

► **It's always surprised me that** as the spawn season wraps, a lion-share of anglers forget about crappies and bluegills—at least anywhere panfish vacate shallow water in favor of deeper, less-conspicuous haunts. Deep water has undeniable appeal to the lake's largest specimens. Every time I've crossed paths with crappies in basins or bluegills on deeper flats and humps, they always are hefty, healthy animals, tails spilling well over the palms of our outstretched hands.

One year while guiding a group of podiatrists for walleyes on Gull Lake, Minnesota, we hit a mega school of

bigwater bluegills, all humpheads hovering along a patch of pondweed growing on a 22-foot rock spine. These were 8- to 10-inch 'gills more than happy to crush 4-inch crankbaits. The pattern lasted about two weeks each August for five or six years before the pondweed vanished along with the bluegills.

On at least a dozen occasions over the years, I've found crappies on deep boulders, large 'gills on 25-foot gravel humps, and both species patrolling the perimeters of isolated sunken Christmas trees and brushpiles on otherwise blank flats. You may hear about friends running across some of these same situations often enough that you realize deep water is where big panfish often go in summer.

It was about this same time last year when Jeff Wenger started sending me pictures of giant bluegills he was catching alongside Jesse Thalmann, a Central Minnesota guide.

Wenger, owner of Jeff's Jigs and Flies, produces two of my favorite panfish lures. His Panfish Leech jig employs a thin strip of squirrel fur, producing beautiful underwater undulation and is mostly a shallow-water lure. Effective shallow and deep, Wenger's Zoo Bug is visually spectacular and singular among panfish jigs—the only truly realistic zooplankton imitation I've seen. The Zoo Bug's versatility lies, in part, in its internal tungsten weight, allowing direct, precise presentations in 15 to 30 feet of water—and some of the most resplendent color patterns in the jig world.

In an email from late summer 2017, Wenger shared photos of a blimp-like bluegill weighing just a few ounces shy of 2 pounds, a beast that chomped a Zoo Bug presented over a flat 22 feet deep. In early September, he wrote again to relay more news of 'gills over 10 inches and some surpassing 11



Dig Deep for

& Summer Bluegills Crappies



inches and 1½ pounds.

Basin Bulls (and Hens)

Thalmann, it seemed, had been tapping a deep-water bluegill pattern for much of the summer, finding similar bites simultaneously on several of his favorite lakes. "Most of the waters I fish have high fertility and plenty of large shallow vegetation-covered flats, as well as ample basin water running 20 to 25 feet deep," Thalmann says. "Some of my better lakes are relatively small, which makes finding fish a little easier."

Further easing the work of detecting small pods of bluegills on expansive deep flats, he notes the species' proclivity toward short-distance travel. "Up until this pattern develops in late July or early August, I'm a weed-edge guy," he says. "I don't like to target spawning bluegills, so my main focus is on pre- and postspawn fish using deep edges of vegetation from June into July, and until most of the bigger fish start fading from these zones. The shallow-to-deep shift usually starts when plant growth has maxed out and water temps have peaked for the summer—upper 70s and low 80s in Minnesota."

"The other clue is a slowing bite for bigger fish along weedlines. That's when I start gradually moving out past the drop-off into the adjacent deeper water. These are often flats in the 20- to 25-foot range, shallow enough where light penetration allows for plant growth. In some lakes, the basin bite occurs in deeper 25- to 40-foot basins where vegetation gives way to mucky bottoms full of invertebrates. That's a slightly different deal, and one I also tend to avoid because deep fish aren't releasable, and I like to release all my bigger bluegills."

Thalmann and Wenger both note that because big bluegills don't often venture far from weededges into nearby basins, it's typically not necessary to canvass deep flats much farther than a few football fields removed from the primary edge. Often they're a mere two to four casts from the drop-off

areas they used earlier.

"First thing I do is use my electronics and slowly drive off the edge and into these adjacent flats," Thalmann says. "I look for anything that interrupts the bottom, particularly small patches of cabbage (pondweed). Any kind of little hump, hole, or other small point of interest gets a waypoint, too. When I say 'small' patch of veg, I'm talking no more than an 8- x 8-foot area. But these small patches are bluegill magnets. In deep water, the patches we fish don't grow much more than a few feet off the bottom, and the tallest stuff is best."

