

THE OUTDOORS PAGE

White crappie, black crappie, bluegill, and other sunfish can be caught almost anywhere, anytime.

By STEVE POLLICK and JEFF BASTING

Panfish are everyone's fish, no-pressure fish, a lazy May or June afternoon's fishing kind of fish, fish that deservedly belong in a frypan.

A collective term, panfish refers generally to such species as black crappie and white crappie, and bluegill and related sunfish. A fresh-caught mess of any of them can produce a mouth-watering meal.

Panfish are easy to catch — as unsophisticated as a cane pole, a bobber, a hook, and a minnow or a worm. Hard-core panfishermen also may use various ultralight spinning tackle or flyrod gear. Avid crappie-men use a stacked "crappie rig," one hook stacked above the other with each tipped with a minnow.

Crappie — pronounced "croppie" — have such a following that their fans form clubs, compete in tournaments, hold contests galore. They are a school fish, especially when they have moved inshore to congregate and spawn, typically in May and into June.

The trick to finding them is to keep moving until you find where they are holding on a given day. Often you start fishing shallow, from just one to five feet deep, but veterans will keep going even as deep as 10 to 15 feet if no schools are located up high. Crappie like brushy underwater structure.

Minnnows are the most reliable way to put crappie in a cooler. But some anglers also use a small jig with a minnow or they cast small spinners in chrome or white, or tiny spinnerbaits with a plastic tail.

Two species of crappie, black and white, can be found in northern Ohio, though white crappie tend to tolerate a wider variety of water, including silty or turbid water. Black crappie like clearer waters.

White crappie have 5 to 10 vertical bands on their sides and backs and black crappie have dusky or dark blotches, with deeper bodies. White crappie, moreover, have just five or six spines on their dorsal fins and black crappie have seven or eight.

Crappie are not huge, averaging

8 to 12 inches, but larger "slabsides" are not uncommon. The state record white crappie is 3.9 pounds, 18.5 inches long. The record black crappie is 4.5 pounds, 18.12 inches.

Do not get too enthusiastic when setting the hook on a crappie, or you'll soon understand one of their nicknames: "papermouth."

Bluegill are farmpound kings, providing year-round action. But they also are found in many waters large and small, lake and stream, and they are on their muscle during late spring and early summer spawning time.

Flyrod anglers use imitation ants and crickets to good effect. But these slab-sided panfish respond as well to mini-spinnerbaits, small jigs with plastic grubtails, and small spinners and the like, all fished on ultralight spinning tackle.

Too, a small hook baited with live waxworms or crickets, or even redworms, is the old standby. Along with a hook, add a piece of split shot and a small slip bobber to the line, adjusting the depth to where the fish are suspending. You'll be ready to go.

The term "bluegill" has been used generically to describe what actually is a whole sunfish family of similarly shaped cousins.

These include the green sunfish, hybrid sunfish, longear sunfish, redear sunfish, pumpkinseed, orange-spotted sunfish, and warmouth sunfish. Identities can be confusing at times, especially when crossbreeding or hybridization is taken into account.

The family indeed includes a true bluegill, which has a classically small mouth and a long pectoral or belly fin. A bluegill's coloration will vary with its food supply and the chemistry of its home waters. But its earflap always is black and a true bluegill will have a black spot or blotch near the end of the top or dorsal fin.

Most bluegill are 6 to 10 inches long, though the Ohio record is a 12.75-inch bluegill, taken in 1990 at Salt Fork Reservoir in southeast Ohio. It weighed — get this — 3.28 pounds.

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White and Black Crappie

White crappie are similar in appearance to black crappie. They have 5 to 10 vertical bars rather than randomly scattered spots like the black crappie. The dorsal fin starts further back than on the black crappie. It is more elongated than on the black crappie. The white crappie has 5 to 6 dorsal spines compared to 7 to 8 on the black crappie. White crappie are typically 9 to 12 inches but may reach up to 18 inches long. They usually weigh 1 pound but may weigh up to 3 pounds. Black crappie are typically 5 to 12 inches but can reach 18 inches. They also average 1 to 3 pounds.

