

Things To Try

Story and Photos By Darl Black

that have proven to be effective for countless panfishermen.

Make A Plan

Panfish behave in many respects like their larger game fish cousins. Each species has preferred habitat and food requirements, although some species' preferences may be more similar than those of other species.

"Finding panfish requires a plan," says Tennessee guide Jim Duckworth. "It's no different than if you were going bass fishing. You've got to have a plan that starts before you ever reach the lake."

In his seminars, Duckworth tells anglers the first step to fishing an unfamiliar lake is to start with a good topographic map.

"A pre-fishing map session is as important for a successful panfish outing as it is for bass," notes Duckworth. "Based on the type of impoundment, I'll look for key areas on a map to explore when on the water. For example, I know on lowland-type reservoirs such as Kentucky Lake during the summer that bluegills and shellcracker prefer some type of wood cover in deep water. My best summertime spots for these species are stump fields in about 20 feet of water, so I want a map that will show me the cut-off stump fields."

However, on highland reservoirs like Center Hill, Duckworth knows that big bluegills will be on rock bluffs with sporadic wood cover and as deep as 50 feet.

"For this type of reservoir, I look at the contour lines that indicate bluff areas, especially where an old creek channel swings close," he says. "Other good spots to check are the riprap face of a dam and bridge pilings."

When his initial homework is done, Duckworth heads to the lake to cruise the selected areas while studying his



Summer is here. It's the season for fun in the sun. One of those fun things to do is spend more time fishing. Whether it's the entire family or just you and a buddy headed out to the lake, the crucial factor in this fun fishing equation is catching something.

While bass or walleye may garner angling headlines in different regions, it's that eclectic collection of species referred to as panfish that are the real bread and butter of everyday anglers from all corners of the country.

When anglers say panfish, they usually mean the species is pan-sized, good

for eating and plentiful. While there's not a definitive list, in most parts of the country the term panfish covers all of the sunfish clan plus yellow perch and white bass. From among the dozen or so sunfish species, the big three are bluegills, which are found in every state; redear, which are mainly in Southern regions; and pumpkinseed, which reside in Northern areas.

Keep in mind that summer panfish will have changed locations since spring, when they flooded the shallow-water spawning sites. When searching for them in reservoirs and natural lakes, consider the following methods

When Fish Aren't Biting

depthfinder. If marks appear indicating fish, he will drop several buoys to delineate the area. Only then does he begin fishing.

"The Humminbird 900 Color unit is absolutely superb at showing bottom, cover, baitfish and fish in different colors," explains Duckworth. "This new color unit has taken the guesswork out of trying to identify bottom structure from fish lying close to the bottom or larger fish mixed in with baitfish. Of course, it will not tell you whether the fish marks are bluegill, shellcracker or even small bass. That is something you have to find out by dropping a lure to them. But color units are going to make fishing time for the average angler a lot more productive."

Keep It Simple

According to Duckworth, the simple approach is best when it comes to bluegill and shellcracker.

"For depths to about 20 feet or so, I fish crickets under a slip-bobber," he says. "My rig consists of a No. 2 Blood Red Tru-Turn bait hook, a large split shot, a Thill slip-bobber and 4-pound Trilene XL line."

If you have problems managing 4-pound monofilament on an open-face spinning reel, Duckworth recommends a closed-face model.

"I got turned onto the redesigned Johnson Century this past year," he notes. "They took care of the major complaints with the reel, such as drag and pick-up pin, and now it is absolutely awesome for 4-pound test. I match this reel with an inexpensive fiberglass/graphite composite rod for the perfect brim rod."

To set the depth of the slip-cork, Duckworth refers back to the depthfinder. He wants the cricket to hang about 1 foot above the tops of the stumps or brushpiles.

"I don't care much for commercial bobber stops, so I take a piece of thin rubber band, tie it to the main line with

a couple of half hitches and trim the ends," he explains.

When it comes to targeting vertical-type structures where depths will exceed 25 feet, Duckworth removes the float and simply tight-lines the cricket.

"I position the boat parallel to the structure, make a long cast, engage the reel and maintain a semi-tight line as the bait sweeps slowly across the face of the structure," he says. "Bites are likely to occur on the fall, but if the bait finally settles straight down without a fish picking it up, then I begin an ultra-slow retrieve. I turn the reel handle one revolution, pause for several seconds and turn it another revolution."

Yankee-Doodle Panfish

Farther north, multi-species guide Bob Hornstrom fishes for panfish on both man-made impoundments and natural lakes. However, the majority of natural lakes do not have accurate underwater maps available.

"My summertime plan is to use my depthfinder to locate structural elements similar to where I've caught pan-

fish in the past," explains Hornstrom. "Even if I can't actually identify fish marks but see what appears to be baitfish activity, I'll fish it. I'm not saying that I don't have confidence in electronics, but I've had experiences where the electronics didn't show fish but I still caught them. I go with my gut feeling and 40 years of experience."

