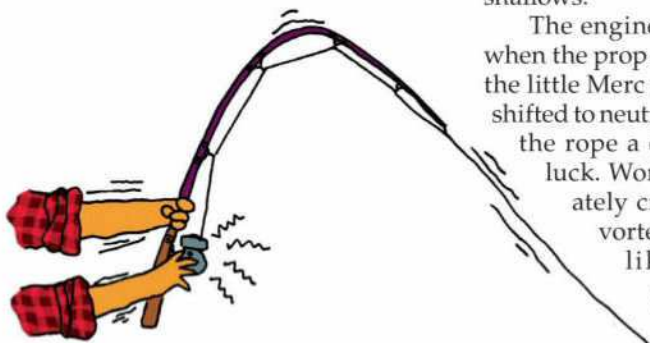
I was immediately immersed in the icy froth, made relatively colder by the elevated air temp. The water was only a few feet deep, but the mineral-tasting fluid flooded my mouth and nose. I hit my head on something. One or two jolting revolutions, I don't know for sure. A boot caught on something, and I was under. Glasses and hat gone. Head downstream, life jacket and pants legs full of water. No air. The roar of the water fading to a gentle hiss. I used every bit of remaining energy to sit up in that unrelenting current. Head surfaced for a second. One breath. Two. An urgent command.

"Catch!" Doc yelled. "Catch!"

I could see the vivid blue sky in flashes. Up. Down. Choking. My hands felt a rope. Nylon anchor rope. Water rushed around me like root beer Jell-O.

I grabbed. I wrapped the rope around my forearms. My boot pulled free. Then I was above water. Under again. Above for good.

And there was Doc, feet anchored on the rocky bottom. His impressive bulk holding firm in the



raging current. My personal Rock of Gibraltar.

He pulled. Took up slack. He pulled more. I swallowed half the lake. He dragged me to the shallows.

I was sick. From ingesting so much water, for sure, but probably, and mostly, from the fearful realization that I had just cheated death. Doc had just cheated death for me. I gasped. I cried like a baby. Doc gripped my shoulder and looked away. A trickle of watery blood ran into my eye.

Somehow the 14-foot boat hull was wedged against a rock the size of a Ford Bronco II at the upper **right side of the chute, and with Herculean effort, Doc retrieved it. He knows as**

much about engines as he does about aerobics, but he got it started, put me inside, and we motored out of there.

We stopped for a good 40 minutes to assess the damage and dry out, and watched the eagle feed its young again.

The nick on my forehead had stopped bleeding, and my arms were scuffed, but not too bad. When I felt around, I could detect nothing more than aches and strains from the ordeal. Bruises would appear later. I had extra glasses in the cabin, just in case, and even a new yacht cap. The old one was stained and frayed, anyway.

Several times on the long, thoughtful voyage to the cabin, Doc asked if I was okay. Several times I said I was.

After 10 minutes of silence, not counting the boat engine's gas-perfumed purr, Doc said, "Tell you the truth, I don't think I can get into this exercise thing. But maybe there's a special lady out there who would fall in love with a big man like me."

After considering my own undying love for the big man, I said,

"No doubt in my mind."

Another 10 minutes passed, and Doc said, "Um, maybe it would be best if we didn't share the details of our, uh, adventure."

"Don't want to admit to being a life-saving hero?" I said.

"It's not that," Doc said. "We know this lake well enough to be more careful in high water conditions. I feel kinda guilty about that. Kinda stupid."

"It could've happened to anyone," I said, "but I'll keep quiet. If they ask, I'll tell the boys I was on shore surveying the rapids, and bumped my head on a tree or something."

"I appreciate that," Doc said.

"Can I say one more thing about it?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

I managed to stifle the sob that welled up in my throat just long enough to wheeze, "Thanks, Doc." ■

*North with Doc columnist Greg Knowles lives in Green Valley, Arizona. A 5-volume set of the first 20 years of North with Doc is available in e-reader form at [amazon](http://amazon.com).



