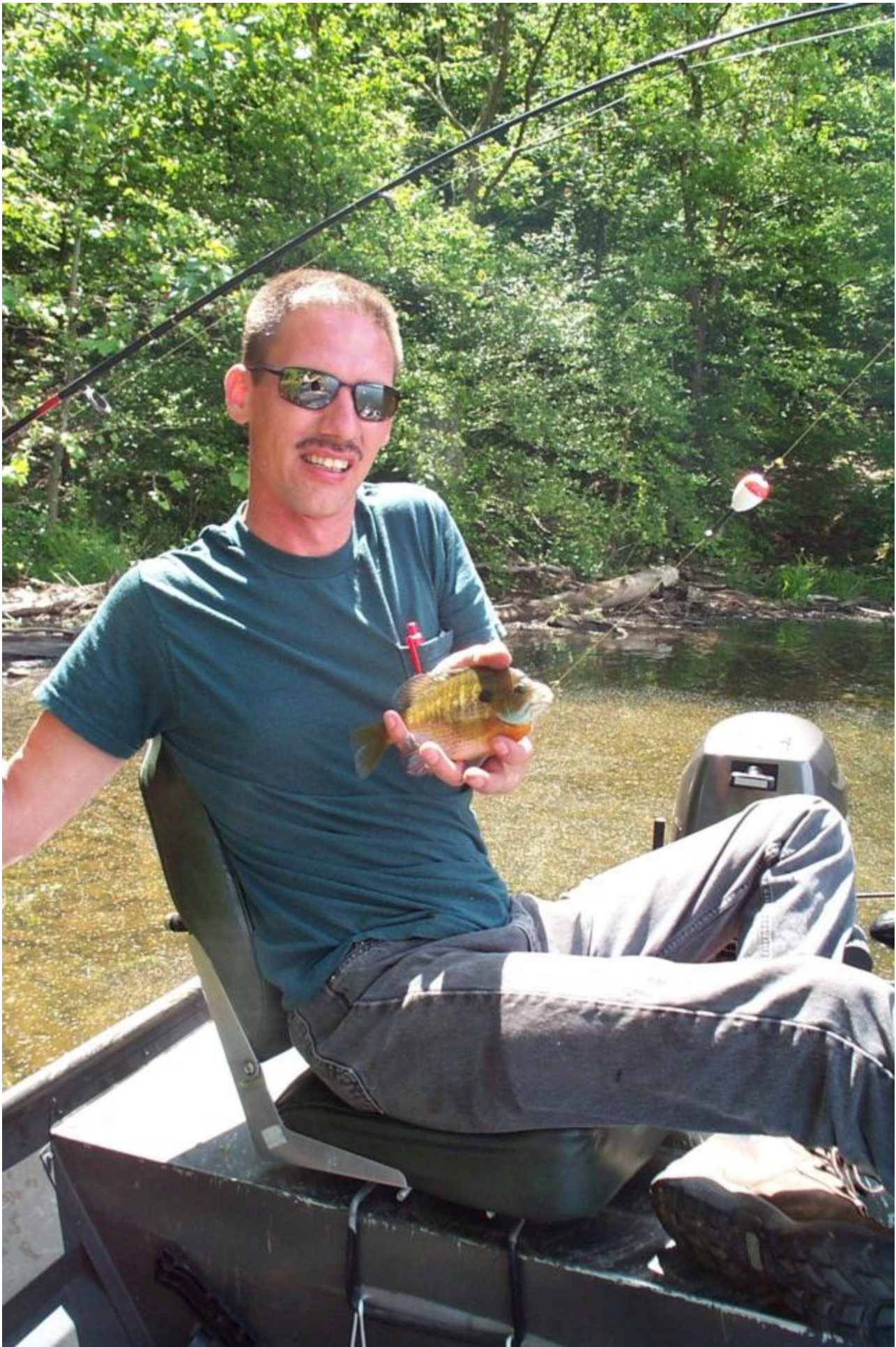


It's nearly time for panfish

by Lee Keck

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Each spring, it's the panfish bite that often rescues countless early season fishing trips.

