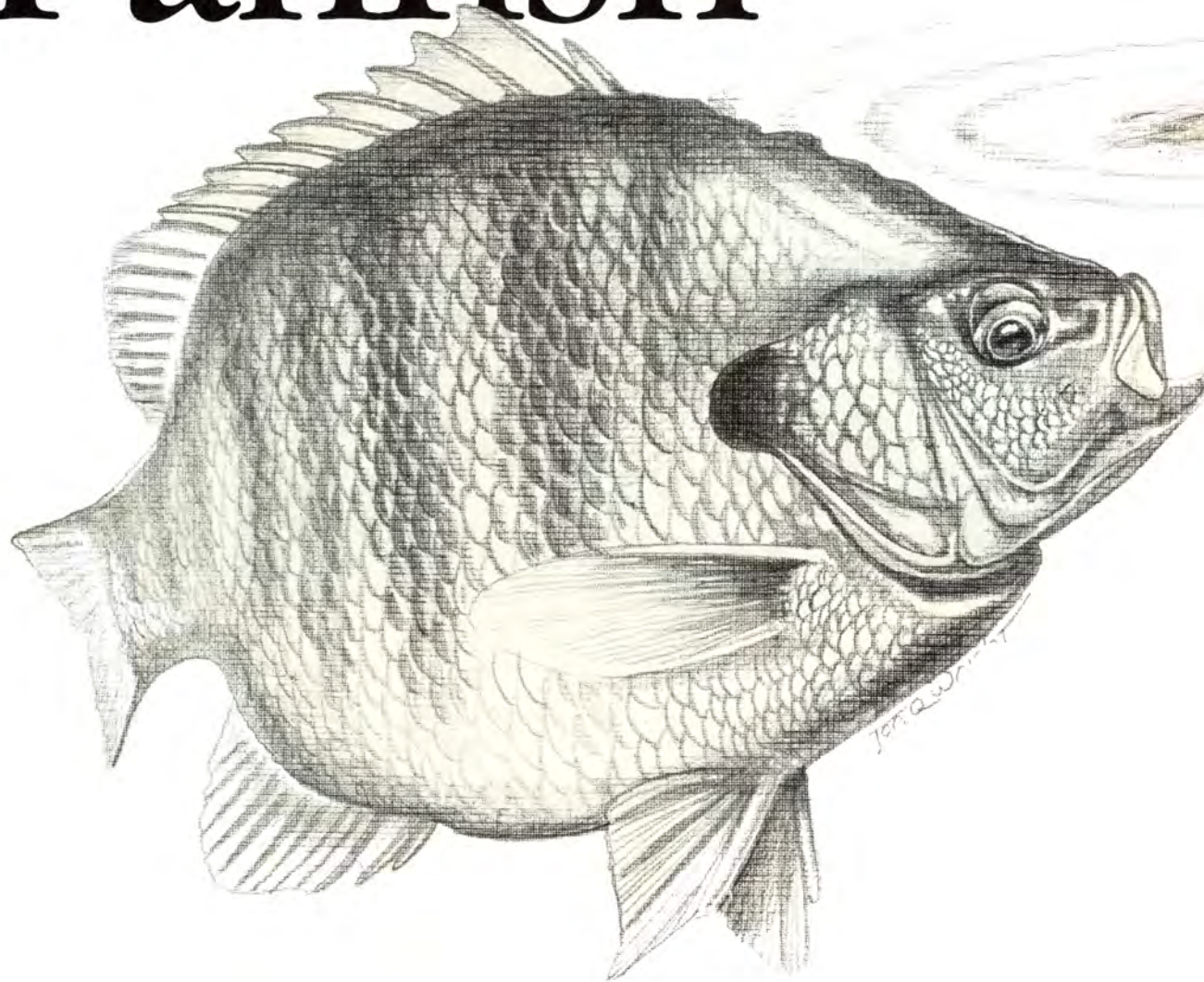


Panfish



JOHN GIERACH

IN MOST PARTS of the country, it's safe to translate the loose term "panfish" as sunfish. White crappies and bluegills are probably the most common because of their potential for good size in the right environments, but there are plenty of others. There are black crappies, green sunfish, redbreast sunfish, pumpkinseeds, redears, rock bass, and some more obscure ones, many of which are too small, even at maturity, to be of interest to anglers. That's not counting regional nicknames like bream (pronounced "brim"), shellcracker, redeye, stumpknocker and so on. Each is distinctive, but all are variations on the same theme; they are modest-sized, deep-bodied, warm-water fish—as a group, the most widely distrib-

uted game fish in North America—and they are custom made for a light fly rod.

Panfish of one kind or another are found throughout the country in warm-water lakes, reservoirs, quarry ponds, farm ponds, and even in creeks and rivers, and it's not unusual for two or more species to be found together. It's the kind of fishing most of us have more or less in the backyard.

IN MOST AREAS, serious fly fishing for panfish begins in the spring when the fish move into shallow water to spawn. Here in Northern Colorado, it typically starts in the second or third week in April, or about the time income taxes are due. Farther south it can begin as

early as late March while up north the fish may spawn as late as May or even June. Where you live makes a difference, as does the way each particular spring shapes up.

Although anglers tend to watch the calendar, fish pay attention only to the water temperature. Panfish begin to spawn when the temperature of the water reaches permanently into the mid- to high 60s. There may be slight temperature variations for some of the different species, but they tend to be no more than the standard margin of error for most inexpensive stream thermometers. Figure on 67 degrees as a rule of thumb.

Even as eagerly as fishermen look for spring, temperatures in the high 60s in the local warm-water fisheries can sneak up on us. As I look through my slides at photos of friends fishing for spawning bluegills, pumpkinseeds, crappies and rock bass, I see wool shirts and brown cattails; the skies are often gray and the willows and cottonwoods are just beginning to leaf. For various reasons, the ponds in a given area will often come on at different times, but in any one piece of water, the fish will be on the beds for roughly a month to six weeks. That means that if you wait for shirtsleeve, mosquito swatting weather, you will miss half of the fun.