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☾ **1** ☽ **2**

12:52 A-2:52 A
1:16 P-3:16 P

1:46 A-3:46 A
2:09 P-4:09 P

☾ 3 ☽	☾ 4 ☽	☾ 5 ☽	☾ 6 ☽	☾ 7 ☽	☾ 8 ☽	☾ 9 ☽
2:38 A-4:38 A 3:02 P-5:02 P	3:30 A-5:30 A 3:53 P-5:53 P	4:19 A-6:19 A 4:41 P-6:41 P	5:05 A-7:05 A 5:28 P-7:28 P	5:50 A-7:50 A 6:12 P-8:12 P	6:32 A-8:32 A 6:55 P-8:55 P	7:14 A-9:14 A 7:38 P-9:38 P
☾ 10 ☽	☾ 11 ☽	☾ 12 ☽	☾ 13 ☽	☾ 14 ☽	☾ 15 ☽	☾ 16 ☽
7:57 A-9:57 A 8:22 P-10:22 P	8:42 A-10:42 A 9:09 P-11:09 P	9:33 A-11:33 A 10:02 P-12:02 A	10:29 A-12:29 P 10:59 P-12:59 A	11:00 A-1:00 P 11:31 P-1:31 A	12:06 A-2:06 P 12:37 P-2:37 P	1:14 A-3:14 A 1:45 P-3:45 P
☾ 17 ☽	☾ 18 ☽	☾ 19 ☽	☾ 20 ☽	☾ 21 ☽	☾ 22 ☽	☾ 23 ☽
2:22 A-4:22 A 2:51 P-4:51 P	3:25 A-5:25 A 3:53 P-5:53 P	4:23 A-6:23 A 4:49 P-6:49 P	5:15 A-7:15 A 5:40 P-7:40 P	6:02 A-8:02 A 6:25 P-8:25 P	6:45 A-8:45 A 7:07 P-9:07 P	7:25 A-9:25 A 7:48 P-9:48 P
☾ 24 ☽	☾ 25 ☽	☾ 26 ☽	☾ 27 ☽	☾ 28 ☽	☾ 29 ☽	☾ 30 ☽
8:05 A-10:05 A 8:28 P-10:28 P	8:47 A-10:47 A 9:10 P-11:10 P	9:30 A-11:30 A 9:54 P-11:54 P	10:16 A-12:16 P 10:40 P-12:40 A	----- 11:04 P-1:04 A	11:30 A-1:30 P 11:54 P-1:54 A	12:21 A-2:21 A 12:45 P-2:45 P

➤ Visit in-fisherman.com to search month-to-month for the best times at specific locations.

(continued on page 64)

guides when they sang,

"Mommas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys (fishing guides).

Don't let 'em pick guitars (tie flies) or drive them old trucks (boats).

Let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such.

Mommas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys (fishing guides).

Cause they never stay home and they're always alone

Even with someone they love."

And furthermore they speak of the pride of a guide, "He ain't wrong he's just different. But his pride won't let him do things to make you think he's right." In fact, the entire song represents the life of a fishing guide.

As things begin to settle down in the boat, Billy picks himself up and grabs his rod, doggedly untangling the line from the tip. After a minute or so he clips off the tangled portion and reties his hook with a Palomar knot. After baiting up he makes a perfect cast to the lilies and plops down beside me.

For a moment we settle into a groove on the little boat. No one yells or complains. Fish are getting caught. This is actually pleasant. I think to myself. These boys are going to be great anglers someday. I must be doing something right. At that moment I feel a searing pain behind my ear along with the slime of a 4-inch nightcrawler splattered on the side of my face. A split shot takes a dull thump into my forehead. I calmly try to take the rod away from Daniel, my 4-year-old, but he struggles with me, not wanting to give it up and not understanding what he's done. As I reach for the Lightning McQueen rod he goes to make a quick cast sinking the hook and worm past the barb into the back of my ear. I announce the most dreaded words of any fishing trip, even this one, "It's time to go home! Time to call it a day boys!" as I rip the 3-foot pole from my youngest son's hands. They all beg and plead for ten more minutes of fishing. And it's time to start a conversation with my wife about a bigger boat. ■

*Matt McQueen is a freelance writer living in Chief, Michigan, where he splits his time between writing, wrenching on boats, and baiting hooks for his three boys.

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Reflections

BY MATT MCQUEEN*

Illustration by Hal Mayforth

Hell on Reels

I wanted to throw him overboard and head to the house. His complaining and arguing with his brothers and I had reached an all-time high. The disrespect coming from the mouth of my 10-year-old son was more than I could bear as I tried to keep the peace in the little 16-foot flat-bottom boat.

As I try to keep worms on hooks for his little brothers, he demands I untangle his line, rolling his eyes as I try to explain to him that he's not my only child. My anxiety builds with his impatience as he continues to start arguments with his brothers and the turmoil builds.

Billy rolls his eyes as his brother misses another bite. "Zack! How could you miss that fish? He's going to swallow the hook!"

Surprising myself, I reach behind him, grabbing him by the straps and collar of his life jacket, and chuck my oldest son into Chief Lake. Immediately, there is wailing and gnashing of teeth, as my younger two sons cry for their oldest brother. Red and white bobbers roll in a one-foot wake from the plunge. Bluegill, bass, and pike scatter into the depths.

