Sunfish on the Fly

Fly fishing for big bluegill nets "beautiful vibrations."

Story and Photos
By Ron Kruger

The abundant panfish species loosely lumped under the heading of "bluegill" probably provide more budding fly fishermen with their first feel of a vibrating long rod. Many go on to cast for trout, salmon and salt water species, but some of us never grow up, even after we're considered "experts."

I'm that way, and so is my old friend Terry Wilson, a retired school teacher from Meridosa. "Beautiful vibrations" is what he calls the feel of bluegill on a fly rod.

Because of its unique presentation qualities during the retrieve, fly fishing is one of the best ways to catch big bluegill and redear sunfish.

Bluegill, indeed, are the perfect fish for a beginning fly caster. They're eager and they don't demand accurate deliveries or delicate presentations. Most any fly or small popper will get you into the game with as much fishing action as you can find anywhere.

Though experienced in many kinds of fly fishing, Illinois' own Terry Wilson retains a passion for bluegill.

You can successfully fly fish for bluegill before you are able to cast very well and before you really know much about the sport. But, like with most any other type of fishing, you can take it to more advanced levels. Those of us who have stuck with them through advancing years and experience have concentrated our efforts toward catching the biggest bluegill.

The Illinois record for bluegill is a 3-pound, 8-ounce beauty caught in a farm pond in Jasper County way back in 1987. Even though redear sunfish generally grow much larger than bluegill, the biggest redear ever recorded in Lincoln Land was a 2-pound, 12.3-ounce

Fly fishing for bluegill is a pastime that satisfies both the beginner and the experienced alike.

fish taken in 1985 in Marion Country Club Lake, in Williamson Country.

Either is up for grabs, but the redear record could—should—be broken. A fly fisherman has as much chance of breaking either of these records as a worm or cricket angler, because sunfish not only provide the perfect target for a beginner, a fly rod is the most effective tool I've found for catching the big ones.

The best general advice I can give for catching more, and bigger, panfish is to get down.

Everyone thinks of some sort of surface offering when fly casting to bluegill, but I learned decades ago that I could catch more—and much bigger—bluegill with something that sinks. This is true for all sunfish, but especially for redears.

Some claim you can't catch redear with a fly rod, but I suspect they've never really scratched the surface on this subject—literally. Redear are notorious bottom feeders, but they move shallow to spawn and feed, and at that time they are just as susceptible to a fly as any bluegill.

Because redears seldom rise to the surface, some fly fishermen think they are hard to catch. If you'll let a weighted fly sink to them, they'll take it without hesitation and bore straight away with bullish intent.

All manner of weighted nymphs and wet flies will work for redear, and you can use just about any color you want—as long as it is black.

I think black works best for all panfish species, but especially for redear, because their main diet is small snails and other mollusks, and all these shells are dark gray to black. I've found weighted black fur ants, tied on #12 or #14 wet fly hooks, equally attractive to both bluegill and redear. They also eat small fish and some insects, so black isn't the only color that will work. But, since they make the majority of their living feasting on black creatures, offering them the color they're most accustomed to eating improves your chances.

Years ago, Alabama anglers, who have a passion for redear, dubbed them "shell crackers" because of the rather unique set of molars on their pharyngeal arches (throat) and muscles that are strong enough to crack the shells of small snails. Alabama's state record redear, by the way, is 4 pounds, 4 ounces, and the world record is an unimaginable 5 pounds, 7.5 ounces, caught in South Carolina.

Most any fly rod outfit is good for starters, but a matched five- or six-weight outfit with a double-taper, high-visibility floating fly line is ideal. Clean the line often as a little fly-line dressing keeps it floating well, necessary as the line is your strike indicator when fishing sinking flies. (Various "strike indicators" are made that attach to the end of a fly line but these make casting more difficult. Learn to watch the end of your fly line instead.)

The leader should be between 6 and 9 feet long, depending upon how deep

Retired teacher Terry Wilson feels the "beautiful vibrations" when landing sunfish on a fly rod.

Bluegill flies can be quite simple, such as the black deer hair dry at top and Terry Wilson's own Bully's Bluegill fly at bottom.

you expect the redear to hang out. As a general rule, use a leader that is twice the depth you plan to fish.

After casting, allow the fly time to sink. I use a countdown method based upon how fast the fly sinks and how deep I want it to get before imparting any retrieve. As it sinks, pay close attention to the end of the fly line, because sunfish often snatch it on the fall.

Once the fly reaches your intended depth, retrieve the line slowly and steadily with a hand-twist retrieve or short (6-inch) strips of the line.

The key is to retrieve slowly. Fly fishing is so effective for panfish not because of the way the line is delivered, or because of any "match-the-hatch" aspect, but because of its unique presentation qualities during the retrieve. Once you begin a retrieve, weighted flies quit sinking, even on the slowest retrieve, and the slower you can go the more time it spends in the strike zone.

One final piece of advice: Don't spend too much time in one place, especially when casting to spawning panfish. The unavoidable commotion of catching a few from one spot alerts other fish that something is wrong. The commotion ruins the spawning mood like a mother-in-law knocking at the door.

If you sit there and wait long enough, as some anglers do, the bluegill will settle down and start biting again. But this can take anywhere from 30 minutes to a couple of hours. Fly anglers are more likely to move to another spawning area to find more willing quarry. Those who catch the most know three or four spawning sites, and will rotate through them, casting to active fish almost all the time. By the time they circle back to the first one, the fish are rested and ready again.

Bluegill are found in nearly every type of water, and fly fishing is one of the best ways to catch them.

Fly fishing for bluegill is the perfect sport for beginners and experts alike, because those "beautiful vibrations" never fade.

For some of us, they just get bigger.