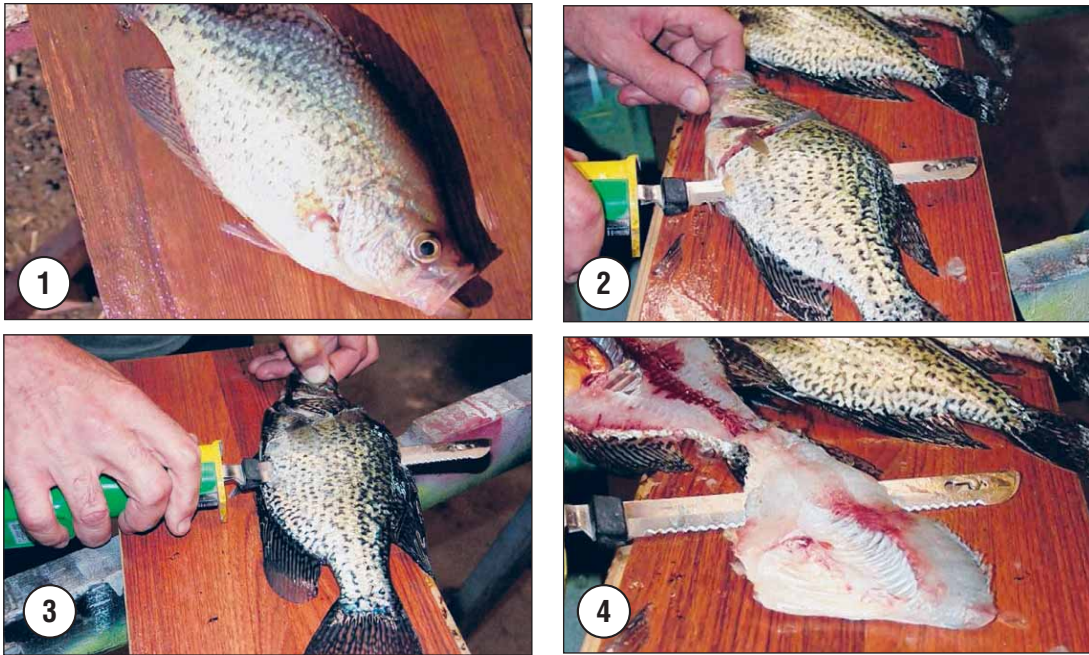


SOURCE: OHIO DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
PHOTOS COURTESY OF ODNR

Bluegill

Bluegill have 5 to 9 dark bars running vertically on their sides. They are a dark green in overall appearance. The opercle (ear flap) is always black. Bluegill sunfish often have a black spot near the back of the soft dorsal fin and anal fins. They have blue along the lower edge of their jaw and rear bottom edge of their gill covers. They do not have wavy blue lines on the cheek like pumpkin seed. Their belly is white in young, yellow in females, and orange or red in breeding males. They are 6 to 10 inches, but may reach 12 inches. They average less than a pound but as high as 2 pounds.

Filleting Crappie



PHOTOS BY MIKE MAINHART

1. Rinse the fish and lay it on a cleaning plank.
2. With a filleting knife, cut straight down behind the gill to, but not through, the backbone.
3. Turn the knife blade 90 degrees, flat against the backbone, and slice rearward, using the backbone as a guide. Without severing the last flap of skin at the tail, flip the fillet flat onto the plank.
4. Run the knife, edge slightly pressing the skin side, down the fillet to make a skinless portion.

Where to angle for panfish

■ **Northwest Ohio, crappie** — Pleasant Hill Reservoir, east of Mansfield, south of U.S. 30; Findlay Reservoir No. 2, near Findlay; Veterans Memorial Reservoir, State Rt. 12, Fostoria; Nettle Lake, Williams County; Harrison Lake, Fulton County; Lakes McKarns and Barton, St. Joseph River State Wildlife Area southwest of Montpelier, Williams County; Sandusky Bay and the south shore tributary creeks; Lake Erie marina and harbor waters around East Harbor State Park and other lakeshore marinas [permission to fish required]; Mary Jane Thurston State Park marina, State Rt. 65 west of Grand Rapids, Wood County; any structure and brushy banksides, Maumee River; boat-ramp, Farnsworth Metropark, Waterville.

■ **Northwest Ohio, bluegill** — Willard Reservoir, Huron County; Wauseon Reservoirs, Fulton County; Beaver Creek Reservoir near Green Springs, Seneca County; Ox-bow Lake, Defiance County; Lake La Su An State Wildlife Area, 13 lakes, Williams County [reservations 419-636-6189]; St. Joseph River State Wildlife Area, Williams County, Lakes Barton and McKarns.

■ **Southeast Michigan, bluegill/crappie** — Devils Lake and Sand Lake, Lenawee County; in Monroe County the Lake Erie shoreline, including back bays and marinas, North Maumee Bay, Plum Creek, Pointe Mouillee State Game Area, and Swan Creek.

For directions to these sites or maps, visit on-line at www.wildohio.com/fishing, [click on wildlife publications, fishing, public fishing waters of northwestern Ohio], or www.michigan.gov/dnr.

Tried-and-true recipe

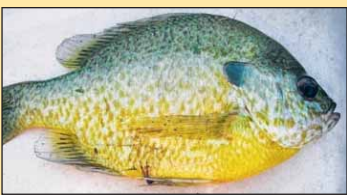
The collective term "panfish" that is applied to crappie and bluegill and their related sunfish cousins evolved because the preferred way to prepare them is to fry them in a pan.

Thus a standard, tried-and-true panfish recipe is offered here by Dot Mainhart, of Vienna, Ohio. She oversees operations of Dot's Diner, as the script

neon-sign that decorates her kitchen declares.

"If you like fish, like I do, here's a delicious and easy recipe for pan-frying," Dot says. "Of course you have to start with fish caught and cleaned by someone else. You catch and clean them and I'll cook 'em."

In a shallow bowl or pie plate beat the eggs with salt and pepper and set aside. Place bread crumbs in another bowl or pie plate. Dip the fillets in the beaten eggs and roll them in the bread crumbs, shaking off excess. Set the breaded fillets on a wire rack. Meanwhile, heat the oil, an inch or so, in a large fry pan, such as a chicken fryer. When hot — 350 degrees, or when a drop of water crackles when added — place a few fillets at a time in the oil. Do not add too many, or the oil temperature will drop. Fry a couple of minutes on each side until golden. Remove from oil and sprinkle with salt and lemon.



Pan Fried Fish
fresh fish, dressed or filleted
2 eggs
bread crumbs
salt & pepper
lemon
vegetable oil