

Riversins

Reminiscences of a lifelong angler teach new lessons

By Nate Matthews

I was seven when I discovered the battered smelt dipping net. It was sitting in a dark corner of my dad's tool shed, the steel mesh of its basket rusting and covered with dust.

It worked best in the river. I would hold it by the baskets open to the current and face backwards—gripping its circular frame. Shuffling my feet kicked detritus up the water column, and I would sweep the gaping meshwork upstream through the clouding sediment like a baleen mouth.

By digging deep, dragging the metal edge through the waterweeds, across and under the ancient logs rotting new shapes in the sand, I could lift dripping loads of river bottom into the sunshine and spread them across the dock for sorting.

Everything in those loads was black, or wet and mud covered. I focused on movement. At each glistening twitch I would dig with a twig until its cause appeared, some small life twisting from the muck like a mud-borne fetus.

Each motion was different. The small fish moved in fading spasms as they suffocated. Insects struggled, confused by the new gravity of the air. Worms and leeches curled and twisted, searching blindly for bits of wood and leaf to hide beneath. Everything was frightened and pulling away from the sun.

Only the crayfish lifted their claws in defiance. Hard shelled, intimidating, demanding respect, they scuttled backwards to drop off the dock's edge if you didn't have the courage to stop and pick them up for examination.

One snipped me once, as I grasped it poorly behind the thorax. Its blue claws hurt. A living fossil torn from the pre-rock riverbed, dragged into the light unwilling, and poked by a curious finger.

Our Michigan house rose from that riverbank. Across the sandy shallows a small forest of flooded saw grass and sapling had formed inside a meander. It was perfect amphibian habitat, and frogs—leopard frogs, green frogs, bull frogs, wood frogs and spring peepers—stared, ate and mated in its sun-striped shadows. I stalked them there.

My mom called me the bog-stomper. I must have looked immensely frightening to those small creatures, some strange seven-year-old giant with long limbs and quick hands—the young of a predatory primate playing in the water.

Stalking frogs is an art. You have to look

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for their eyes as they peek periscopically from cover. Approach from the blind spot, from the rear. Step slow, move slower, never look away or they will vanish.

If you grab a frog around the hips, curling your fingers in front of the kicking legs and below the yellowed belly, even its slippery skin can't save it.

My tenth spring, in New York now, while chasing fish in the shallow, weeded bay of the lake across the street, I got a hook stuck deep in my hand. It was a big hook, mean looking, one of nine on the lure I was using. It hurt, digging deep into the meat under my thumbprint. The point grated against my bone.

It hurt worse when the female largemouth bleeding on the rest of those hooks jerked with righteous vengeance. Twelve inches of green-scaled muscle and bright red gill flopped unstopably on the grass while I struggled to hold her still, crimson from my thumb dripping across her distended white belly. Between paroxysms of fury her flat, round eyes stared into mine, grimly flashing retaliation.

I deserved that pain—how many fish have I caught, to not know what the tug of a hook feels like. And fishing in the spring, during the spawn? It took seven needles of Novocaine to numb my thumb at the hospital, but earlier, as I tried to separate us from that steel embrace, eggs had dribbled from her gravid belly.

The other day I walked out onto MSU's Agriculture Hall fire escape, looking for a place to sit and reminisce in the warm weather during my lunch break.

There was a fly out there, large and iridescent; resting on a metal railing in the heat of the sun. Not many people go to that place, and I startled it. Buzzing, it circled my head for a while, angrily protesting the invasion of its territory. I sat down and forgot it.

A few minutes later, sitting on the steps and blankly staring, some premonition made me look up. Inches away, on a piece of strut work, that angry fly stared at me, demanding recognition. It buzzed at my face, star-

ting me, then flew off.

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The old bass was large. She lived in the one-acre pond behind our house in Spencer, and had been there a long time. I was 13 when we moved to that house, and it took me two years to kill her.

I started the chase with a fly rod, but she showed no interest in feathered deceits. When worms didn't work I tried spoons, then stick-baits, then plastic frogs, jigs.

The pond was small; the smallmouth's only cover was the deep water. I saw her every time she came to the surface to feed on the real frogs and insects inhabiting its reeded edges. Every movement in the water drew her attention. Only my imitations drew her snubs, and my frustration built.

I took to catching her progeny, stunted six-inch bass that had overpopulated the pond, then impaling them for bait. She ate them, too big a meal to pass up, but ripped them off the hook where I couldn't see her. I never even pricked her; she was untouchable, a ghost fish.

It was a crayfish that finally finished her off. It was big, and angry when I picked it up, but I knew now how things were done. Its big claws strained backwards, reaching for revenge, but my hook pierced the joint between its thorax and tail.

There was bright sun that day, and white beams shafted toward the bottom, illuminating curtains of sediment suspended in the water. A pendulum cast, and the crayfish settled through them, fading, legs and tail fins splayed apart to slow its descent.

She materialized then, directly beneath that falling fossil. A mottled golden mouth, formed from shadow and gaping with anticipation. As she inhaled, gulping water, the hook sank deep into her gullet, and I had her.