



# Panfish

PART ONE

*There's a panfish pond near your home, and it can provide you with superb fly fishing.*

DAVE WHITLOCK

**L**AST SUMMER I HAD the joy of seeing Joeline, my two-year-old granddaughter, catch her first sunfish with a pole, line, bobber, hook, and worm. It was a feisty, colorful, three-inch pumpkinseed or longear. She seemed as frightened as the tiny sunfish, but this summer you can bet she will be ready to catch more. Twenty-four years ago I watched her dad, Joel, and his older brother, Alan, do the same thing. And that's the way I got started about 52 years ago.

*Coppernose bream caught on a deer-hair bug.  
Dave Whitlock photo.*

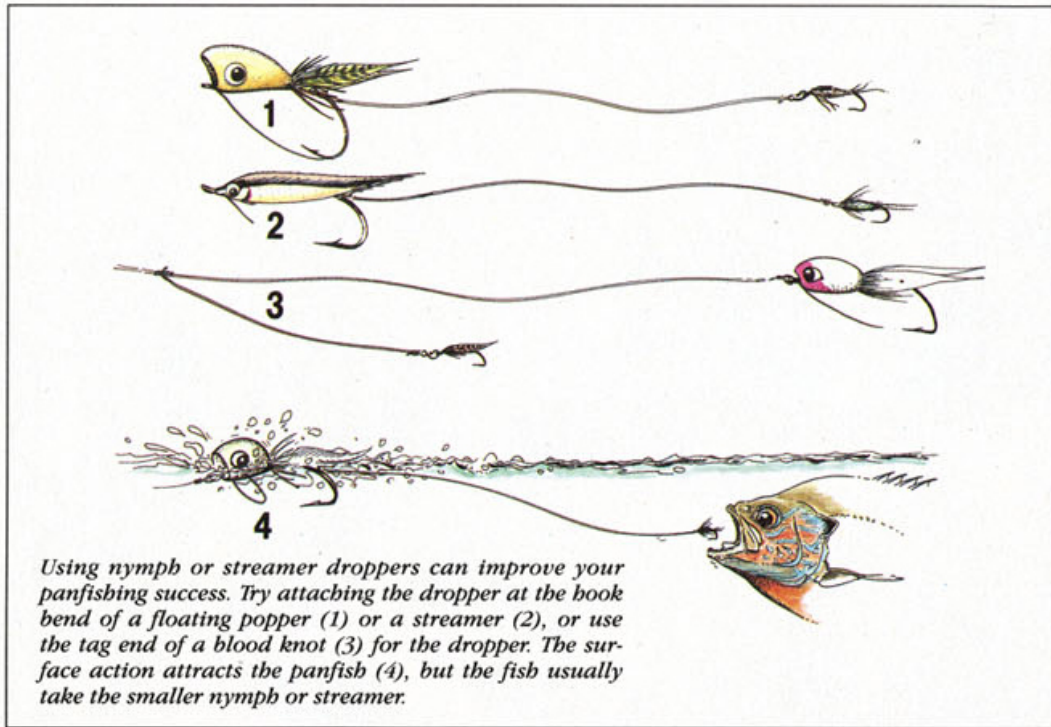
In 49 of our 50 states warm- and coolwater panfish are more widespread in distribution and eager to bite than trout or bass. And there's so much more to catching them than you might imagine. So this feature speaks to every fly fisher about catching these pan-size critters and not as just a prelude to catching other, bigger fish. Maybe it's time you came *back* to panfish if the fast-lane adult life and the high pressure of Atlantic salmon, bonefish, or tournament fishing have you down. With a fresh perspective and challenging approach, panfish can open a new future of fly-fishing pleasure for you.

There are excellent panfish fly-fishing opportunities within a few minutes' drive, walk, or bike ride from where you live or work. Even better, such special spots may not even be fished. And, unlike with quality trout or salmon waters, permission to fish panfish waters is seldom difficult to gain.