Basins in some lakes don't offer the right water clarity or bottom substrate to cultivate aquatic plants. As Thalmann observes, you can certainly catch fish roaming these types of featureless basins because the bottom is often rich with invertebrates. But a lot more downtime often occurs between bites here—either because you're trolling cranks or drifting live-bait rigs for small, roving pods of fish, or because you're driving around the basin, waiting to bomb a marked school of fish with a drop-shot rig, small spoon, or jig. Thalmann drops on any fish he marks, though he has confidence when he graphs vegetation, within which fish can be difficult to discern on sonar.



UNDERWATER PHOTO // ROGER PETERSON

BY **CORY SCHMIDT***

Zoo Bugging

"Jesse and I fish each cabbage patch no more than 10 to 15 minutes," Wenger says. "We usually have a predetermined milkrun of waypoints set up on our digital map, so we run through the route and then cycle back through, starting from point A, all over again. This is a day bite, too—no need to arrive at the crack of dawn or stay until dark."

"The biggest bluegills usually bite first on each sweet spot," Thalmann adds. "Their aggressive nature explains why anglers can quickly wipe lakes clean of trophy bluegills. I've had days when we've run across entire pods of 1-pound-plus bluegills. We almost always get them on the first drops with jigs. Their bites jolt the rod tip. Harvesting these fish could destroy a lake in a few days. I love catching and palming giant bluegills, but harvesting them can quickly transform a fishery into one that swarms with stunted fish. It's why I allow clients to take a limit of medium 'gills if they want, but everything 9 inches or more goes back."

Thalmann and Wenger believe that a Jeff's Jigs Horizontal Zoo Bug has produced more large, deep-water 'gills than any other presentation they've used. "We like to work straight beneath the boat with a single 5.5-mm tungsten Zoo Bug, which weighs approximately 1/18 ounce," Wenger says. "By itself, this jig thunks heavy on 4-pound mono and a light to ultralight 6½-foot spinning rod." Thalmann prefers a 6.5-footer by DH Custom Rods.

While they've caught fish with a plain, unadorned Zoo Bug (which offers its own built-in action), they prefer to bulk its profile,

» Innovative fly and jig tier Jeff Wenger hoists a big Zoo Bug bluegill.



tipping with half a nightcrawler, or a full 'crawler or large leech when the biggest female bluegills are nearby. Wenger notes that the biggest two to date measured 11¼ and 10½ inches, both females. "These big hens can weigh close to 2 pounds, while males in the same population weigh close to 1 to 1.2 pounds," he says. "We also get crappies and big bass. It can be quite a smorgasbord of species."

Thalman refers to the presentation as "pounding," working the jig with nearly constant, aggressive, short shakes and pops of the rod tip. "Drop the Zoo Bug to the bottom, reel up a turn or two, and start pounding the jig. "There are a lot of invertebrates in these areas, midge larvae in particular. So it's important to draw attention to your bait any way you can."

When he approaches a waypoint, he engages the trolling motor, using a slow constant speed to move over each spot, back and forth until he contacts a fish or two. When he catches one, he often hits Spot-Lock on his Minn Kota to hover in place.

Wenger adds that the posture of his Horizontal Zoo Bug and #8 sickle hook assures positive hookups on nearly every bite. Even with a whole 'crawler, big bluegills focus on the Zoo Bug head, planting the hook neatly into the top lip or corner of its mandible.

"In clear water, a copper or rainbow pattern Zoo Bug is exceptional," Wegner says. "Chartreuse and orange excel in the more fertile, green waters we fish." When fish bite a Zoo Bug, they seem to hold it longer than a standard lead jig, even without bait, because its exterior is composed of a malleable, clear epoxy overlaying the internal,

colored tungsten bead. Homemade eyeballs and Arctic fox "feelers" accentuate visual appeal and motion.