Sunfish spawn in colonies of round, shallow nests made on sand or gravel bottoms in about two to four feet of water. You may find a handful of nests clustered around a small, offshore hummock or hundreds covering the open bottom of a cove. Sometimes they stand out like cream-colored pockmarks against a dark bottom and at other times they'll be almost impossible to spot.

Crappies are the exception. Their spawning habits

are much the same as other sunfish except that they build their nests in deeper water—up to six or eight feet—where they can seldom be seen from shore.

Spawning panfish take flies by way of protecting their nests. Fishermen call it "anger," while a scientist might call it "territoriality." Whatever you call it, the fish are seldom selective to pattern.

Dry flies aren't as effective as wets, however. The same spawning panfish that will nail just about any wet fly, nymph or streamer that comes near his nest may well ignore a dry fly, probably because he doesn't see it as an immediate threat to the eggs. (I say "he" because it's typically the males who guard the nests.) Sometimes a small, brightly colored popper will do the trick, but usually the hot action on dry flies in the spring comes from fish who are too young, and too small, to spawn.

It's probably fair to say that a wet fly, nymph or streamer that's fished deep through a spawning area on a medium to fast retrieve will draw the attention of panfish. You want a fly that's large enough to attract attention but that's not too large for the fairly small mouths of most panfish. Sizes 12 through 8 are usually best, though in better waters where the fish are big you may want to go a size or two larger.

Here again, crappies are an exception. Their mouths are somewhat larger—vaguely bass-like in appearance—and their appetites run more to fish than some of the others. In the same pond, a crappie streamer might be a size or two larger than a bluegill fly.

Many panfishers prefer flies that are brightly colored or flashy for visibility and, since panfish tend to be nippers rather than swallows when taking flies, you may find that long-tailed patterns like leeches and Woolly Buggers will draw short strikes.