You can find panfish in creeks, ponds, lakes, canals, water hazards on golf courses, fountain and pond waters around buildings, irrigation or drinking-water ponds, reservoirs, and waterways.

The surprising thing about most of these city-limit "secret" panfisheries is that they are fish-filled and fertile. Most receive large amounts of lawn or farm fertilizers that enrich the food chains and generate big fish populations. For instance, just consider the runoff of golf courses into the water hazards. It's a wonder those sunfish enjoying the good life there don't explode from so much nutrient-created food.

What are panfish? Well, the term itself is a general, even denigrating, label fishermen give to nearly any group of small fish, especially those they catch primarily to eat. Fish that don't exceed two or three pounds at maturity are often



Using nymph or streamer droppers can improve your panfishing success. Try attaching the dropper at the hook bend of a floating popper (1) or a streamer (2), or use the tag end of a blood knot (3) for the dropper. The surface action attracts the panfish (4), but the fish usually take the smaller nymph or streamer.

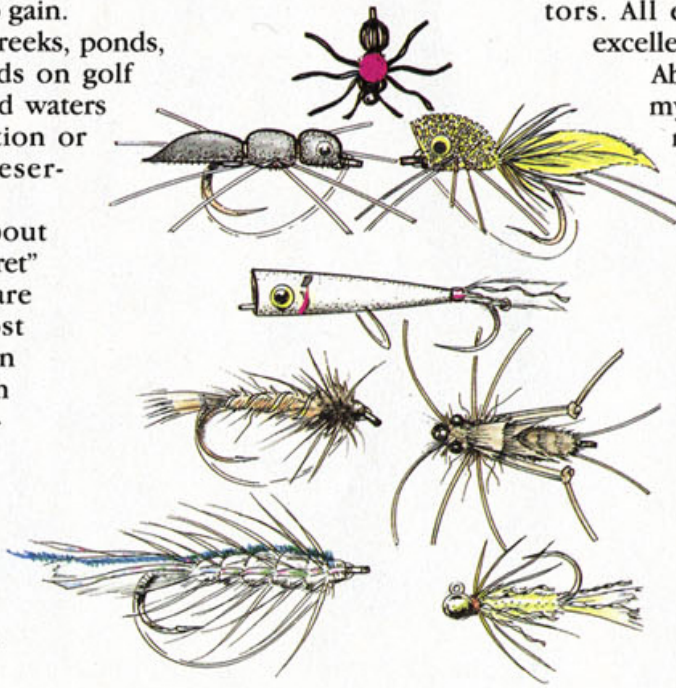
DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATIONS

referred to as panfish. However, most fishermen think of panfish first as the sunfish group—bluegill, crappie, redear, rock bass—then probably yellow and white perch, white bass, and others. Freshwater panfish are extremely aggressive live-food predators. All except the white crappie are excellent fighters on light tackle.

About two years ago, as I started my study for this feature, I soon realized each of these panfish requires as much specialization in flies, tackle, methods, and timing as any trout or bass group I have tried to master.

Usually panfish are caught accidentally or only fished for during bedding (spawning) activity. During such times these various fish are highly concentrated and aggressive, and you can often catch them quickly, with 25- to 100-fish counts per day. But give them a try during the rest of the season and go for them with fly tackle geared down to their size, and it's another story.

For instance, try sight casting to a one- or two-pound bluegill in a clear spring pond with a 2-weight rod, 13-foot 7X leader, and #18 scuds. I did recently and had a harder time with these small permits than



A variety of panfish flies to carry in your box: (from top, left to right) black ant; sponge spider; Whit Hairbug; pencil popper; Red Fox Squirrel Nymph; gray cricket nymph; lectric leech; minijig.

any four-pound rainbow or brown. I sight cast to 18 or 20 bluegills, spooked all but six, hooked those, lost four scud patterns on break-offs, and landed two puffed fish in the pound-plus class.

