



Photo by Don Ingle

A mess of fresh winter bluegills provides fun and food for the ice angler.

# Bluegills are winter favorite

• They will be the No. 1 target for anglers in coming months

By DON INGLE

Special to the Record-Eagle

It's no contest!

For a majority of winter-time ice anglers, the favored target fish will usually be that ever-lovin' panfish called a bluegill. And for good reason.

Bluegills are widely distributed in our waters, can be taken on simple ice fishing tackle, tend to favor the same areas of a lake day after day, and — perhaps most importantly — these fish offer both fun and food. The sweet flavor of the bluegill is hard to top.

To be certain, many ice anglers seek out perch, walleye, pike and other game fish; but over the long winter season, the fish most sought and most often encountered will be the bluegill, or its closer cousin the pumpkinseed sunfish.

This prolific fish is a slow feeder in winter. It's metabolism is slowed down to a low setting and it requires little food compared to spring when it suddenly goes hog hungry as it builds back body weight and energy for the spawning time ahead.

Now, the winter angler needs to practice both patience and attention to those subtle and sometimes almost phantom strikes that can be missed if you take your eyes off your bobber or line.

Like all fish, the bluegill has a comfort zone. In winter, bluegill will seek the warmest waters of the lake, and at this time they are on or near the bottom, thanks to a principal of

physics.

Water has a density and weight that is the greatest at 39 degrees F. When it reaches that temperature that layer of water at 30 degrees sinks to the bottom with the colder water on top. (Incidentally, in the hottest times of summer the same thing occurs — in reverse — as the warmer waters rise to the top surface the cooler waters are found deeper.)

Since the bluegill has a preferred comfort zone, it seeks out the places that feel the most comfortable, so it is that you often find this fish down deep in both the coolest times of winter and the hottest times of summer.

Mark down the locations where you find the most fish in either season, then locate the same places in the opposite season, and you may be in bluegill heaven. (If you have a lake map and a GPS unit, take a reading in either season and mark it out on the map when you find good action. You can return at later times and usually find it again.)

Because of their dainty appetite, larger baits don't turn on a bluegill in winter. In fact, you need to keep the baits small.

That is why such baits as corn borers, wigglers, mousies, wax worms and other small grubs make the best winter baits.

Hooks, too, need to be small — and they need to be extra sharp since the finicky panfish can spit out a bait in a flash if it doesn't seem right; dull hooks may mean missed fish.

If the hook is attached to an attractor like a small spoon or other attractor material, they also have to be tiny in size.

Ice flies and tear drops (mini-spoons) are standard fare for the

tackle box in winter.

The ice rod needs to have a sensitive tip, a spring bobber, or a small floating bobber that can detect the sometimes microscopic hints of a fish sampling the bait. Again, you must pay constant attention to your rod and spring or float bobber all the time or you will miss a great number of fish for lack of attention. Panfish tend to move in schools and they will cruise, so it is important to get your fish up and off the hook and rebait quickly and return to the pay zone before the school wanders off. Some anglers will fish two lines down the same hole (though sooner or later you will have a major untangling chore) so that there is always one baited line down at all times.

Constant jiggling with short rests between will keep the bait and lure active to attract the attention of cruising fish.

Expect lulls between times of action, but don't give up. If you are in a good location the fish tend to return time and again.

Be aware that panfish are most active for only a few hours of the day. Many find the periods just before sunup and for an hour or so after, and again just before sundown and for a short time after to be the best times to fish. But weather, passing fronts, ups and downs in barometric pressure all effect how active the fishing will be.

Remember the old adage — "You can't catch a fish with your line out of the water!" Once winter has made the surface ice safe for ice anglers, there's sure to be plenty of lines in the water as fisher folks seek that champion provider of ice fishing fun and wintry fish fries, the delicious bluegill.