

FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE POND

Out where the deadfall tree trunk drops away into deeper water and the multi-branched secondary limbs reach depths of eight feet or more lie the biggest bluegill in the pond. Long past is the frenzy of the spawn when they were easy prey even for novice anglers. In this sea-son, when grass crackles under foot and oppressive humidity blankets the landscape, big bluegill become the most selective and most challenging of the warm water species.

On a 96-degree day last August, we made cast after cast, with sink-tip lines, weighted flies, and fine tippets that were counted down into the umber depths. No dice. Finally, as the sweltering sun touched the horizon, an imperceptible pause in the fly line invoked the automatic response of a quick hook set. After an intense fight filled with quick, darting movements and threatening lunges toward his snag-infested home, a darkly colored bluegill was quickly measured (ten and three-quarters inches), admired, and released. There wasn't another angler in sight and probably none in the entire coun-ty to share in the season's most interesting fishing.

While most anglers turn to other pursuits, you can continue to catch big bluegill. You must be will-ing to make a few tackle refinements, however, adjust your location a bit, and modify your presenta-tion slightly, to take these big bluegills with regularity.

Here are some tips to help you catch more and larger post-spawn bluegill:
FISH THE SHADE

We may call them sunfish, but only the younger, smaller fish spend time in the sunlit shallows. Big bluegills will remain shallow only if adequate shade-producing cover is available. Overhanging brush, a dock, or even the small, shaded side of a stump will hold big fish while just a few inches away, your offering will go unseen. These conditions place a premium on short, but very accurate casts.

LOOK FOR DEEPER WATER ADJACENT TO THE SPAWNING AREA

Many bigger bluegills migrate to deep water after the spawn. Of course, "deep" is a relative term. In our experience, this usually means water from three-to eight-feet deep, but very clear water could force them deeper or into dense vegetation. If your lake or pond has a first break line adjacent to the shallow flats, it would be an excellent place to look for large summer bluegill.

WOOD STRUCTURE HOLDS THE MOST AND BEST FISH

This doesn't mean that weed lines, moss, rocks and other structure won't hold good fish, but wood is consistently better than all the rest. A deadfall with multiple branches extending into deeper water is a sure thing. Fish it carefully and confidently.

SIZE IS RELATIVE

If you had your best luck with size eight during the spring spawn, try dropping back to size 10 during the summer. If you fished size ten's early, go to size twelve's. Sometimes even smaller flies are required, but this is rarely so. Occasionally, when fishing is tough, a larger fly will catch the few active fish when smaller won't budge them. This may reflect the fish's sense of "expended energy." In other words, it's getting more nutrition with one chase than it might in five or six smaller morsels. Keep in mind that even the largest bluegill has a very small mouth. Size six is about the maximum practical hook size.

USE SINK-TIP OR FULL SINKING LINES

Counting down a leader on a floating fly line in eight feet of water can be exasperating, but your fly will get down to the fish fairly quickly with a sink-tip line. The new weighted leaders are a nice alternative, and can be attached to your fly line easily and quickly with looped ends. Be sure, however, to shorten your leader or tippet. A long leader will bow toward the surface, so you may not be fishing at the depth you intended.

COUNT DOWN

While your count rate may be different from the next angler, fish contact at seven (or any other number) means you have located the fish. Counting to that number on other retrieves and in other areas likely will produce good results. After imparting action to your fly, count it down again so that your offering will return to the fish zone.

RETRIEVE S-L-O-W-L-Y

A hand-twist retrieve is most productive in this situation, but it's not your only option. A short, but quick strip followed by a long pause can be lethal. Big bluegill enthusiast, Walt Holman of Huntsville, Alabama, describes his retrieve as "do nothing, then do just a little bit." It's good advice. Watch your line carefully for any indication of a strike.

TRY HOT PINK

While it may offend the purist who subscribes to natural hues, those willing to learn from the experience of catching fish will rapidly be won over to this outrageous color. The advantage of hot pink, or any of the fluorescent colors, is increased visibility in deeper water and shady areas. The color selectivity of bluegills may relate directly to visibility. As light conditions change, the colors that are most effective will change, too. Far too many anglers fall in love with a particular color. This is self-limiting. Be adaptable, experiment with different colors, and give the fish the color they want (or can see best).

FISH THE RIGHT TIMES

Just as with bass, early morning and late evening are the best times to fly fish for bluegill during the summer. These not only are the most pleasant times to be out, but insect activity is highest. A good hatch and low light conditions will bring big bluegill shallow.

Applying these principles on the "dog day" trip last August enabled us to catch twenty-four fish of eight inches or more in the last hour and a half before complete darkness as we fished opposite sides of the same deadfall.

Utilizing these tips will enable you to catch more and larger bluegill this summer. You may never apologize for catching "just bluegill" again. You will come to know that catching them in their summer location is challenging and rewarding, that your knowledge and skill will rival that of anglers who fish for any other species. A word of caution: If you want your water to consistently yield big bluegill, release the bigger fish. That doesn't mean you can't take some for the skillet, but they should be six inches in length or smaller. We must realize that for bluegill to grow to nine or ten inches takes time. Let's practice catch and release with this marvelous sport fish, too, and encourage others to do the same.

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