It was as emotionally draining as any permit fishing I have experienced. If I tried to wade to them or cast the leader over them, they spooked, vanishing into deep water. So I just took on a heronlike stance until with polaroids I saw one or two cruising along the edges of the shallow moss beds, presented the scud fly, and let it sink and rest on top of the moss. Then I began to swim the fly as the bluegills got two or three feet from it. They moved deliberately to it, then slowly sucked the scud in, and when they felt the hook, they dashed wildly to deep water. I could feel the hair stand up on the back of my neck when they ate my fly. Each bluegill was so strong and quick I was initially helpless to turn or stop it. Time after time it would dash back into the lake's depths. Such experiences have increased my respect for panfishing with the fly rod. They will yours, too.

In this issue I'll describe the important panfish of the sunfish family, and in the next issue I'll describe yellow perch, white perch, white bass, and yellow bass.

## Sunfish

THE TACKLE AND FLIES for these one-quarter- to two-pound-size fish should be light and small. Most of these fish feed on small, live, active foods similar to what trout prefer: aquatic and terrestrial insects, crustaceans, small fish, leeches, aquatic worms. And they feed on some aquatic and terrestrial plants, fruits, and seeds. Each type of panfish has distinct preferences throughout its feeding seasons, preferences that parallel food abundance at various water conditions, temperatures, and seasons, just as trout or small-mouth bass do. Water temperatures most panfish prefer range from 60 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit, while trout prefer temperatures of 45 to 65 degrees for their peak feeding activity.

Your fly tackle should be light: 2-, 3-, or 4-weights are especially good for sport, as well as more effective for presenting and fishing the small flies panfish prefer.

My three favorite panfish rods are graphites, a 7'9" 2-weight, an 8'9" 3-weight, and an 8' 5-weight. I use single-action or multiplier reels with enough size to make retrieving fast and with light, sensitive drag systems. I use 100 to 150 yards of 12- or 20-pound braided-dacron backing to make the reel and fly line function better during fishing and retrieving. Cover-loving panfish seldom make long runs.

I use floating weight-forward fly lines or small floating shooting-tapers and sinking-tips with sinking portions cut to four-foot lengths. I use knotless, tapered leaders from 2X to 7X, the length tailored to the type



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTOS

Sometimes panfish spawn together and create hybrids, such as with the longear (left) and (two) yellow breast sunfish (right), which form a yellow breast/longear hybrid (right, top). Below: a typical large bluegill.

of fishing. The knotless design eliminates casting tangles and hangups on vegetation. Since it is common to land from 25 to 100 fish a day, the knotless leader attached to the line's tip with a Joe Robinson Zap-A-Gap connection (see FFM March 1988) avoids rod-guide hangups when you are landing the fish or running the leader and fly line back up the guides.

Hook removal from the small mouth of any fish is difficult, so it's important to use barbless flies. Panfish don't have sharp teeth, but they do have needle-sharp, spiny-rayed fins that can painfully stick you.



## FLIES FOR Panfish

Handle them carefully and remove the hook before they struggle. If you use hemostats or a hook degorger and a small landing net, you can hook, land, and release them unharmed, or keep them.

Most panfish have fine, delicious firm white flesh, and they are usually plentiful. Harvesting them can actually improve the fishing by reducing heavy competition for food.

## Bluegills

MATURE BLUEGILLS prefer still to flowing waters, but they also thrive in slow-moving or low-gradient streams or stillwater sloughs off main streambeds. Look for them around lily pads, cattails, sawgrass, milfoil, water hyacinth, coontail moss, and reeds or bullrushes. Old partially submerged tree trunks and stumps, willows, and cypress also attract them, and they favor rocks and such structures as boat docks and flooded duck blinds.

Bluegills have small mouths but eat almost anything edible they can grasp. They feed aggressively in water temperatures of 75 to 80 degrees and “bed,” or spawn, in spring or early summer when water temperatures average from 68 to 70 degrees in one to six feet of water over sand or fine gravel.

