The Crayfish Collectors

These "miniature lobsters" of freshwater lakes and streams are a snappy way to experience natural food.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

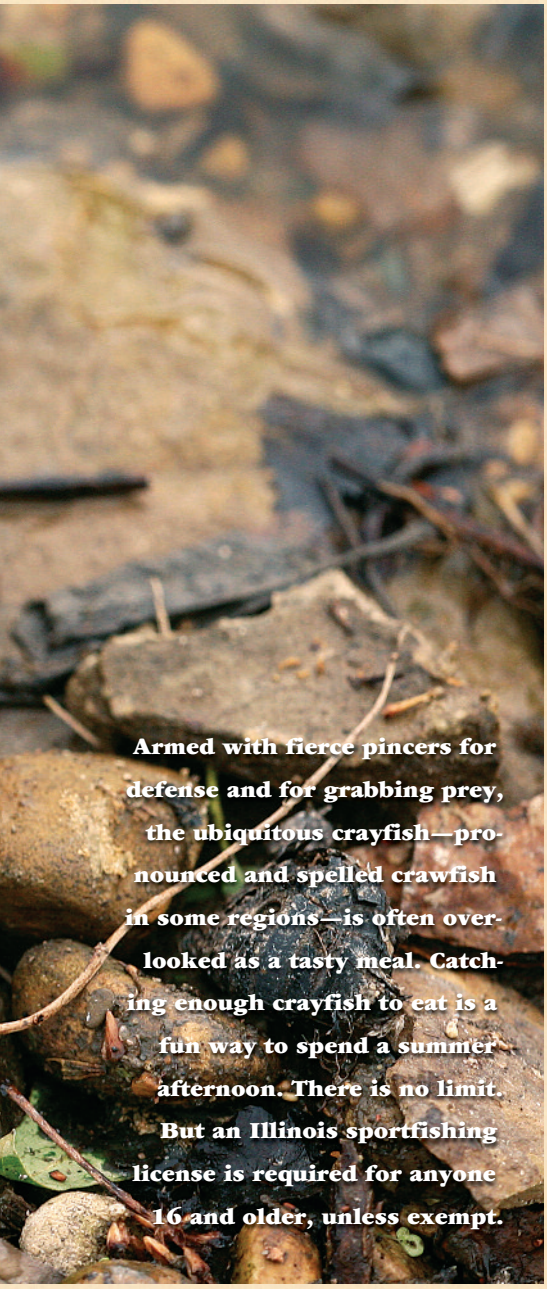
Blake Gerard is one of just a few Illinois farmers planting rice in his fields. It's a "southern" crop he's cultivated for several years now in this level-flat, Mississippi River floodplain near East Cape Girardeau. Rice grows well enough in this fertile, levee-filled habitat along Illinois' lower Mississippi, a place where the state of Mississippi is actually closer than the city of Chicago. Gerard sells much of what he grows as seed for other rice farmers in rice-belt places like northern Arkansas.

The trouble is, like every other farmer, Gerard has to deal with certain pests in his fields—freeloading wildlife scavengers bent on eating up profits. It's an ages-old agricultural battle.

But not all scavengers that show up in these shallow-water rice fields are unwelcome pests. In fact, one opportunistic arrival—armies of tunnel-building crayfish, with their fat, meaty tails—are being encouraged as a second crop. And he's even stocking extras now to boost yields. Rice is nice. But crayfish are incredible.

"I love eating crawfish," this fifth-generation farmer explains as he trudges through watery mud to retrieve one of his homemade crayfish traps. They're pronounced "crawfish" in this southern region, he points out, and ever since Gerard decided to give rice-farming a try, he's had plenty of crayfish to eat. He shares them with friends and scores of locals eager to get a fresh taste of this Cajun staple.

