

Bluegills provide fishermen a guilty pleasure



Jayde Gordon, 4, and her grandmother, Gina Dunlap, react as they examine a bluegill held by her uncle, Terry Good, at the Upper Lake in Twin Lakes Park on Friday, May 31, 2013, in Hempfield.

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Consider the plight of the bluegill.

They're abundant, populating everything from your local farm pond to the mighty Susquehanna River. They're feisty on light tackle. They taste good on the table. And they're aggressive, willing biters: Everyone who's ever dunked a worm has caught one.

Tons of people fish for them, too. More than a quarter of all American freshwater fishermen, about 7.3 million people nationwide, targeted panfish — meaning bluegills and pumpkinseeds — in 2011, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They spent more than 97 million days angling.

Only bass put more people on the water more often.

“They're the unexpected star of fishing,” said Richard Aiken, an economist with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Yet, for all that, the species is the finny equivalent of Rodney Dangerfield, sans the plaid “Caddyshack” jacket. They get no respect.

“I've always liked them. But to say that is like revealing a dirty little secret,” said Ryan McCaw of Iowa, author of the book “Secrets to Catching More and Bigger Bluegill.”

“Everyone fishes for them. They just don't want to admit it.”

Size may be the issue.

Bluegills can get big. Pennsylvania's state record is an almost unimaginable fish. Pulled from Keystone Lake in Armstrong County in 1983 by Tom Twincheck of Blairsville, it weighed 2 pounds, 9 ounces. A replica of it hangs in the lobby of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's headquarters in Harrisburg.

It looks like a soccer ball with fins and a tail.

“It does look like a fake bluegill, it's so big,” said Bob Lorantas, warmwater unit leader for the commission, with a laugh. “It's huge.”

But the standard for a nice bluegill is considerably smaller. Commission biologists generally call a 7-inch fish a “quality” one. A 9-incher is a real dandy, and anything over 10 is a certifiable whopper.

Ah, but don't be fooled.

“Everybody kind of thinks that panfish like bluegills are easy to catch. And that can be true,” said Greg Martin of McElhatten, director of the Northeast Panfish League, a Pennsylvania-based tournament trail. “But to get the big ones, that's another thing.”

Like bass or any other game fish, bluegills have seasonal patterns.

Once near-shore water temperatures hit about 70 degrees, bluegills start to spawn. They excavate shallow, dinner plate-shaped nests near the bank. They'll be obvious. Bluegills are "colonial" nesters, so if you find one, you'll usually find dozens, Lorantas said.

Bluegills, and especially males, called "bulls," can be aggressive and easy to catch then, as angler catch-rate data suggests. Fishermen land as many bluegills per hour in June as at any time of year, according to the commission. Catch rates stay high into fall.

But if you're after big fish rather than sheer numbers, it pays to expand your thinking, McCaw said.

Sometimes that means moving away from shore, especially after the spawn ends, he said.

"Once a bluegill gets to eight or 10 inches, most bass can't do them much harm, so they move into that deeper open water. They just cruise. I'll often catch my biggest ones out in the middle of a pond," McCaw said.

Turning to bigger lures is also important.

"I've found that using bigger baits, almost like you'd use for crappies, gets me more big bluegills," McCaw added.

He prefers something 1- to 2-inches long. Sometimes that means a crankbait like a Yo-Zuri snap bean. More often he uses a soft plastic bait, tipped with Crappie Nibbles if it's not already scented, on 4-pound monofilament or 6-pound Berkley NanoFil line.

His specialty, though, is his "Iowa tube rig," which is a tube jig rigged backwards, so that the hook point comes out near the head.

"The more legs the bait seems to have, the more the bluegills seem to like it," McCaw said.

Martin also likes bigger, unusual baits. He fishes jigs that he and friends tie and often uses more than one at a time.

"If fish have been caught and thrown back a time or two, they can get shy about one particular lure profile. So sometimes, if you can show them something they haven't see yet, that can be a big plus," Martin said.

"And sometimes we double up, with a dropper or multiple lures on one line. It's not like the fish can count, but if it looks like there's more bait in the area, it may seem like a bait pod and that might trigger them to start feeding."

No matter the technique, though, bluegills are a great fish, and lots of fun to catch, Lorantas said. Opportunities to get into them right now are "phenomenal," he added.

McCaw is a fan and not afraid to admit it.

“When they get to 10 or 12 inches, bluegills are as tough to catch as anything,” he said. “And smallmouth bass are the only other fish I know that fights as hard.”

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