When they are spawning, bluegills and other sunfish dig an 8- to 18-inch round depression in mud, sand, or small gravel in sheltered shoreline areas, especially the ends of ponds or lake coves or stream sloughs. The bedding areas, made by the individual males, typically have from 10 to 100 or more nests. Females join the males, lay the eggs, and leave the area shortly thereafter. Males guard the nests.

In the spring, when the shallows water temperatures reach the 60-degree mark, look for beds—a group of light circles on the bottom—or small swirls and wakes in sheltered shorelines. I also pay particular attention when I get fast, splashy strikes while surface bugging for bass, a sign that I am casting over beds and the bluegill are attacking the fly in defense of their nests.

During bedding, males, and to a lesser extent females, strike nearly any fly you cast near the beds. Most sunfish are caught during this two- or three-week period each year.

In some Southern areas sunfish bed more than once a year, in the Deep South almost every month in spring and summer. Some bedding areas are used year after year unless water conditions change drastically, and they may well have more than one species



The author holds a Texas yellow breast sunfish.

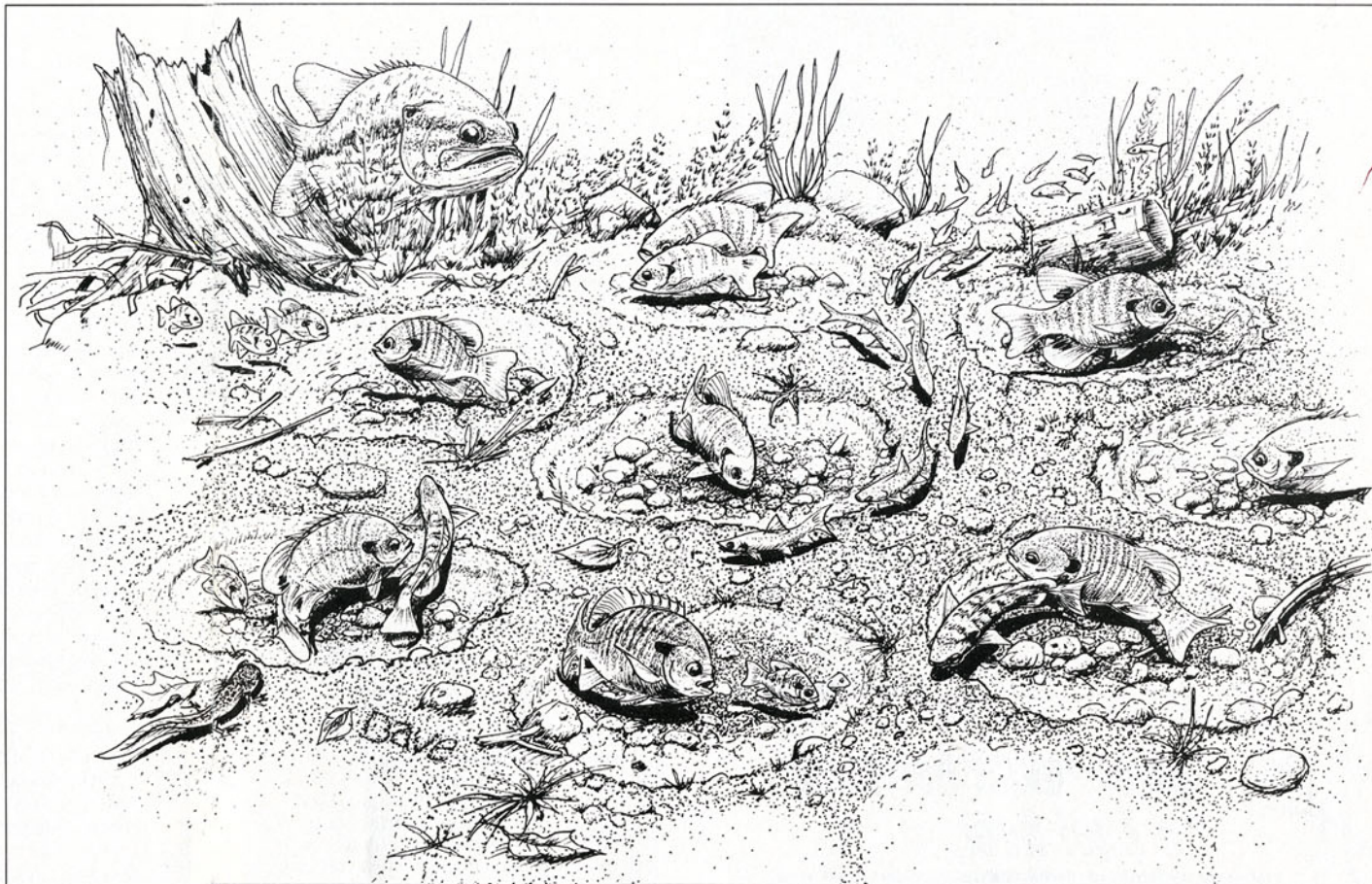


A smallmouth bass (top), yellow perch, sunfish, and black crappie.

of sunfish using them. This can provide exciting catch variety, including hybrid sunfish strains.

During bedding, the entire local fish community may be attracted to the activity—small and large egg-eating minnows and young panfish, suckers, carp, and large predators such as bass, pickerel, pike, and catfish prey on the panfish and their eggs. Don't be surprised if you hook a small sunfish and it is inhaled by a huge largemouth or pickerel. Last year I hooked a 7½-pound largemouth on a small sponge spider just outside a bed area I was casting to. On the 8-foot 5-weight it was an unforgettable experience. I have often hooked big channel cats and nice bass on panfish nymphs just outside the beds.

The most effective way to draw strikes is usually



Sponge spiders (center) are one of the best panfish patterns. They take warmouth sunfish (left) and pumpkinseeds (right).

with a very slow retrieve or by just allowing a dry fly, hairbug, nymph, Woolly Worm, or marabou leech to rest and slowly sink over the beds. Of course, a high-floating dry fly brings the most exciting out-of-the-water, down-on-top-of-the-fly strikes. A fly moved extra slowly works best. Be sure to set the hook fast and gently or you will miss the hair-trigger sunfish. Spawning sunfish provide wonderful reflex practice for any new fly fisher.

