



Sunfish are easily enraged when a popper bobs by.
Photo by Bill Lindner Photography.

Panfish

With a Flick of the Wrist

BANTAM BREAM BECOME BEHEMOTHS ON FLY TACKLE

BY JEFF WILLIAMS

A quick, cold stream and a fly rod make perfect bookends. Just like a bobber and a stump-filled lake.

But if we put these two perfect pairs together, we come up with something that's pretty special and maybe overlooked – fly-fishing for panfish.

When we say panfish, we're talking about those familiar sunfish most folks call bream – bluegill, green sunfish, long-eared sunfish, redears, warmouth and others. Some folks call them “punkinseeds” or perch. They're all different species but each one is as likely as the next to savagely attack anything that invades its space. And that includes poppers and flies – dry or wet.

The traditional method of catching a stringer of bream is simple enough: Find a lake, pond or creek on a warm day and bait a hook with crickets or worms. Clip a bobber and sinker to the line and you're one step from catching fish.

Despite the fly rod's reputation for being as easy to operate as a Stradivarius, it's actually as simple as it gets for catching panfish. We don't have to “match the hatch” or worry about water temperature. No fancy knots are required. Our prey is not as persnickety as blue-blood trout.

Tom Hawthorne, owner of The Ozark Angler fly shops in Heber Springs and Little Rock, says, “If bream grew to be as big as bass, nobody would fish for bass.”

He's right. The tugging power of panfish and their ability to make bobbers disappear is legendary. Maybe that's why so many kids whose first fish is a bluegill return to the water to teach the next generation. Is there any other

species that's as much fun to catch or as good to eat?

In his book, “Float Tube Fly Fishing,” Deke Meyer recalls his boyhood bluegill pond and explains why the fly rod and panfish are a perfect match:

“One of the reasons fly-fishing for bluegill is so enjoyable is that the lightest fly rods match the fish and the fishing. By using a 2, 3 or 4 weight outfit, the dueling might of the fish is greatly increased. As the bluegill turns its fat body sideways, its staunch surges are forcefully transmitted up a light rod – in essence, the fighting power of the fish is greatly magnified.”

Not that a bluegill needs any help keeping a tight line. Panfish are predators and they react violently when what they thought was a meal starts to fight back. That's why so many anglers, especially young ones, love to tussle with these muscle-bound fighters. They're also among the most colorful of freshwater fish.

“One spring I put two bluegill in an aquarium to observe their feeding habits,” Meyer wrote. “The first thing that struck me was how beautiful bluegill are; their muted overall coloration replicates the somber browns and greens of their underwater habitat, while their aqua-blue cheeks and yellow-orange underbellies are a startling contrast.”

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Working the shoreline of a small lake is a great way to fly-fish for panfish. Photo by Jeff Williams.

Hit the Water

If a fly rod's not part of your angling arsenal, it should be – although there's no need for a \$700 model if you're going to chase panfish. Browse through your local fly shop, discount department store or sporting goods store and you're likely to find just what you need – a "combo" pack that comes with rod, reel, line and leader. Add a few poppers and flies, and you're ready to go. You might find what you're looking for at a yard sale or a resale store for even less money.

If you've never used a fly rod, it might be a good idea to seek advice from a friend who's knowledgeable or do a little reading. Practice in your yard before you get to the water so you'll at least have a feel for what it takes to cast a few feet. You'll quickly discover that a fly rod is not as difficult to use as you might think, especially when you get past the urge to throw the line as if you were using a spin-casting or bait-casting reel.

For panfish, find a light rod in the 1-weight to 5-weight range, and fly line to match (a 3-weight rod uses 3-weight line, for example). The lower the number, the lighter the rod. Rods in this range are the ultra-lights of the fly-fishing world.

"A regular trout rod works fine for panfish – 3, 4 or 5 weights," Hawthorne said. "Leaders can be 0X to about 4X."

Tie One on

Volumes have been written about myriad fishing flies. We don't need that much information to find something that will attract panfish.

Start with a popping bug – bream will rise to the surface and try to drag it under. It's as exciting as watching a largemouth bass smash a top-water plug in lily pads.

"Try a mayfly or a dry fly like an Adams or a Wulff," Hawthorne said. "The good thing is most fly-fishers have these in their fly boxes already."

The Adams is a bread-and-butter fly. It's the fly-fisher's version of the bass angler's Lucky 13. It's tied in a wide variety of colors and materials, and it sits on the water as its wings imitate a fly that's just landed. Griffith's gnat and many other varieties will do the trick, too. Flies in the 10-14 size range work well for panfish.

Panfish love to attack insects that land on water, but they also enjoy emerging insects below the surface. Fly-tiers make critters called water spiders, cicadas, Chernobyl ants, hellgrammites and even tiny jigs. Fly shops are full of colorful creations that represent all sorts of insects that sink and float. For a small investment, a panfish angler should have no trouble finding an enticing pattern.