Thermocline Crappies

Perhaps not coincidentally, a thousand miles to the south, pro crappie angler Dan Dannenmueller can be found working late-summer crappies in similar depths. On his home waters along Alabama and Coosa river impoundments, Dannenmueller, co-owner of Crappie NOW magazine, says the key to locating summer crappies is to identify the depth of the thermocline, or where stratification creates an oxygen barrier to fish.

"In stratified lakes, even those with rivers running through, the anoxic line can occur 12 to 15 feet down," he says. "A common depth for summer crappies in the Midsouth is 18 to 20 feet. Eliminate all areas on your map deeper than the thermocline and you've vastly narrowed the search.

"Ledges along river channels hold a lot of fish. I especially like to find submerged islands near major river channels. Creek and river intersections are particularly attractive to shad and crappies, as are brushpiles or rocks that act as current breaks," he says. Tailrace areas below dams, upstream from the main body of reservoirs, offer the highest oxygen concentrations, particularly in summer during power generation. Active shad and crappies often gather there.

"In midsummer, our fish suspend around deep brushpiles, rocks, or little humps," Dannenmueller says. "Mornings and evenings, crappies can rise as high as 12 to 15 feet, chasing schools of shad. At sunset, I look for crappies on the east (shady) sides of the channel ledges and go to the opposite, west-side ledges closer to sundown. During midday, crappies often linger down in 18 to 20 feet. Inactive fish seem to hold up against ledges, while

those chasing shad schools can be well off bottom and away from the edge."

Dannenmueller, an ace crankbait troller, pulls up to eight crankbaits, such as Bandit 100, 200, and 300 series, behind eight Off Shore Tackle planer boards. He prefers Off Shore's OR38 Awesome Crappie Mini Planer, often with a size 1 (1 ounce) Tadpole Weight a few feet above the crankbait to add depth. He consults Precision Trolling performance dive tables and mobile app (precisiontrollingdata.com) to match crankbait, line length, and speed to depth. He notes the importance of keeping lures a foot or less above—but never below—the depth of crappies.

For a mainline, he spools 10-pound-test Gamma Panfish Copolymer, an abrasion-resistant yellow line for monitoring crankbait performance. He chooses 2-foot and longer leaders of 6- or 8-pound test "ultraclear" Gamma Copolymer, depending on the presence of snags and heavy cover. He places each B'n'M Poles Silver Cat rod and Abu Garcia line-counter baitcast reel in a Driftmaster rod holder, moving along at 1.1 to 1.2 mph, just enough to keep the lures wobbling.

One effective presentation for slow trolling is to run what Dannenmueller calls a double rig. He runs a 36- to 42-inch drop leader off a Thundermist T-Turn 3-Way Swivel to a Bandit crankbait, and a second 24-inch leader bringing up the rear of the rig, tethered to a 1/4-ounce Road Runner and Bobby Garland Stroll'R.

When selecting lure colors, he goes old-school, using a Color-C-Lector, still available through Spike-It. Because Bandit crankbaits are offered in such an array of colors, he feels the Color-C-Lector helps distill choices based on the most visible hues at specific depths.

"This is also a fantastic pattern on Grenada Lake from late summer to early fall," he suggests, "with crappies often using deep water at creek mouths, around stumpfields, and bends in the channel." When crappies get tough, he slows down and



» Professional crappie angler Dan Dannenmueller keys on thermoclines to locate late summer crappies.

spider-rigs with the same 1/4-ounce Road Runners and Garland Stroll'Rs. For the toughest fish pinned tight to ledges or cover, he stops the boat and hovers in place, allowing the jig to tantalize crappies with slight movements of the Road Runner blade and Stroll'R tail.

"Sonar can be key for putting baits in front of specific fish," he says. "It's possible to mark every fish I catch on sonar. But we always prefer to find fish in bigger groups, which encourages competitive feeding."

Strikingly similar to Thalmann's natural-lake bluegills, Dannemueller's Midsouth crappie pattern fizzles right around the arrival of the first or second major autumn cold front. From there, panfish often move deeper still. Or shallower. Often both, depending on the waterbody's diversity. Either way, it's the end of summer vacation. Kids and teachers are



bumped. And panfish go back to school, all over again. ☒

*In-Fisherman Field Editor Cory Schmidt is a panfish aficionado and contributor to all In-Fisherman publications.

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