In early spring, before bedding, bluegill move from winter deep water into extra-shallow water in the ends of sun-exposed coves, especially those with warm water running into them. They are there more to warm up than to eat, so they can be difficult to take. As soon as they can find warm water farther out in the cove or along the shoreline, they begin prespawn feeding. Then my best success comes with nymphs and small streamers and marabou minijigs fished slowly in sun-exposed water from two to five feet deep.

After spawning, bluegill scatter out into deeper water first, then after a short postspawn period begin to work shoreline structures for food. The larger fish hold in deeper water and feed early and late in the

Panfish on the spawning beds. Look for groups of light circles in the sand and gravel when the water warms. The males build and defend the nest from small and large predators, which lurk on the edges of the spawning beds and make forays into the nest for food.

day and at night. Hatching aquatic insects, especially emergences of large burrowing mayflies, often called “willow flies” in the South, entice the bluegills to the surface. They prefer spent spinners to duns, perhaps because it's easier for them to zero in on a helpless victim. Dry flies, small hairbugs, sponge spiders, and various floating nymphs all work. Nearly any insect emergence—ants, damselflies, caddis, crickets, and grasshoppers—works magic on the fish.

Listen for bluegills and other sunfish surface feeding just before spawning, during postspawn, through fall, and at night. Listen especially near heavy aquatic vegetation such as lilies, water hyacinth, milfoil, cattails, reeds, and sawgrass, as well as near flooded shorelines and timber and cypress roots and trunks for soft smacking or sharp sucking sounds. Investigate and you'll find large bluegills inhaling crickets, spiders, gnats, or emerging damselflies. Such feeding

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## Panfish . . .

activity is usually tucked well inside the surface structures, and fishing requires a soft, pinpoint, floating-fly presentation with little or no action other than occasional tiny twitches. The longer you let the fly sit, the better chance you'll have of enticing a large sunfish.

