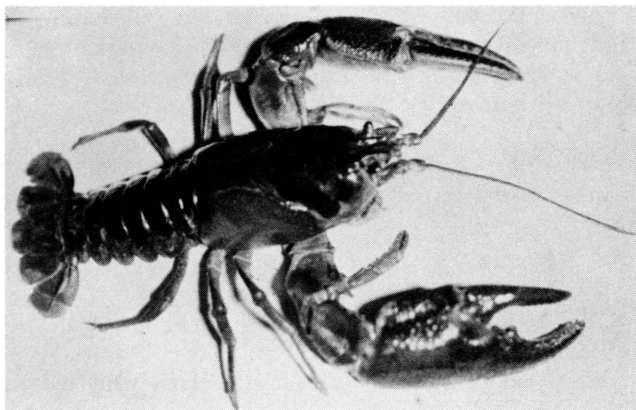


Catching and Cooking Crayfish

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As a family participation sport we personally put crayfishing near the top of the list. However, from the standpoint of utilization by Oregon and Washington sportsmen, it still ranks near the bottom.

Why this general lack of interest by sportsmen? Probably simply because most persons have not tried crayfishing—deterred, perhaps, by not knowing proper methods of catching or preparation.

Crayfish are found in most northwest streams and in many lakes. Large crayfish will run from 4 to 5 inches in body length and often have claws from 2½ to 3 inches long. Certain areas, however, consistently produce larger crayfish. The largest we have seen came from Tenmile and Siltcoos lakes on the Oregon coast, and were fully as large as some of the smaller spiny lobsters caught in California. Some streams produce crayfish with very large, heavy claws, while crayfish from other areas characteristically have long but very slender pincers. Even a relatively small crayfish has a fair-sized chunk of meat in its tail.

Although the season on crayfish is legally open the year round, the best period for indulging in this sport corresponds roughly to the open season on trout. Crayfish activity seems to depend largely upon water temperature. Thus crayfishing success may be good in smaller lowland streams as early as May, while in larger, colder water perhaps not until June.

Crayfish are most active during the late afternoon—and this (unless you are using traps) is usually the best time to pursue them, or to check on numbers in a new stream. At this time the crayfish move out of their hiding places and begin active foraging along the stream bottom.

One of the first questions usually asked by the neophyte is “Can a crayfish pinch?” The answer is an emphatic “Yes!”, but you’ll recover. In catching a few thousand bare-handed, and never being too careful, we have been pinched many times and still have all our fingers. A large crayfish may cause a somewhat painful bruise but will seldom break the skin—unless you attempt to jerk your hand free. Instead of jerking (the natural thing to do), lower the crayfish to the ground or stream bottom and relax. Usually within seconds he will release his grip. Since for some people this takes a bit of doing, an alternate method is to break off the claw quickly, and disengage your finger at leisure. To handle crayfish properly, grasp the body behind the claws. If further insurance is needed, wear a pair of heavy leather gloves.

How to Catch Crayfish

Since crayfish are taken in a number of ways, only the methods believed to be the most efficient will be described—including the one we believe the most sporting and the most fun.

For real summer sport, pick a relatively small, clear stream with a good crayfish population and go after them with trout landing nets (or if you want to be really sporting, use your bare hands!). For this type of endeavor, armpit waders have one advantage over hip boots—they hold more water when you fall in! In warm weather, shoes and shorts or bathing suits are appropriate. Felt-bottom wading shoes or caulks give the most secure footing. One advantage of this type of fishing is that only the large specimens need be netted.

If crayfish are not showing, it may be necessary to tip over the rocks under which they are hiding. Placing of *fresh* fish or meat baits along the bottom of the



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stream will entice the crayfish out of hiding and cause them to concentrate around the baited area.

For those who are only interested in eating, are allergic to water, or are just plain lazy—crayfishing with nets or commercial-type crayfish traps is recommended. This, obviously, is the only practical method of fishing muddy streams or deep water.

The commercial-type trap is very effective. It consists of a hardware cloth cylinder with funnel openings at each end, and a door in the middle to facilitate baiting and removal of crayfish. A rope with a float at the end completes the setup. While dimensions are probably not important, a trap 7 inches in diameter by 30 inches in length is both handy to carry and effective in use. In operation, crayfish crawl up the funnel, go through the opening, and drop into the baited trap. Nesting type, commercial minnow traps may be used if funnel openings are enlarged about 2½ inches in diameter to allow entry of the larger crayfish.

Any fresh meat or fish bait is effective in luring crayfish; they are attracted by odor. Baits that send out a good odor trail—such as oily fish—are particularly effective. Tea caddies filled with canned cat food have proven very effective for baiting traps. Traps are usually left out for at least 24 hours.

The use of open top nets is less common. They are similar to crab rings (simply a round hoop net attached to a rope for pulling). Let the baited ring lie flat on the bottom and pull up at intervals—frequency depending on numbers of crayfish coming to the bait. Rings 30 to 40 inches in diameter with ¼-inch mesh will work well. Sort the catch immediately upon pulling the net or trap, and return undersized crayfish to the stream as soon as possible.

How to Cook Crayfish

So you've caught your crayfish—now what?

First you kill them. We simply fill our laundry tray with hot water and dump in the crayfish, killing them almost instantly.

How crayfish are prepared for cooking depends on whether you belong to the "cook 'em whole—eat everything but the shell" school—or "the tail and claws are all" group. In the former, after the tail and claws are gone, the head end of the body shell is broken off, the back end is placed in the mouth and the contents "inhaled." While we admit that a couple of dozen large,

whole crayfish in a big serving tray, flanked with cracked ice, looks pretty—we cook only the claws and tails.

Regardless of how you cook them, first remove the intestinal tract from the tail by twisting the middle flipper and pulling. Before cooking, crack the claws and cut the tails with scissors along the top from end to end. Press on the bottom of the shell and the tail meat pops right up—all in one piece. We happily blunted our nails and scarred our fingers for years attempting to get at the meat before discovering the scissors trick.

There are almost as many recipes for cooking crayfish as there are cooks. Here are our "standard" ways:

Spiced Crayfish

Kill in hot water. Clean crayfish by removing the intestinal tract—by twisting off middle tail flipper and pulling. Cook whole or break off claws and tail as desired.

5 dozen crayfish	1 tsp nutmeg
8 oz. salt	2 tsp. allspice
1 med. onion, diced	½ tsp. Cayenne
3 tbsp. Worcestershire	½ cup Burgundy wine—or
3 bay leaves	substitute juice of two
1 clove garlic, diced	lemons
1 tsp. whole cloves	

Put spices in a bag or tie in cheesecloth. Add water to cover and bring to boil. Add crayfish. Bring to boil again and time for 3 to 5 minutes. Do not overcook. Take crayfish out and spray or dunk in cold water for 2 minutes (this is important to stop the cooking process and prevent meat from sticking to shell). Chill before serving.

Simmered Crayfish

Cook only the claws and tails in shell. Simmer cleaned crayfish in water (just enough to cover), butter or margarine, and salt and pepper for 5 minutes. Best eaten hot.

Deep Fat Fried Tails

Cut cleaned tails end to end (on top) with scissors. Remove meat. Mix batter with ½ cup carbonated water or beer, white of 2 eggs, and enough flour to thicken; beat until fluffy; bring deep fat to 400 degrees. Dip tails in batter and drop into fryer. Take out when browned. Serve with favorite sauce—such as mixtures of catsup and horseradish—well laced with tabasco.