Although it's often possible to sight-fish to spawning panfish, it's usually unnecessary. The fish are packed together and are busy protecting their nests from predators ranging from aquatic nymphs to other fish who will happily eat the eggs. They seem to spend the entire spawning season in a state of sustained aggravation and will hit a fly with no second thoughts. Fishing the water is generally sufficient.

Spawning activity concentrates the adult fish into relatively small areas and the most predictable catches of large numbers of large fish often occur in the spring. Panfish may not actually congregate to spawn according to size, but the larger fish often grab the best areas. If you get into little fish, try moving down the bank or working a little farther out in the deeper water.

If you show up a little early and the fish aren't on the beds yet, try fishing over the dropoff near a known spawning area. Unless the water level in a pond changes significantly, panfish spawn in the same areas year after year. Many spawning areas are near shore, but in shallow ponds they can be almost anywhere.

JOHN GIERACH is the author of *Trout Bum*, by Pruett Publishing, Co., Boulder, Colo.

Panfish . . .

As the spawning activity peters out in late spring to early summer, panfish move into their regular program of feeding heavily in the weedy or otherwise structured shallows in the morning and evening and lazing in deeper, cooler water during midday.

Warm Weather Tactics

PANFISH ARE EAGER, aggressive, even competitive, feeders. Most seem to prefer aquatic insects, crustaceans and that sort of thing as a daily diet, but they'll give just about anything a try. Anyone who's caught a four-inch pumpkinseed on a #2/0 bass popper knows how daring these fish can be.

A good panfish pond may be speckled with rises from dawn till dusk, but except for the prime feeding times, it's usually the smaller fish who are rising and boiling at the surface. If you arrive at the pond at midday, try working the deeper water adjacent to the weedy shallows, perhaps even with a sink-tip line. Keep your retrieves lazy—the fish themselves may be a little slow and dopey—and work various depths until you connect with fish. Panfish are seldom found far from cover, so concentrate on textured bottoms with plenty of structure rather than open, sandy ones.

Crappies are notoriously fond of brushy areas and are often found in deeper water than other panfish. This liking for brush led to a trick I remember from my childhood in the Midwest. Farm pond owners would sink piles of sticks in their ponds and mark them with floats or poles that poked through the surface. Schools of crappies sometimes cruise widely, but if they find a pile of brush they like they seem to just stay there.

Rock bass, as the name implies, feel at home on rocky bottoms and along rip-rapped banks, though I've often caught them from weedy water as well.

Whatever type of panfish you're after and whatever regional eccentricities they may have, they'll all want quiet water and some kind of cover.

Crappies are a tightly schooling fish, so much so that you'll usually catch either a bunch of them or none, but seldom just a few. Other sunfish don't school in a technical sense, but they sometimes congregate roughly according to size. The reason may be food concentrations or water temperature. The larger fish can't take the variations in temperature that the smaller ones can, which means that during the heat of the day the little fish can be just about anywhere while the larger ones are almost surely in deep water. In hot weather, pay special attention to spring holes and cool-water inlets.

In my experience, some of the largest sunfish appear to be solitary. The biggest bluegills, rock bass and pumpkinseeds I've caught have come one at a time, seemingly from nowhere, often on larger flies intended for bass. They are startlingly larger than the ones I normally take. The fact that they come singly and that I don't see them on the spawning beds leads me to believe that they wander around by themselves, though I suspect that this is simply because there are so few of them who grow to that age and size that there aren't enough for a concentration.

On summer evenings, and again in the early mornings, the larger fish move in close to shore to feed. They sometimes seem to displace the smaller fish who have been working there during the daylight hours, but it may be that the big ones are more aggressive, so you catch more of them. Low-light periods are the best for fishing the shallows and a cool, overcast summer day can extend the good fishing time considerably.