While other popular species often suffer a severe case of lockjaw, these popular species are almost always hungry. Most days, they can be found looking for an easy meal in or near shallow water areas receiving the warming effects of the sun.

With the first official day of spring less than two weeks away, this early fishing action will soon be upon us.

It is a rare day indeed when a few of these fish cannot be enticed by a piece of worm or a tiny artificial lure. These ravenous panfish are almost always willing to help in your efforts to bring home enough tasty fillets to feed the entire family.

By local standards, a half pounder is considered a quality catch. Fish in the three-quarters-pound category are fairly common. Panfish weighing in excess of one pound will open the eyes of almost any fishing enthusiast.

Most panfish anglers prefer to concentrate their fishing efforts to the months during and following the spawn. During these times, panfish are caught quite easily and in large numbers.

But, pre-spawn panfish are no different. Using the right techniques, tackle and baits, it is fairly simple to boat a stringer full of quality fish.

Unlike other gamefish species, these little scrappers fighters seldom venture far from their spring and summer haunts. A brief understanding of their simple habits is the key to early season angling success.

To the delight of anglers, panfish tend to be a sociable lot. They are often found in groups of 20 or more fish. Depending upon the clarity and depth of a particular fishing hole, panfish are most often found in relatively shallow water.

During the spawn, they can be located near clusters of nests in one to six feet of water. In most areas, spawning activity peaks during late May or early June and continues to a lesser degree throughout the summer months. Though most panfish like bluegill prefer to nest on a harder bottom of gravel, they will also use one of mud, silt or sand.

When not nesting, panfish will usually be found in deeper water adjacent to or near the traditional nesting areas. During the morning and evening hours, they will often move

into the shallows to feed on insects, small fish or other aquatic organisms. Though the assortment of foods is less varied during the pre-spawn months, the same generally holds true.

Areas near boat docks or fallen trees are terrific midday spots to search for pre-spawn panfish. Shallow water areas, especially those containing aquatic vegetation, are best during the morning and evening hours.

Prior to the spawn, it is common to catch a variety of panfish species from the same area. Bluegill, redear, green sunfish and others will often be found sharing the same dinner table.

When choosing a bait, almost every panfish angler I know has their own individual preference. Some anglers like to keep things simple, using a small piece of a garden worm or nightcrawler. However, crickets, meal worms, wax worms and a small piece of shrimp are all equally effective panfish baits.

Many anglers also enjoy excellent success by tempting early season panfish to the hook with a variety of small artificial baits. Fly fishermen experience excellent results using a variety of flies in various colors. Just prior to the spawn, small poppers are particularly effective lures for panfish.

This time of year, the larger pre-spawn panfish tend to be found in slightly deeper water. Most anglers look for drop-offs and channel banks near spawning areas. Using a tiny jig to thoroughly search these areas is the preferred method for quickly locating fish.

Once pinpointed, it's time to get down to business using one or more types of live bait. Though pre-spawn panfish have voracious appetites, they can be rather finicky at times. This is why many anglers seldom limit themselves to only one type of live bait.

In many cases, fishermen find a particular bait to be productive one day only to return the next day and find the fish desiring something else. An angler might not be able to beg a bite using redworms when, only the day before, they had boated cooler full of pan-sized bluegill.

In many local states, early season panfish anglers must often deal with a variety of conditions including murky to muddy water. Since bluegill feed primarily by sight, a moving bait will sometimes yield better results under these conditions.

A trick used by many experienced panfish anglers fishing muddy water is to occasionally twitch the bait. The bit of action will sometimes attract feeding panfish to your offering.

There are those anglers who claim panfish angling is for kids. Perhaps this is partially true, but I know plenty of experienced fishermen who devote most of the year to panfish angling.

Sure, anyone can land a stringer of panfish when the conditions are favorable. The challenge comes during the off times when these temperamental critters become a bit more finicky about their next meal.

And as table fare, few fish species compare to the firm, flaky flesh found on panfish. A plate full of panfish fillets is considered a delicacy among most anglers.