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Outdoor places & outdoor people in the Prairie State

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

It's a mild Sunday afternoon at Washington County Conservation Area and the Vandergriff boys can agree on one thing: Red wigglers are not the worm of choice. Nightcrawlers, 8 year-old Dylan Vandergriff insists from across the pier, will catch fish. Artificial lures recently have been abandoned as useless.

"Lures don't catch fish," Dylan announces flatly. Perhaps it's a taunt. Nearby, the older Vandergriff, Gordon, 12, is dipping a lure into the waters of Washington County Lake, determined to catch another fish—and more than one fish has been caught already, according to family witnesses gathered on this wide pier.

But the lure isn't working, and the desire to demonstrate newly caught fish moves Gordon to quietly shift strategy: He discreetly threads a nightcrawler onto a hook. His back is turned to his competitor.

The secrecy doesn't last. The baited hook is revealed, and younger Dylan is now challenged by an opportunity for bravery. Dylan's hook has no bait. But he prefers not to touch worms himself.

Yet there is a camera present. The worms and the camera loom before him. Finally, as if touching toxic waste, Dylan lifts a nightcrawler from the container.

Mission accomplished, a rite of passage is completed. With sudden bravado, he begins to hop around the pier, like a boxer just entering the ring. It can be a heroic act, this touching of live bait. It requires bravery. But then, unexpectedly, the lifting of the nightcrawler turns ordinary as 8 month-old Trinity reaches out from her mother's arm toward the container of red wigglers. Cyndi Shaw is holding her baby and consents to the curiosity.

Immediately, Trinity picks up a red wigglers and offers it to Gordon, who's already baited his hook. Then, quite suddenly—fish on! A bluegill pops to the surface. The Vandergriff boys remain convinced on this mild Sunday afternoon that, if one really wants to catch fish, nightcrawlers are the bait of choice.