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Sawhill Portrait

Its main virtue is that it doesn't demand to be taken seriously. In this way it is unlike the great trout rivers, the southern bass lakes, the Northwest Territories, the Florida Keys, and other places where the devout gather with clenched teeth and steady eyes. That's not to say it can't or shouldn't be taken seriously, of course. Like all waters haunted by fishermen, it conceals great truths. At those times when the whole evening is the color of the shade under a cottonwood at noon, and whatever is about to happen has just begun to unfold, even the little bluegills can seem like the very meaning of your life.

Or not. It's entirely up to you.

There are thirteen ponds, old quarry pits that filled with water, sprouted cattails, attracted waterfowl and shorebirds, and otherwise did what nature intended for holes in the ground to do. Some of the fish were stocked, while others seem merely to have arrived in that uncanny way they have. Someone once said the entire surface of the earth is covered with bullhead eggs which hatch the minute they're covered with water. Fine, but where do carp come from?

An old feller once told me frogs and panfish travel from pond to pond as eggs stuck to the legs of herons. The turtles walk. It sounds plausible, but even old fellers have been known to be mistaken.

For whatever reason, there are largemouth bass, crappies, bluegills galore, pumpkinseeds, rock bass, as well as chubs, carp, and catfish (three creatures that, as a fly fisher, I find difficult to take seriously).

Still, the trash fish are part of the ambiance of the elaborate warm-water environment, as are dozens of aquatic and terrestrial plants, mammals (from shrews to deer), turtles, frogs, a whole textbook full of insects, and the birds. I've seen ibises there, egrets, avocets aren't uncommon. I don't know my ducks and warblers well enough to say what I've seen in that department. My friend Jack Collom has identified over sixty species of birds there in a single day. Aside from being a crack birder, Jack is a poet—possibly the most famous unknown poet of our time. He's the only nonangler I know who is neither puzzled by, nor overly amused by, the idea that catching fish is the goal but not necessarily the object of angling. "Yes...?" he says, and looks at me questioningly, waiting to hear something that isn't obvious.

Things typically start in April when the bluegills move into the shallows to spawn. Over the past decade or so, the average date has been April 15, coincidentally the deadline for income taxes and therefore easy to remember. Some years it's been a real silver lining.

They can come earlier or later, depending on the shape of a particular season. Over the years I've tried to key the spawning move to such woodsmanlike indicators as the nesting of the Canada geese or the return of the yellow-headed blackbirds, but the fact is, it happens when the water temperature permanently reaches into the mid to high 60s. That's *permanently*. How they can tell the difference between a premature warm spell and the real thing is beyond me, but they can. And I can't.

The plan is to reach that point where I can squint at the sun, sniff the air, listen to the honking of the geese on the first half-warm nights, and know it's time. "Yup, the 'gills ought'a be runnin'." There is a certain feel to things when it's on, but so far it's come after the fact. For the time being I'm stuck with scouting.

I go out early in April—late in March if it's been warm—to walk, cast, look, and bobble an aquarium thermometer in the water. The bluegills like shallow coves to spawn in, ones with gravelly bottoms and not much vegetation. In clear water and good light you can see the beds. They're dinner-plate sized and lighter than the surrounding bottom, clustered in groups of from five or six to fifty or more.

The fish use the same areas year after year unless the water is down, so you can go to the old spots, get up on a hill and look, make a few casts, and know in a few minutes. Sometimes when the shallows are empty you can work the deeper water nearby with a sink-tip line and something like a #12 Zug Bug. If the water is, say, 60 degrees, the fish may be congregated out there, waiting.

The best time to start scouting is when it feels too early. When I look at my slides of bluegill fishing, I see pictures of my friends playing fish in steely-looking water; they're wearing wool shirts and denim jackets, the sky is a dark dun color, the trees faint green and sparse, the cattails brown. If you wait for what we think of as spring, you've missed half of it.