There are times when big bluegills want nothing but a fly far too large for them, even though they can do no more than take a bite out of its tail feathers or rubber legs. I often notice this interest when I'm fishing large hairbugs or divers for bass. I get hard strikes but end up with nothing when I set the hook. Switching to a smaller fly seldom solves anything; it's the large fly that attracts and excites the big territorial bluegills.

To solve this pleasant dilemma, I add an 8- to 12-inch, 3X or 4X, dropper off the bug's hook bend and tie it to an edible-size fly (#8 to #14) such as a Red Fox Squirrel Nymph, gray sinking cricket, or a marabou minijig. The big bug lures them like a teaser; then they eat the small fly tied directly below the large fly. The big bug suddenly darts backward or submerges when a bluegill pounces on the trailer fly. I'm often surprised, too, by large bass taking the dropper.

Some of the best fly fishing for bluegills occurs around the first frost. The fish are summer-fat and strong, and they form large loose schools that patrol shorelines, the surfaces of coves, and sheltered bays, hunting for chilled, windblown terrestrial insects, small minnows, and young frogs.

Excellent patterns include sponge crickets, Dave's Hopper, black ants (small and medium), and rubber-legged #10 Whit Hairbugs in yellow, black, or brown. As you fish, scan the surface for small swirls or dimples of cruising and feeding groups of bluegills. I like windy, warm afternoons that heat the water's surface and send leaves and chumlike multitudes of terrestrial insects raining down on the lake waters from the shores.

When the water's surface temperature drops below 60 degrees, bluegill and other sunfish slide into deeper water, suspending in large schools or small groups along creek channels, especially along the walls of steep rock bluffs, sunken treetops, or aquatic vegetation. Fished on sinking lines and retrieved very slowly, small nymphs, marabou minijigs, and Woolly Buggers take these coldwater sunfish. When such conditions arrive, I go for more active coldwater panfish like white bass, crappie, or yellow

perch. Or I simply go hunting for upland birds or squirrels.

**Redear**, also called a "shellcracker," favor snails and small freshwater clams and crayfish, cracking them by using a special crusher bone in their throats.

Because of this snail-feeding preference, redear feed on bottom and in deeper water than the other sunfish. Thus, like night-feeding brown trout, they have a reputation of being smarter or more difficult to catch on flies than any of the other sunfish. They feed on anything bluegills eat, but if they can get snails, clams, crayfish, or aquatic worms off bottom, why surface feed? They average from eight to ten inches long, but the world record—4 pounds, 13 ounces—is just one ounce larger than the record bluegill.

The redear bed a week to 10 days earlier than bluegills in the same waters, and they prefer a softer silt or mud bottom than bluegills. I've often seen both fish simultaneously using the same bedding areas.

Redear like pre- and postspawning structures similar to that preferred by bluegills, except they prefer stumps and sunken trees and less light than bluegills. Their local nickname in cypress country is "stumpknockers," perhaps because when hooked they often dash inside or under a stump to escape the rod's pull, and make a thumping sound as they beat the sides with their body or tail.

When redear are not on the beds, fish for them in deep water with flies that swim or crawl slowly near bottom or through and over stumps and tree limbs. Most redear bait fishermen insist on live redworms fished on bottom or gray crickets suspended near bottom. Try a one- or two-inch chamois San Juan worm fly. Other flies include a gray Dave's Sinking Cricket, Red Fox Squirrel Nymph, Weedless Electric Leech, scud, damsel nymph, and small brown or olive Woolly Buggers—either weighted, or fished with split-shot or sinking-tip fly lines to keep the flies moving deep and slow.

**Pumpkinseed** are abundant sunfish ranging in waters across the northern and eastern states. It averages about one-half the size of a bluegill and prefers shallow, weedy water along the shorelines of ponds and slow streams. Otherwise, catching it on small dry, nymph, and streamer flies is about identical to bluegill fly fishing. On a 2-weight they provide endless pleasure.