"The old-timers say five days before and five days after a full moon are good times to catch panfish," Hawthorne said. "In summer heat, look for beds and use flies like grasshoppers and crickets."

On the Bubble

As easy as it is to make the leap from bobber fishing to fly-fishing for panfish, there's a shortcut.

Anglers who use spinning or spin-casting gear can tie on a plastic float, attach a fly and suddenly they're fly-fishing with familiar gear. These shortcuts are known by many trade names – Spin Bubble Float, Bubble Spin, Spinning Bubble, A-Just-A-Bubble and, perhaps the oldest, Cast-a-Bubble.

Some of these are egg-shaped, others are tapered – some are clear, others are brightly colored – but they all work the same way. They have an opening on one end so water can be added for weight. Add enough water so casting is easy but make sure the bubble floats high enough so you can see it. Tie (or thread) the smallest end of the bubble to the end of the fishing line. Add about 2 feet of leader (4-pound line works fine) to the other end

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of the bubble and attach your favorite fly or popper.

Fish on a Stick

“Doodlesocking” – a technique usually used for bass and crappie – can be adapted for panfish fly-fishing. This method uses a long pole with a few feet of line at the end that dangles bait in hard-to-reach areas, likely in deep cover. It works well with any long rod (such as a crappie stick), but a fly rod offers ultralight action and the ability to whip flies into calm pockets of water.

Use line about the same length as your rod. Whether you’re fishing from the bank or a boat, it’s easy (with a little practice) to swing the rod and let the line carry your floating or sinking creation into panfish territory.

Easy Outings

All of these approaches to catching panfish with a fly rod are easy, inexpensive and great excuses to enjoy the nearest body of water. Preparation and experience are minimal. In fact, even a novice will be a veteran after the first trip.

“You just don’t need a bunch of tackle to do this,” Hawthorne said. “Don’t forget sunscreen and insect repellent. Wear shorts and sandals. Wading sandals with felt soles come in handy on slippery rocks.”

Besides enjoying a day on the water, you might come home with dinner. Even better, you might come home with a kid who’s become an angler for life. **AW**



Bluegill

Description – Mean. Predator. Powerful. Tasty.

Habitat – Shady, stumpy, rocky waters.

Food – If it’s in the water and small enough to attack, it’s on the menu.

Illustration by Duane Raver, courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Water’s Waiting Across Arkansas

This is a sampler of places to catch panfish on a fly rod, although Arkansas is loaded with creeks and farm ponds waiting for your visit. If you want to fish on private property, be sure to ask permission, and yes – anyone under 16 must have a fishing license, no matter where they’re fishing. However, licenses are not required during Free Fishing Weekend, June 6-8.

Lake Conway

For more than 50 years, Lake Conway (Faulkner County) has been popular with crappie, bream, bass and catfish anglers. It’s shallow and loaded with structure. Catching panfish around stumps with crickets and worms is fun, but it’s even more exciting with a lightweight fly rod and foam spiders. It was built by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and covers 6,700 acres.

Lake Monticello

We know it’s earned its reputation because of Florida largemouth bass that have flirted with the state record, but have you heard about the plate-size redear? They’re in this 1,500-acre impoundment in Drew County in good numbers. The lake, a little more than 10 years old, has a little of everything – a relatively deep channel, coves, standing trees and stumps, and lily pads along the shoreline. It’s owned by the City of Monticello and managed by the AGFC.

White Oak Lake

This is another lake – actually two lakes – known for bass, but it’s big on bream and catfish, too. It was built by the AGFC in 1961 and covers almost 3,000 acres, split by Arkansas Highway 387, on the Nevada County-Ouachita County line. Cast a line in downed timber and along cypress trees. Camping is easy at White Oak Lake State Park, which is very friendly to anglers.

Ozark Streams

There are so many – why pick just one? Big Piney Creek, Illinois Bayou, the Mulberry River, the Buffalo River, Crooked Creek, the White River (above Beaver Lake) are scenic and accessible. They have tree-lined banks that provide summer shade, long pools and plenty of rocks and willow trees that provide cover for panfish. If the bream aren’t hitting, there’s always time for smallmouth.

Henry Gray Hurricane Lake WMA

The Little Red River and the White River converge in White County, which is reason enough for any angler to visit. But the real attractions for bream seekers are the lakes within the wildlife management area – Big Hurricane Lake, Big Bell Lake, Three Sisters Lake, Honey Lake, Whirl Lake and others are typical of eastern Arkansas oxbows. Access is easy.

Think Locally

Good panfish water might be right around the corner. Consider visiting your nearest golf course and asking about fishing its ponds. Ask permission and find out when no one is playing the course. Also, the AGFC’s Family and Community Fisheries Program stocks trout, catfish and hybrid striped bass in cities across the state. These waters are good for panfish, too. Visit www.agfc.com and click on “Fishing” for details.



The extraordinary structure in Lake Conway was revealed during a drawdown in 2006. Photo by Jeff Williams.