Hornstrom's experience also tells him where to start looking on natural lakes.

"Most anglers head to the shallow weedbeds for bluegills and pumpkinseed, even in summer," Hornstrom says. "Sure, they will encounter smaller-sized panfish there because weedbeds are nursery water. But it's summer, and the respectable panfish are deeper."

Hornstrom typically starts at the outside edge of weedbeds, usually around 12 feet, and works deeper, following the flats out to a major drop-off and watching for rockpiles or sunken debris that may attract a school. He might also head right to a mid-lake hump that has a rocky outcropping.

"Whereas sunfish relate to some type of cover or a ledge similar to their large-



A summertime search for bluegill and redear on lowland reservoirs should begin by checking stump fields in approximately 20 feet of water.

mouth cousins, yellow perch will likely be on an open flat, either smack on the bottom or hovering just above it,” Hornstrom notes. “The best clue to locating perch schools is finding the heaviest concentration of baitfish schools. I’ll search for panfish as deep as the thermocline, but not deeper.”

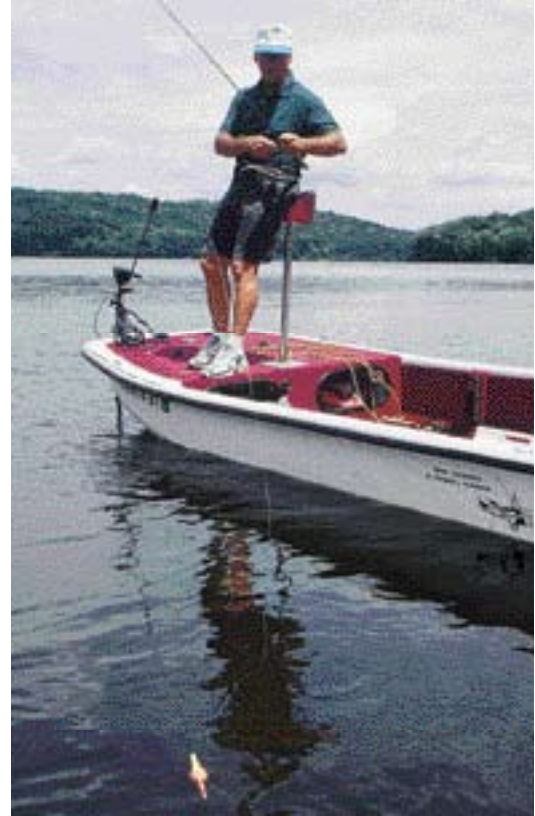
The thermocline, which is a temperature barrier that forms during summer, keeps deep water from mixing with water nearer the surface. It is generally visible as a band of interference on a depthfinder. Not only is water below the thermocline likely too cold for warm-water panfish, but the dissolved oxygen down there gradually disappears over time, making it uninhabitable by fish until the fall turnover.

Hornstrom says the summer thermocline on natural lakes in western Pennsylvania and western New York sets up somewhere around 30 feet by midsummer. On reservoirs with minimal water-retention rates, oxygen depletion in deeper water is not a concern, since the water continually moves through the system.

Spoon Exciter

When exploring an area for panfish, Hornstrom fishes rather quickly, looking for those first few bites to tell him something. During an initial pass through an area, he uses a lure presentation that allows him to keep moving.

“I’m a big fan of small jigging spoons as practical fish finders in deep water, which to me is water deeper than about



Guide Jim Duckworth favors a slip-bobber rig baited with a cricket for bluegill or redear.

15 feet,” he explains. “Using a ¼-ounce Kastmaster or Hopkins spoon, I’ll draw reaction strikes from crappie, white bass, yellow perch and sunfish. I may or may not catch a bunch of fish with the spoon, but at least I get the strikes from the most aggressive ones. So when a couple members of the school swipe the spoon, I can switch to another presentation once I know what’s down there.”

To prepare a spoon for panfish, Hornstrom first removes the stock hook and



Bridge pillars often offer a shortcut to finding summer panfish. Make long casts and allow your bait to sweep across the face of the pillar.

Finding White Bass

Catching white bass can generate a lot of excitement for anglers. These smaller cousins to the striper are full of energy. Anglers are likely to target them early in spring when they make a spawning run up a feeder river to a reservoir, but come summer, the white bass location is a mystery to many fishermen.

“On reservoirs, white bass roam open water following the schools of young shad or other baitfish,” notes veteran guide Jim Duckworth. “They particularly like to feed in areas of current, either wind-generated current on mid-lake humps and shoals or flow-through current such as necked-down areas near causeway bridges.”

Usually the best way to locate a school of white bass is to troll a compact-sized crankbait that runs between 10 and 15 feet.

“I use a Bandit 200 because it isn’t too big of a mouthful for white bass and its trolling depth on 8-pound test line puts it in the range of open-water white bass,” Duckworth says. “However, when I find white bass by trolling, I’ll stop and cast to them with a countdown lure such as the Jimmy D tailspinner. Catching whites by casting is much more fun than trolling.”