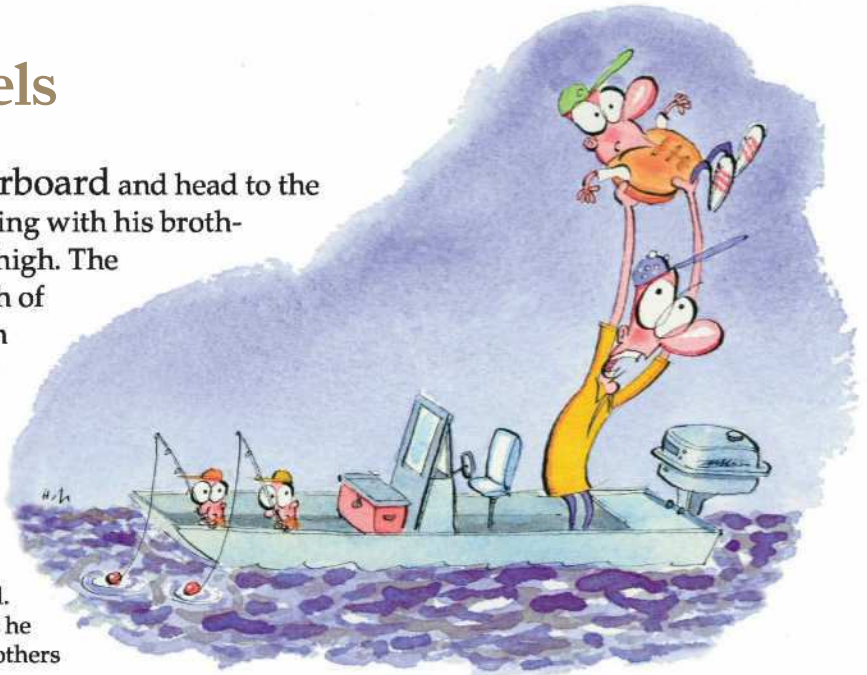
As the weeping continues, I sit down with my mug and take a nice long drink of cold coffee and watch my oldest son bob up and down in the lake with a look of shock on his face. Homeowners along the lakeshore peer out their windows in wonder at the fuss. How could a person throw a child from a boat? I catch the eye of an older woman sitting on a bench at the end of her aluminum dock and flash a wicked, malicious smile her way. The sobbing continues and I begin to laugh a hysterical Tom Hanks laugh at the entire situation. I even begin to point my finger childishly at my oldest son floating in the water next to the boat. No one shares in my humor.

A pathetic wet figure stares at me as I pretend to enjoy my cold beverage. Should I leave him? I think to myself. That would be pretty funny, but I'm sure that I would receive a knock on my door by a social worker by the end of the day. So we stare at each other for a moment longer, deciding our next moves.

"Billy! Are you alright!?" Zack hollers to his brother as if he fell off the S.S. Badger halfway to Wisconsin. No answer, just staring.

"I'm telling Mom! Mom would never do that!" Billy finally yells at me as he starts to swim back to the edge of the boat.

"Ok. What do you think she'll say?" I reply as I plop



a bobber and worm two feet from his shoulder, the little splash causing him to wipe his face in disgust.

"I'm never going fishing with you ever again, Dad!"

I've heard this one many times. I've even turned it around on him just as many, as a threat, and never fulfilled it. We always fish together. We would rather fish than anything else in the world. His dreams are filled with fish and his world revolves around the prospect of catching bigger fish. He caught his first king salmon when he was six and many big pike and bass to boot. He will freeze his hands until they're too numb to catch steelhead on the pier. He'll soak himself to the bone in the rain on a frozen lake waiting for a late season tip-up flag.

Today we are out for his little brothers, not that Billy sees himself above catching bluegill under little red and white plastic bobbers. I ignore his comment and lift him by the shoulders of his life jacket and he slides over the gunwale onto the floor of the boat. He resembles a wet, red-haired dog in all his clothes.

As he lies in the bottom of the boat for a few minutes, pouting, I wonder to myself, did I create this monster? Since he's been able to walk I've brought him on every fishing and hunting endeavor I've embarked on. We have shot at turkeys and deer and netted many big fish together. My wife and I choose to homeschool our boys in order to give them the freedom to join in all that nature has to offer, uninterrupted.

I have a friend who was a full-time fly guide on the Big Manistee River in Northwest Lower Michigan. He has told me to be careful with this child of mine or he may end up becoming a guide. His determination and relentless will is leading him into a life of banged up jetboats and marginal pay. "That boy is going to be hell on reels when he gets old enough to drive." But you have to follow your dreams.

Waylon and Willie must have been speaking of fishing



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