Working these ponds at the end of March makes me feel alternately lonely and stupid, wise and cunning—wise to the point of smugness if I come out with a stringer of fish and call A. K., Dave, Bill, Dale, or Paul with *The Word*. Among this small group of blue-gilling fly fishers, it's been left to me to burn up the telephone wires when the fish are up. It's not clear whether this is a tip of the hat to my supposed expertise in the field or simply that they'd rather be fishing for spawning rainbows somewhere while I'm looking for the panfish. When given a choice like that, I tend to consider it a compliment. These guys get a little less excited about panfish than I do, but since it's the earliest dependable fishing that can be done with a fly rod (*dependable*, I said), they perk up when I call.

Along about here I should cop out to the standard outdoor writer's formula and get into a brief, halfhearted defense of panfish in general, bluegills in particular. I should say that they're easy to catch, plentiful, good eating, passable fighters on light tackle, and custom-made for the fly rod. I should do that, or rather, I just did.

It's all true. They *are* easy once you find the beds where the larger fish collect. They guard their nests against each other and against predators who will happily steal the eggs. These predators range from dragonfly nymphs to carp. It's a personal theory of mine that the bedding bluegills, who seem to take no time out for feeding, survive during the long bedding period on insects and small fish who try to raid their eggs. Maybe, maybe not. If true, it would be a typically neat system with lots of carnage and mutual benefit: the fish survive on the bugs, and the bugs who don't get eaten (there must be some, or they'd have long since quit trying) survive for a time on the eggs. It looks like war but is, in fact, nicely symbiotic. It's like the existence of legalists and anarchists in the same society. Neither is especially

right or wrong—they're just there, and if there's a larger meaning, it's to be found in the struggle itself, not in the outcome.

These are the things that can buzz around your head like mosquitos while you search for the first panfish on a chilly spring day. Maybe it happens because there are no real mosquitos to think about.

So much for homespun biological theorizing. It's been established by people who know that it's almost impossible to overfish a panfish pond. These little guys overpopulate as a defense mechanism, and most biologists agree you can't harm a healthy population with fishing pressure. It might even help, though there seems to be some disagreement about that. What will clearly help is a bunch of big, hungry pike or bass. Carnage and mutual benefit again.

The thirteen ponds hold bass and get some heavy fishing pressure from people who string up their catch. I think the fishing pressure helps the panfish by thinning them but hurts the same population by reducing the number of large predators who eat them. Combine this with cryptic population cycles that can make one year just noticeably better or worse than another and you have a complex chain of interlocking events that results, in this case, in mediocrity. That doesn't detract from the place. Things that are less than perfect have some value in this life, and it's a good thing because there are plenty of them.

The current daily bag limit for bluegills in Colorado is thirty, an embarrassingly impressive stringer even with our modest-sized fish. Out here, a bluegill that covers your hand is unquestionably a keeper. It is a permissible excess, and I guess that's what I like about panfish as much as anything. Later in the season, when the streams come down and the high country opens up, one fishes long and hard for trout. For cultural as well as practical reasons, the trout are seldom kept, which makes a few messes of bluegills in April a pleasant way to start the season—the bounty of spring and all that.

For the record, there is no closed season on fishing in Colorado, a very civilized arrangement. Still, a few frostbite trips to tailwater fisheries for winter trout and the occasional ice-fishing expedition notwithstanding, the "season" begins in April with the panfish.

The thirteen ponds are excellent then, clean and empty. You surprise wildlife and meet only the odd bird-watcher or early bait caster. The latter may greet you with, "What you doin' with that fly rod? There ain't no trout in here."

The place is graspable in a way that a trout stream is not. You can walk around it in an hour or wade or belly boat to every inch of it, with the confidence that you've got them surrounded. At the same time, it's sprawling enough that you can pass a season without having fished it all, partly by choice, partly by oversight.