I use smaller flies—#12 to #16—for them. When I'm in pumpkinseed waters, I'm usually bass fishing, and a small dropper-fly tied to the bass bug is espe-

cially effective in adding pumpkinseed strikes to the less frequent bass strikes.

**Redbreast Sunfish**, called yellow-breasts in Texas and across the South, closely combine the lifestyle characteristics of spawning, foods, cover, and temperature needs of bluegills and redears that it seems they are hybrids of these two sunfish. The main difference is that they prefer slow-moving water more like rock bass or smallmouth bass. And redbreast, especially those that exceed three-quarters of a pound, prefer large flies more than the other panfish.

**Longears**, like the pumpkinseed, average much smaller than the other sunfish, but what they lack in size they make up for in beauty, abundance, and ferocious aggressiveness. No fish twice its size could win a fight with a mad male longear. When they strike, they become so brilliantly colored they must be seen to be believed.

The longear has a long, soft, velvety-black gill flap, or ear, rimmed with white or pale turquoise. Its body and head are spotted and veined with the brightest iridescent turquoise, blue, and orange.

They strike nearly any lure or fly that comes within hearing or sight, sometimes chasing and beating on the fly far out from their shallow shoreline homes or nests. No piranha could be more aggressive.

Longears do equally well in clear-water ponds, lakes, and streams from the far Northeastern states to mid-South. In the South they bed nearly every month from spring to early fall. They prefer coarse gravel and rock bottoms, boulders, and lesser amounts of aquatic or terrestrial vegetation structure.

Longears eat most live or freshly dead foods, so they'll strike any fly you cast near them. But because of their size and tiny mouths, fly sizes 10 through 16 are the most consistent hookers.

### Largemouth Sunfish

YEARS AGO I CALLED THIS sunfish group the "bigmouth perch," because they have large, bass-size mouths and body shapes more like well-fed bass than sunfish. Their number, nesting habits, feeding habits, and living areas are like bass. They spawn in separate, widespread single nests when water temperatures reach the high 60s to low 70s. Though when spawning they are extremely aggressive, they are not caught in the numbers bluegill are during spawning.

**Rock bass** are perhaps the best known of this group. Plentiful from the mid-northern states to the East and South, they prefer streams to ponds, and as their name implies, they like rock and rubble bottoms in modest to

slow current speeds.

Rock bass look a lot like smallmouth but they are smaller and have larger and more pronounced red eyes. Often called "goggle eye" or "red-eye," they seldom exceed 1 to 1½ pounds, and they average about ¼ to ½ pound.



Rock bass

Rock bass like the same temperatures as smallmouth—from 60 to 75 degrees. They feed more along bottom and at twilight or dark on minnows, crayfish, leeches, and large insects, especially hellgrammites, stoneflies, and dragonfly nymphs.

Occasionally, especially at night, I catch rock bass on surface hairbugs, poppers, and floating rubber-leg sponge spiders. They are often shy, slow, deliberate stalkers and strikers, so any surface-swimming or bottom-hopping fly is most effective when fished slowly.

Rock bass and the other largemouth sunfish ambush from structure hides—rock crevices, stump roots, logs, or floating objects.

**Warmouth sunfish** prefer still water and more silty, weedy bottoms than rock bass. Look for them in shoreline areas that largemouth bass favor. Their range approximates that of the rock bass, except they are more abundant in ponds and lakes than the stream-loving rock bass.

Warmouth prefer bottom foods, especially crayfish, but also eat nymphs, leeches, minnows, and surface-swimming food.

**Green sunfish** are second only to the bluegill as the most widely distributed sunfish in the United States. They have amazing tolerance to water temperature, water quality, and water conditions, and they are willing to attempt eating nearly any object up to twice their size. No panfish or bass slams into a surface hairbug or popper with more sheer explosion.

Green sunfish haunt the steeper drop-off shorelines of calm stream areas, ponds, lakes, canals, and strip pits, and they den under boulders, rubble, rock, logs, roots, water weeds, and nearly any manmade structure. They eat crayfish, insects, minnows, and each other.

