

Deadfalls and Bluegills

More large bluegills are caught in and near deadfalls than any other type of structure. Weed beds, stump patches, docks, riprap, points, humps, and depressions can serve as temporary refuge during weather changes or become home bases for as long as a season. All of these areas deserve the angler's attention, but as aficionados of big bluegills plan for the upcoming season the structure that should command their attention by one structure deadfalls.

By definition deadfalls are any bankside trees or woody brush that has toppled into the water. If the branches of the deadfall extend from the shallows into relatively deep water, it will become the year around home for big bluegills. The importance of the close proximity of deep water that provides security and safety cannot be overstated. Without this adjacent retreat, the deadfall may hold big feeding bluegills early or late in the day, but otherwise harbor only young, small specimens. Locating prime deadfalls enables fly fishers to consistently target large bluegills in every season of the year under all weather conditions.



One factor that makes deadfalls attractive to bluegills is the multiple branches that form a canopy of protection from overhead predation and sunlight penetration. In time the branches become covered with moss and other plant life, which attract microorganisms that in turn attract insect larvae, nymphs, and minnows. Large bluegills can avail themselves of the veritable smorgasbord of easy meals. Sawyer's Pheasant Tail and Hare's Ear Nymphs are productive in this environment, but small streamer patterns can entice the larger fish. Simple marabou patterns tied with bead heads of various sizes and weight can be the ticket.

As temperatures change and light penetration varies, big bluegills adjust their positions along the main trunk and the extended branches of the deadfall. In general, bluegills' movements will be progressively shallower during warmwater periods when sunlight penetration is reduced. Extended days of overcast skies and warm water temperatures will cause the bluegills to move into the shallows of the deadfall and fan out laterally along the branches. Conversely, as sunlight begins to illuminate the shallows, the fish will move deeper and into shaded areas nearer the trunk and large limbs of the tree. Falling water temperatures at the surface will move bluegills progressively deeper within the deadfall's branches in search of warmer water.

As the pond or lake water begins to warm in the spring, sexually active males move to shallower water along the stem of the deadfall and eventually to shallow flats immediately adjacent to the deadfall in search of suitable spawning sites. When water temperatures and the length of daylight hours coincide to formulate spawning conditions, the females join them along the shoreline in both directions from the deadfall.

From pre-spawn through the males' ritual of guarding the fry, the fishing is easy. Anything retrieved in close proximity to the spawning beds is smashed with reckless abandon. This is the time for floating lines, 7-1/2- to 9-foot leaders tapered to 5X tippet and flies in sizes 8 and 10. Bluegills are aggressive and territorial at this time, and poppers can provide exciting surface action. Wet patterns are equally effective. Tandem fly rigs that feature either a popper and a dropper (a popper and a wet pattern fished 12 to 18 inches below) or a dual cast of wet flies can increase your chances of success and help you select the most productive flies. Double hookups are common during the spawn and offer some of the season's most exiting action. Two 8-inch-plus bluegills, each twisting and diving to escape, are guaranteed to produce a memorable fight.

Summer is a time of abundance for the residents of the deadfall as their lives assume a more laidback pace. Weather conditions determine the bluegills' location in the deadfall. As water temperatures rise and sunlight penetration increases the fish are inclined to move deeper to seek the comfort of shaded areas. Generally, they will migrate into shallower positions during periods of low light to feed. Rising water temperatures speed the metabolisms of bluegills and consequently the need for frequent meals is relatively high. A falling barometer also prompts the residents of the deadfall to feast in advance of a storm. Long periods of low light, such as several days of overcast skies, enable bluegills to take up shallow feeding stations and forage along the outer branches of the submerged tree. These shallow water fishing opportunities can be matched with floating lines and surface flies or with unweighted wet patterns that are allowed to fall slowly among branches located near the surface. Bluegills become very selective during the summer period as to both size and color. Sizes 8 and 10 will get most of the action until the "dog days" of late summer when dropping down a hook size improves the fly's effectiveness. Our rule of thumb for color selection depends on the visibility under different lighting conditions. Clear water and bright sun require lighter, more reflective colors while dark or fluorescent colors are better suited to murky water and overcast skies. Despite such general guidelines for color selection it's best to change flies frequently during periods when the action is slow to let the bluegills tell you what they want.



Eventually, summer's intense sunlight penetration and very warm water temperatures will drive bluegills into deeper water, often close to the main trunk of the tree. While they may not be as readily caught as they were in spring, that doesn't mean fly anglers will be unrewarded. Moderately weighted flies capable of dropping deeper into the deadfall will attract the most hits. Rubber hackle legs that wiggle seductively on the vertical drop acquired first-string status in our fly boxes for this situation long ago. Counting down the offering will allow the fly to sink to the desired depth before action is imparted and will also avoid constant hang-ups once the configuration of the deadfall is understood. Precise casts and careful manipulation are important to pinpoint tightly holding fish. Bluegills won't move far for their food in deeper lies and anglers must watch their lines intently to detect subtle hits.

If the fish locate beyond 5 feet deep, sink-tip line is helpful to get the flies to the fish. On large lakes, full-sinking line solves the problem of presenting flies deeper than 8 feet. While deep-water fishing is not as fast as the frenzied activity of the spawn, it is tremendously satisfying to catch a number of platter-sized bluegills when they are located in difficult positions.

Autumn's cooler water temperatures and shorter periods of daylight cause bluegills to build reserves for winter. They will spend increasingly longer periods in shallow positions aggressively feeding. Instead of concentrating on the low light, early and late periods of the day, fishing is more productive closer to midday. Unweighted wet flies and streamers are effective once again when they are fished among the shallow branches of the deadfall and along the nearby bank where spawning took place several months ago. Cooler water becomes clear, and lighter-colored flies become consistent fish foolers.

In many places ice cover eliminates much of the winter season, but bluegills can be caught where open water is available. Spring-fed ponds and lakes can provide consistent action, while more frigid waters must be plied with very slowly worked flies. Winter bluegills frequently occupy the extreme depths where the deadfall's branch tips reach the bottom of the impoundment. One exception occurs on the warmest days of winter when bluegills, seeking a bit of warmth from the sun, suspend near the surface over deep water. Weightless, light-colored flies in white or silver produce best on these more active fish, while dark patterns serve best in the inky depths. To achieve success in cold water, it's imperative that flies be retrieved very slowly.

Well-positioned deadfalls not only provide for the needs of large bluegills in every season of the year, but as the pond or lake's most appealing cover they are magnets for the water's oldest and largest bluegill specimens. By locating deadfalls with branches that extend into deep water in ponds and lakes you fish most often, you can target big bluegills in all seasons of the year.

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