Panfish Flies and Poppers

SMALL POPPERS AND OTHER miniature floating bugs are the ones most often sold as "panfish flies." They can be very effective when large fish are working in shallow water in the mornings and evenings, and they may move larger fish at midday in the shallower ponds. It's an item of fishing lore that crappies are poor surface feeders and fisheries biologists tend to agree that they are, relatively speaking, a deep-water fish. Like all gamefish, they can surprise you now and then.

I tie almost all of my flies, but I still buy most of my panfish bugs. The main reason is economic: A good quality panfish popper costs about the same as a standard dry fly, but takes about three times longer to make. There are quite a few of them on the market. Some are handsomer than others—and some are more durable, too—but they all work. I'll admit to a soft spot for fancy paint jobs, but solid colors, without eye-balls, seem to work just as well. The best colors are yellows, reds, whites, greens and blacks, and bugs with rubber legs sometimes out perform those without. On many commercial bugs, you must chip the paint from the hook eye and the point of the hook, and it's a good idea to inspect them before you get on the water.

Panfish bugs are fished just like bass bugs, with gentle twitches and long rests, although the fish-catching action is usually faster with panfish than with bass.

Various weighted nymphs and wet flies are excellent for panfish—my two favorites are the Hare's Ear nymph and peacock soft hackle—but in recent years I've been tending more and more toward streamers. A marabou or bucktail streamer in yellow, white, or the two colors combined, has always been a classic for crappies and most other types of panfish will take these flies as well. The basic advantage of, say, a size 10 streamer over a nymph or wet fly of the same size is that you get a larger, beefier fly on the same size hook. It's easier to see and the fish move farther for it. Streamers do not eliminate strikes from little fish, but they may generate more interest from the larger ones.

For the last few seasons I've been using a handful of streamer patterns that I developed on our local panfish ponds. Four of them are simple hair wings in yellow and white, black and brown, black and purple, and a white bucktail and gray squirrel-tail concoction that I have modestly dubbed the Gierach Special. Two others are marabou-winged flies with palmered hackles over the bodies—variations of the Woolly Bugger. For panfish I tie these in black and yellow, and they have come to be known as Nearly Weedless Woollies.

They're all nearly weedless (no fly is completely

A spawning bluegill guarding its cream-colored, shallow-water bed. The beds, light, sandy patches that have been fanned clean by mating fish, stand out against the otherwise dark lake bottom.



A selection of small poppers and a lightweight rod are all it takes to get into panfish action when the waters warm (left). A Susquehanna River rock bass (above). A Currituck Sound Redear Sunfish (bottom).

weedless, though some are weed resistant) because they're tied upside down so the hook points ride above the shank in the style of some bonefish patterns. This lets me fish around, and even in, the heaviest cover with less fear of losing flies. Monofilament weed guards work well for bass, but on smaller panfish patterns they seem to get in the way of the fishes' small, rubbery mouths. I wanted patterns that wouldn't snag but that left the hook points exposed. The upside-down streamers proved to be the answer.

Fishing Tactics and Tackle

MORE IMPORTANT THAN the actual patterns you use is how you fish them. A subsurface fly stripped briskly through a spawning area in the spring usually excites fish to strike, but for year-round panfishing a medium to slow retrieve is usually best. Most panfish are aggressive enough, but they won't chase a fast-moving fly far.

Usually a slow, crawling retrieve draws more and surer strikes than a fast one. This even holds true for

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Panfish . . .



J. SCHOLLMAYER PHOTO

Continued from page 43

crappies that, among the sunfish, are the most likely to chase a school of minnows. Just remember, it's still the slow minnow that gets eaten first.

Pay special attention to stopped or sinking flies. I doubt that panfish get spooky often, but they do seem to get lazy at times, sometimes so lazy they won't hit a moving fly. At such times a slowly sinking weighted fly, or one that's been retrieved gently and then stopped, draws more strikes than one stripped steadily.

Remember also that panfish, like large-mouth bass, are often attracted to a fly hitting the water. They spook at first, but then swim back to investigate, or they may hit only seconds after you've completed the cast. In fact, sunfish are like bass in a number of ways because they're members of the same family. Bass are just big panfish.

