

Just call them perch

Posted on May 08, Posted by [Webmaster](#) Category [John Sloan - Outdoors](#)

By JOHN L. SLOAN

They had many names when I was growing up. We called them specs, short for speckled perch. Bream perch and chinquapins and shell crackers were bluegill in some areas. The names just varied depending on what variety of perch we were catching. What I am referring to are fish we call crappie and bluegills here. Over most of the South, they are just referred to as perch.

Now you talk about fun to catch, mister, I mean to tell you they are. Dave Thornhill called me a few days ago and the talk reminded me of how much fun I use to have catching bluegill on Center Hill. The method I used was dissimilar to the way he catches bluegill.

Dave played lead guitar for Loretta Lynn for over 25-years. I met him when I was working for the rodeo end of the business. Now he is a Wilson County Deputy and fishes as much as he can. Maybe we can get together for a day or so this year.

Dave waits for the first new moon in May to go after bluegill on Center Hill. He heads way back in a creek I won't name until he hits shallow water with weeds sticking up. Then, he starts flipping a cricket on a bream hook, in tight on the weeds. Dave said he started one day, a couple years ago with 500 crickets and by mid-morning, the live well would not hold another bluegill. He caught some big ones, too. One measured 13-inches in length. That is a big bream perch.

My method on The Hill was quite different although I used the same bait. I would wait until the hot part of the summer and fish deep along the bluffs. I would place a 1/4-ounce, worm weight 18-inches above the hook, held in place by a small split shot. I would drop the bait straight down and between 20-30 feet; I would hit the big bream. Both Dave and I fished with 4-pound test line and usually, sometime during the day, we would catch a bass or catfish, too. Makes it fun. The major portion of the catch would be just good, hand-size, bluegill. That is standard for most Tennessee lakes.

In the last few years, I have done my bream fishing down in Alabama. Two-pound bluegill were not uncommon down there and most of the time, I used small artificial lures. It only takes three of those big, Alabama bream to make a meal. It was a spring ritual to go down, meet Uncle Lester there and fill the freezer. Jackie Taylor and family started doing the same thing.

As for crappie, Dave prefers Normandy Lake for the big ones. Just a few weeks ago, he had four in the two-pound range and a three-pounder for good measure. Again, he was using light line and fishing a 1/8-ounce jig with a white and chartreuse twister tail for bait.

I do most of my crappie fishing on Old Hickory with Jackie Taylor. We are using the same lure in various colors. The problem with Old Hickory is in catching fish that measure over the state 10-inch legal size. You have to catch 40 fish to get enough keepers for a good mess.

For along time, I was under the impression you had to use minnows, we called them shiners, to catch crappie. Lately, I haven't even thought of using them. However, one day on Kentucky Lake, we were fishing minnows down deep around the brush piles and caught a boatload of big crappie.

A few years ago, I got into the crappie down in Alabama and we filled a big cooler in less than three hours. Where we were fishing, there was no limit and I recall we cleaned fish for quite some time that afternoon.

It doesn't matter where you fish or what you are calling the fish you catch. Those perch can be a blast. They are great for teaching kids because when they are biting, they are so easy to catch. Plus, those big bream pull like a John Deere tractor. In many cases, a cane pole and a bucket of crickets or red worms are all you need.

Another tactic you might keep in mind is to watch for the willow flies to hatch and start gathering around shoreline bushes. Jimmy Holt catches big strings of bluegill casting a tiny, 1/32-ounce lure with a small brown grub around these spots. One way to do it is to place a small float above the grub and just cast in and jig it while you slowly retrieve.

My Uncle Lester Paul, who is not really my uncle, does that frequently. He places a slip cork above an artificial lure like a twister tail or a tube lure and floats it around the area, just slowly jigging it an inch or so. When the fish bite, he lets them pull the cork under before he sets the hook.

Anyway, now is the time to be fishing for the perch of any name. The next month or so is when you get to fill your freezer with superb eating fillets. In fact, I just may go tomorrow.

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