Green sunfish like to smash a bug

tight against shoreline structure, usually the millisecond it touches the water. Sometimes it actually seems like my fly explodes on contact.

**Crappie** are angelfish-shaped sunfish. They range in waters throughout the U. S. but in only scattered areas in the Rocky Mountains. The black crappie is more predominant in cool, clear lakes, especially northern pike waters. White crappie are more abundant farther south in warmer, less clear waters, but some lakes and rivers have both fish.

Crappie are schooling sunfish that eat minnows, insects, shrimp, crayfish, leeches, and aquatic worms, in about that order of preference. They live in deeper water, usually preferring 6 to 15 feet of water over shallow areas.

When the water of late winter or spring climbs into the 40-degree range,



Black crappie

crappie begin to feed, gradually working their way into shallows as the waters warm. They feed aggressively from about 55 to 75 degrees. When spring water reaches from 62 to 65 degrees, they begin to bed and spawn similar to bluegills. Crappie bedding activity usually lasts from 10 to 16 days.

**Black crappie** nest closer to shore in shallower water than the white crappie and prefer areas with water weeds and small bushes. Both fish prefer to build their nests under or beside cover—a fallen tree, roots, or cypress stumps.

After spawning, crappie move into deeper, cooler water, especially around rocks, old trees, or aquatic vegetation growth. From then until fall, catching them on flies becomes a challenge. Either deep, slow-sinking retrieving or vertical jigging works in daytime. After dark crappie often move into shallow water to feed on minnows and surface insects.

When the water temperatures drop into the 50- to 60-degree range, crappie move back into shallow bays, coves, and creek channels and feed aggressively on minnows, insects, and small frogs. As winter and cold temperatures grip their stream and lake homes, they move to deep water and feed much less. Then fly fishing for them is difficult.

Black crappie are more aggressive arti-

ficial-lures strikers and fight harder. They also move farther to strike than whites do. Don't let me misguide you about crappie strikes. Except during bedding time, they are seldom more than very light bites. They are not hot-pursuit predators; they hide, using their camouflage and letting their food swim or crawl close, and then they suck in their prey.

So any fly should be fished very slowly and held in or near crappie hides as long as your patience can allow. A dropper fly fished off a floating hairbug or popper is also a way to detect such delicate takes.

**White crappie** prefer less clear, warmer streams and lakes than blacks. They hide and feed around boulders, stumps, logs, roots, sunken trees, docks, pilings, dams, and bridges.

Larger white crappie really prefer deep water and darkness. So fish deep for them or at night when they are not in a prespawn or bedding pattern. When you are crappie fishing after dark, be sure to listen for their surface-feeding activity. You can easily locate a school chasing minnows or eating surface insects. Explore any area where lights are near the water. The lights draw insects, shrimp, and minnows, and crappie to eat them. In daylight fish the shady banks and cover.

White crappie prefer light-colored flies, particularly white, yellow, chartreuse, and pale blue.

Crappie, especially whites, have large, tender membrane-and-cartilage mouths similar to shad. Most large crappie are lost because the hook tears out during the last seconds of fight at the surface or when they are lifted out of the water suspended by the leader. To prevent these losses, grasp their lower lip with your index finger and thumb or use a dip net.

When I'm fishing swimming or jigging flies through typical crappie cover, hanging up is always a problem. I use snagguard-equipped flies or at least the up-hook keel or bend-back designs. Minijigs swim hook up and do help you avoid snags. Many live-bait crappie fishers use the soft-wire Aberdeen-style hooks that bend and pull loose with lines as light as four pounds. You can tie flies on these soft hooks, too. Since crappie do not require hard hook sets and do not fight with the strength of other sunfish, the light-wire hooks seldom cause any loss of hooked crappie.

DAVE WHITLOCK lives in Norfolk, Arkansas. His books include *Dave Whitlock's Guide to Aquatic Trout Foods* and *The L. L. Bean Bass Flyfishing Handbook*.