Bob Hornstrom is the present holder of the Pennsylvania record white bass. He has spent a lot of time fishing for white bass in recent years because they are such great fighters when hooked.



“When they surface on a baitfish school, you can catch them on about anything you throw,” Hornstrom says. “But when white bass sound, that’s the real challenge.”

The best areas to search for white bass often are extended points or tapering flats that drop into the main river channel or the deepest basin of a lake. Saddles between mid-lake humps are good bets, too.

“I catch a lot on spoons, especially if the fish are off the bottom,” Hornstrom adds. “But sometimes the fish are so shut down that the spoon doesn’t bring a strike. Under this really tough bite situation, using a 3- to 4-inch live shiner in place of a soft plastic on a Carolina rig has proven

most effective for me. I make the leader about 2 feet long and use a No. 4 live-bait hook and a sinker. Under power of the trolling motor, I move up and down the likely structure while dragging the rig.”

— Darl Black

replaces it with a thinner-wire round-bend size No. 6 treble. Then he adds a swivel to the split ring on the front of the jigging spoon. He fishes the spoon with a 6-foot fast-tip medium-light spinning rod and 6- or 8-pound Original Clear

Blue Stren.

“I use heavier line because I’m just as likely to hook a smallmouth bass, walleye or even muskie,” Hornstrom adds.

Hornstrom free-lines the spoon to the bottom, engages the reel and takes up slack line so the tip of the rod is within 8 or 10 inches of the surface. Then he snaps the rod tip upward 12 to 18 inches and lowers it back to the starting position at the same speed as the falling spoon. He continues snapping the rod tip, pausing long enough to ensure the spoon settles back to the bottom.

After popping the spoon off the bottom for some distance, Hornstrom reels in 2 or 3 feet of line. He then snaps the spoon and allows it to fall back to a tight-line position above the bottom.

“Because panfish sometimes hover above the bottom a couple of feet rather than hugging it, I alternate every so often between the bottom-bumping pop and the off-the-bottom pop,” he explains.

Should Hornstrom observe baitfish

and suspected panfish suspended at mid-depths, he reels the spoon in, drops it back over the side, counts it down to that level and begins snapping it.

Drifting The Flats

Both Duckworth and Hornstrom realize that some anglers look for a more laid-back approach to finding and catching summer panfish.

“Some fishermen don’t really know how to read their depthfinder to find fish largely because lower-end units present problems in separating targets,” notes Duckworth. “They use the depthfinder to tell depth changes and little else. They need to have an approach that does not depend on intense depthfinder use.”

Some anglers don’t like constantly working a lure to locate fish. “Maybe these are guys who go fishing simply to get away and relax,” says Hornstrom. “Or maybe they have several youngsters in the boat and don’t want the kids casting lures. But that doesn’t mean they don’t want to catch some panfish to take home.”

Hornstrom’s advice for the casual angler is to stay away from clear-water lakes and impoundments, as well as res-



When fishing small jigging spoons, replace poor-quality hooks with an ultra-sharp round-bend treble and add a swivel on the front of the split ring to reduce line twist.


ervoirs with extremely steep sides.

“The easiest lakes to catch panfish in are nutrient-rich flatland-type impoundments with somewhat dingy water,” he says. “A good portion of the lake’s panfish population will likely position on flats adjacent to secondary or primary creek channels in water depths less than 25 feet. If there are stumps or brushpiles on the flats, so much the better.”

To locate and catch fish, anglers simply need to drift over the flats while trailing jigs or live-bait rigs. An excellent drift is one that ends up criss-crossing the channel several times, because panfish may suspend over the channel. While the school may not be feeding, some of them will still grab a small jig as it streaks by.

Hornstrom suggests a double-jig rig with two jigheads of slightly different weight and two different-colored curly-tailed grubs. The combined weight of the jigs must be heavy enough to keep them within 2 or 3 feet of the bottom during a drift.

If a breeze is pushing the boat over the flat too quickly, put out a drift sock. If the lake is calm, use your electric motor to slowly troll the flats.

“Some anglers will be content to make repeated drifts all day long,” notes Hornstrom. “Others will take note of the depth and location where fish are caught, and anchor the boat for a more thorough casting or slip-bobber presentation. As long as you are catching fish, there is no right or wrong approach.” 

Manufacturers Mentioned

Acme (Kastmaster Spoon)

(401) 331-6437
www.acmetackle.com

Bandit Lures

(662) 563-8450
www.banditlures.com

Hopkins

(757) 855-2500
www.hopkinslures.com

Humminbird

(334) 687-6613
www.humminbird.com

Lindy-Little Joe (Thill)

(218) 829-1714
www.lindylittlejoe.com

Pure Fishing

(Johnson Reels, Stren, Trilene)

(712) 336-1520
www.purefishing.com

**TTI – Blakemore Fishing Group
(Tru-Turn Hooks)**

(334) 567-2011
www.truturnhooks.com