In early spring you cover ground, surveying the situation. You tie on a weighted wet fly at the truck and never change it, casting it now and then, here and there. It's less a matter of fishing, more a matter of satisfying curiosity. The bluegills are the harbingers, moving early, grouping together to spawn roughly according to size. Often the beds you see, the most exposed ones, are those of the smaller fish. The hand-sized keepers will be nearby, though, in slightly deeper water, safer from herons and kingfishers.

Once you've located the bluegills, you know that the crappies will be established in the deeper, weedier water and that the rock bass will have congregated in various places, especially in the few rocky areas and cement-block riprapped banks—hence their name. Pumpkinseeds, the prettiest fish this side of salt water, seem to spawn alongside the bluegills, though they sometimes develop exclusive areas. Once every spring there's a

stringer of all four mixed, a thing so lovely it must be hung from a low tree limb in the late afternoon light and admired as a work of art in which you had a small hand.

Those are the mechanics of early panfishing in Colorado. The same procedures—less casually practiced—work in strange places, too, and one *tries* strange new places because no fisherman is ever satisfied in a lasting way. Still, there's nothing more comfortable than fishing the home water for bluegills and crappies, game fish that go down to the rock bottom of the angler's consciousness as the fish we started on. This business of fishing builds up enormous deposits in the mind, a whole landscape of emotion. On the surface we may see fly rods, dry flies, tweed hats, and such, but if you dig down through it all, past the spinning rods, bait cans, and minnow buckets, you'll find a fossilized bluegill.

There are those fly fishers who decline to go after panfish (or do go, but exhibit some disdain) because bluegills, crappies, and the rest are seen as kids' fish, lacking the stature of the trouts and bass. Okay, but maybe that's exactly where their charm lies. I mean, how serious do you want to get about this? You try to catch fish as if it really mattered, but you can't lose sight of the fact that it doesn't.

The thirteen ponds are a good place to lose your inflated ideas about yourself as a *fly* fisher. For one thing, you can take fish on just about any wet fly that isn't too big for the small mouths of panfish. In winters past—the long, cold ones—I've developed a few panfish selections consisting of unnecessarily detailed and realistic warm-water nymphs and free-form fancies, but I'm just as likely now to use up unfished trout flies and unsuccessful experiments in sizes 8, 10, and 12. I once won a five-dollar bet by catching a bluegill on a bare hook (a Mustad 3906-B, size 10, sparsely dressed). This is not what you'd call highly technical match-the-hatching. The fish will hit anything that approaches their territory. Anything. Last spring I spent twenty minutes watching two small pumpkinseeds attacking an 8-pound carp who was vacuuming the eggs from their nest.

You'll also meet a lot of non-fly-fishing types on the ponds, at least later on when the weather has warmed to the first-sunburn-of-the-year stage. Most of these people won't be automatically impressed by you; some will be curious, others amused. If you persist in wearing an up-downer hat over a clean chamois shirt and a bulging, jangling fly vest, you'll begin to feel overdressed. All you need is a Harley Davidson T-shirt, baseball cap, and a small box of wet flies. If you catch fish you may attract some favorable attention, but even then someone will sooner or later kindly inform you that a spinning rod is a hell of a lot easier. Kids will want to take a spin in your belly boat.

So you go on weekdays and stay past suppertime when the crowd flakes away, leaving the "serious" anglers of whatever persuasion to stalk the ponds. Even then, your pretensions dissolve. It slowly dawns on you that your moral stature will not be significantly eroded by easily catching a whole bunch of little fish.

If you start feeling guilty (I seldom do anymore), you can tell yourself it will get plenty hard later. The bass in these very ponds will not come so easy in late May and June. And then there are the trouts. You know about the trouts. They're either taking the *Paraleptophlebia adoptiva* (probably the emerger, possibly the dun) or the smaller *Tricorythodes* spinner. Try the quill-bodies #18 floating nymph—no, not that one, the paler one—on a 12-foot leader with a 7x tippet.

There'll be plenty of that later.