The best rod for panfishing is subject to debate but, for sheer fun, use the lightest rod possible. I've used 3- and 4-

weights happily and I just learned, to my delight, that my new 8 1/2-foot, 2-weight graphite will cast a #10 cork popper—as long as I don't cast it too far. That's not a problem because I'm doing more and more of my panfishing from a belly boat where flipper power can replace the long, accurate cast. When fishing from shore or on windy days, I usually opt for a longer, stouter rod, something like an 8 1/2- or 9-foot, 5- or 6-weight.

When fishing bugs and streamers on light rods, try using a short leader. It will turn the flies over better and you usually don't have to worry about lining panfish.

There's another consideration. Good panfish ponds are often good bass ponds as well and, as much fun as panfish are, bass are not to be passed up. I'll have to admit to having caught my share of panfish on 7-, 8- and even 9-weight rods, though it's usually been unsatisfying. When I hook a fish, even a small one, I like to see the rod bend.

Although the fight panfish put up is

not something fishing writers wax poetic over, they are definitely scrappy. They stay in the water (I've seen two of them jump in over 30 years of fishing) and use their flat sides against the pull of the line, sometimes very effectively. They do tend to tire quickly.

Light rods let them show off nicely and fine leaders can also even the score a bit. I now avoid tippets as light as 6X and 7X because they're not very good at turning over the bugs and weighted streamers I like to use. Panfish also have the tendency to dive into the nearest and thickest cover when hooked, which means you'll either have to turn them quickly or dredge them out. I once thought that 7X tippets would be properly sporting—regardless of how they performed—but they ended up costing me more flies than I was willing to part with. A 5X seems to be a reasonable compromise, although I'll go heavier if the cover is especially thick or if the fish are especially large.

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Panfish . . .

Trophy or Tiddler?

WHAT CONSTITUTES A BIG PANFISH? Around here any bluegill, crappie, pumpkinseed or rock bass that covers a grown man's hand is definitely a keeper and, as I've mentioned, they do come bigger, though rarely. The Colorado record bluegill weighs 1 pound, 11 ounces. By comparison, the world all tackle record weighed 4 pounds, 12 ounces. This incredible fish, big enough to be a heart-stopping trout, was caught in Alabama in 1950.

The South accounts for most of the largest panfish in the country. In fact, the locations of the waters where most of the world records were taken reads like a roll call of the Confederacy. There are some notable exceptions, however. For instance, the world record rock bass (3 pounds) was caught in Canada.

The fact is, respectable panfish can be, and are, found anywhere in the country where the conditions are right. A rich warm-water environment is essential, but that's not the only requirement. You also need a balance between predators and prey.

Whatever brand of panfish you're after, chances are they'll be attractive fish. The crappies and rock bass are tastefully handsome, while some, like the red-breast, are downright gorgeous. Bluegills exhibit the widest color variations, being darker or lighter, brighter or duller in response to environmental factors. In a local pond kept perpetually off colored by watering stock, I've caught some that were flesh-colored, although they retained the characteristic dark blue gill flap, and in other ponds hereabouts they interbreed with the green sunfish, producing an attractive hybrid.

For my money, pumpkinseeds are the most exotic-looking. With greenish blue speckled bodies, orange breast, blue-stripped face and gill covers and a blue and red gill flap, they are just about the prettiest fish that swims in fresh water.

Panfish are ideal for those of us who like to bring fish home to eat now and then. Most warm-water biologists agree that it's all but impossible to harm a panfish fishery by keeping fish. The bag limits in most states reflect this opinion. Here in Colorado, for instance, you can keep 20 crappies and 30 bluegills per day.

For the record, I'm a staunch catch-and-release fisherman with box after box or barbless flies. Even my panfish flies have the barbs pinched down, partly from force of habit and partly because the sharp, barbless hooks sink deeper and faster with less pressure. Still, I find it pleasantly nostalgic to come home on a spring evening with a nice stringer of fish—and no guilt.

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