Dual-cropping rice with crayfish is common practice farther south along the Mississippi. (It's easy to see why these basic ingredients for certain Cajun dishes came together.) Once the crayfish showed up in his fields, Gerard decided to take them seriously. He's built about 1,000 basket-type traps, and he sets one trap every 20 paces or so



Armed with fierce pincers for defense and for grabbing prey, the ubiquitous crayfish—pronounced and spelled crawfish in some regions—is often overlooked as a tasty meal. Catching enough crayfish to eat is a fun way to spend a summer afternoon. There is no limit. But an Illinois sportfishing license is required for anyone 16 and older, unless exempt.

(Photo By Adele Hodde.)

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among the dozens of acres of rice fields beginning in late May. He even encourages higher yields by stocking adult crayfish in his rice fields each July and harvests offspring the following May.

He points out rice farmers south of here have been doing this dual-cropping trick for ages, so Gerard didn't invent the technique. In fact, the crayfish industry is so well-established, there are trade products available that folks elsewhere might not realize exist.

"I bait my traps with crawfish bait," Gerard says matter-of-factly. "Yes, there is such a thing."

Of course, this rice farmer isn't alone in his appreciation for these miniature lobsters. Elsewhere, others in aquaculture-related fields are taking full advantage of the windfall bonanza that appears when rearing ponds are drained. A little farther north, at Logan Hollow Fish Farm in Murphysboro, employees scramble to fill 5-gallon buckets with tasty crayfish during certain fish harvests—it's a perk of employment.

"It's kind of hit or miss," explains Logan Hollow owner Pete Reiff, who said some ponds produce loads of crayfish during spring harvests while others do not. Although he doesn't sell the crayfish to the public, the crayfish "harvest" can be huge, and Logan Hollow employees always keep an eye open for these private culinary benefits.

"In the years you really want to get a bunch, you don't find many," Reiff added. "But in years when you're not trying to find crayfish you're tripping over them."

For back-to-nature chefs interested in acquiring Prairie State crayfish for a meal, the source of these shrimp-like tails can be as close as a backyard pond or creek.

A Cajun staple: Restaurants in America's Gulf region serve spicy, boiled "crawfish" as commonly as deep-dish pizza is served in Chicago.

Illinois crayfish farmer Blake Gerard hauls in one of his baited traps at the end of the 2007 season. Gerard began raising these edible crustaceans as an alternate "crop" in his Mississippi River floodplain rice fields.

Know that not all crayfish are created equal, says James Fetzner, an Illinois native and crayfish specialist who earned his doctorate studying these pincher-wielding crustaceans. The familiar "volcanoes" of mud that appear in damp soils—sometimes in front yards—are created by species of crayfish that are scarcely worth collecting for food.

"The ones people see building those mud towers out in fields tend to have pretty small tails," Fetzner explained. "If you want to collect crayfish to eat, you're better off collecting in shallow, rocky streams. And bring a net. While I was doing my research (at Southern Illinois University), I had my best success making collections in rocky streams."

Another method of crayfish-catching is one especially favored by kids since all that is required is a chunk of bait (such as a fish carcass), a few feet of string and a bit of patience. The ravenous and greedy crayfish hiding among rocks along shorelines will grab the bait and cling tenaciously to it, even as the string and bait are lifted gently from the water. Most crayfish won't let go of the bait until they've been lifted well out of the water—and over a bucket.

So many locals begged for a fresh supply of "crawfish," Gerard expanded his farming operation.

Crayfish recipes from Cajun etouffee to boiled-in-the-shell crayfish abound online. Most chefs recommend storing the crayfish alive in cold water for a couple of days to allow them to purge themselves. It makes for a cleaner-tasting crayfish.

All that one needs to legally collect crayfish in Illinois is a sportfishing license for anyone 16 or older, and to observe local site regulations. Although crayfish are not included on advisory lists for sportfish consumption in Illinois, crayfish do have the ability to accumulate mercury, PCBs and other known toxins in contaminated bodies of water. A simple and appropriate approach when deciding whether or not to eat crayfish from any body of water is to review the health advisories for Illinois lakes and rivers (listed in the 2008 Illinois Fishing Information guide or online at www.dnr.state.il.us/fish/digest. Health officials suggest that avoiding crayfish from bodies of water where sportfish are known to contain high levels of any toxin would be a safe, common-sense approach to good eating.