

Keeping it wild:



Outdoor food and forays

PANFISH PLEASURES

John Motoviloff

There's something about the word panfish that sets anglers at ease. You don't have to make 10,000 casts, sneak along dense-wooded streams or crowd below dams, flotilla-style, in ugly March weather to catch them.

No, panfish have a Norman Rockwell sense about them. They are green willow evenings tossing a worm and bobber into the quarry. They are Plum Lake Memorial Day with your buddy Brad working the lily pads off Field's Island. They are a dancing wine cork suspended above a minnow just before it's yanked into the weeds.

And they are skillet sizzling, potatoes frying, beer flowing. In short, panfish are fun fish.

Year-round bite

Part of the fun of panfishing is that you can catch them year-round. As readers open this issue of *Wisconsin Natural Resources*, panfish will be in their summer suspended mode. Troll or drift around deep-water weeds, trying various depths, until you locate fish.

Fall finds panfish seeking shallow water as they bulk up for cold weather. In winter, they may be found anywhere there are weeds — deep or shallow. Perhaps the easiest time to panfish is during the spring spawn, when sunfish and crappie seek out sand and gravel flats. During these times, they can be sight-fished with bait or flies.

Just what are panfish? For regulatory purposes in Wisconsin, they are sunfish (bluegill, pumpkinseeds, etc.), black and white crappie, and yellow perch. The statewide bag limit is 25 total per day and 50 in possession, with no minimum size. Check the "Guide to Wisconsin Hook and Line Fishing Regulations" for special-reg-

ulation waters in the county you're fishing. Panfish season runs year-round.

Rock bass, yellow bass, white bass and bullhead — all commonly caught while panfishing — have no bag limit, minimum size or closed season. These species do not count toward your panfish bag.

Spin or fly?

Panfish anglers fall into two camps — spinfishers and fly fishers. Spinfishers use small hooks or jigs either beneath a float or with a small sinker. Wax worms and spikes work for all three species. Red worms will catch sunfish and perch, while minnows are the preferred bait for big crappie and perch. Two- or 4-pound test on an ultralight rod are best for spinning gear. Fly anglers typically fish a 4-weight rod and offer nymphs or dry flies, depending on where in the water column fish are feeding.

As the name "panfish" implies, these tasty morsels are usually targeted for food. Keeping them fresh is job No. 1. The best bet is to store your catch in a cooler with plenty of loose ice — more ice means quicker cooling. Livewells work when the water is cool. However, they need to be drained and rinsed when traveling between waters to help prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species.

Clean your catch

Filleting is the neatest and easiest way to clean your catch. Begin with a sharp, flexible knife. Place fish flat on a cutting board and make a shallow cut behind the gills from the top of the fish to just below the pectoral fin. Run the knife parallel to the backbone, continuing to just above the tail. The knife blade will "click" as it touches the bones; this is fine as long as you don't cut into the bones. Leave the fillet attached and repeat on the other side. Remove both fillets.

The skin can be discarded by placing fillets flesh-side up on the cutting

board. Insert the knife where skin meets flesh and keep cutting until all skin is removed. If you prefer your panfish skin-on, scale fish thoroughly before filleting. The remaining carcass (with entrails removed) can be used to make stock or chowder.

Panfish cookery is pleasantly simple. Dry fillets on a paper towel, then dredge them in your breading of choice. I use a seasoned mix of half flour and half cornmeal, but Panko, standard breadcrumbs, soda cracker crumbs and even crushed corn flakes all have their followings. Keep the number of fillets in the pan to a minimum — three or four to a 10-inch skillet — and the oil sizzling hot.

If you aren't craving a batch of fresh bluegill, it might be time to rethink your priorities. 🍷

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WISCONSIN FRIED PANFISH

1 pound panfish fillets

½ cup white flour and ½ cup cornmeal, seasoned with one tablespoon Old Bay (or use breading mix of choice)

1 cup peanut oil

Baking sheet

Paper grocery bag for draining

Homemade tartar sauce (1 cup mayonnaise mixed with a quarter cup chopped pickles)

Lemon wedges

Dredge fillets in breading mix, shaking off excess, and place on a plate.

Preheat oven to 250 degrees; put baking sheet in oven.

Heat oil ¼ inch deep in skillet until just smoking. Add three or four fillets and cook until crisp on one side, then turn.

Drain cooked fillets on paper grocery bag and place them on baking sheet in oven to keep warm. Repeat until all fillets are cooked, adding oil to pan as necessary.

Serve with homemade tartar sauce, skillet potatoes, coleslaw and lemon wedges.