

Hooked on Fish ~Bluegill

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Bluegill, *Lepomis macrochirus*

Fishing for Bluegill is a favourite activity for anglers of all ages. They bite hard and fight, providing a thrill for the angler!



Photo by Karen Cogliati

Bluegill are the most abundant and widespread of all of the sunfishes. The name Bluegill refers to the bluish colour on its chin (the lower jaw) and up to the gill cover. Although Bluegill can be caught in murky lakes, they are most often found in clear waters of lakes and ponds with aquatic plants. Bluegills hide and feed among plants and dwell among rocks and sunken logs. Bluegill can also be caught in slow moving rivers, but never in fast-moving waters. These are warm water fish and so are most active when water temperatures are between 10° C and 30° C.

There are some features that help to identify Bluegill. The scientific species name "*macrochirus*" is Greek for "large hand", describing the fish's body shape. The body of the fish is somewhat circular, and it is flattened from side to side. Bluegill have black earflaps. The back is olive to brownish black, the sides are silver, and the breast ranges from copper-orange to yellow or white. There are sets of 8-10 double vertical bars on the sides of the body. A black blotch is near the rear of the back (dorsal) fin. There are spines on the dorsal and anal fins.

In 2008, my student, Karen Cogliati, studied spawning behaviour of Bluegill at the Queen's Biological Station on Lake Opinicon, north of Kingston. Colourful, parental males (around 7 years old) gather in colonies to spawn in shallow water in early June. By tail-fanning, each male makes a nest, which is a depression in sand or gravel. Envision a colony of males defending saucer-like nests in preparation for the arrival of females.

All spawning in the entire colony takes place in a single day! Almost on signal, 4-year old females approach the nests to spawn. Many females deposit their eggs in the same nest so a few males get most of the action. Males aggressively defend the eggs and offspring from other fishes. Other younger (2 years old) and smaller "sneaker" males dart into nests to fertilize eggs when male and females are spawning. Older (4 years old) "satellite" males look and behave like females, and

squeeze themselves between the parental male and female during fertilization. The sneaker and satellite males contribute to future generations by fertilizing eggs without helping to care for eggs or young in the nests.

Although anglers might not have the good luck to see Bluegills spawn, the fish are a lot of fun to catch. Fish for Bluegill during the day because these fish feed by sight. Try fishing along weed lines. Bluegill may be found in schools close to shore, and smaller fish are easy to catch near docks. The fish typically nip at prey, feeding on insects, crayfish small fish and aquatic plants.

If Bluegill are in an area, they will likely bite within 10 minutes. If you are not getting any action, move to another location. These fish have small mouths and so put a worm on a small hook (choose a #8 or # 9 hook). Although Bluegill are good fighters, you don't need a heavy line to land them. A light line, 4 or 6 pound monofilament, is ideal.



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Most Bluegill are caught by fishing with worms, but plugs, spinners, minnows or artificial flies also are used. You might want to try artificial lures in the summer when the fish are most active. The advantage of using an artificial lure is that you avoid wasting time baiting a hook. Big Gull Lake cottager and expert angler, Gord Erickson, introduced me to "Big O crawdad" lures. I used one to catch a small Bluegill in a bay nearby our cottage on the south shore of the lake.

The average total length of Bluegill caught in the 2015 Big Gull Lake Kids Fishing Derby was 17.4 cm and the largest specimen was 20.2 cm. The Ontario record is 28.2 cm!

Although many anglers prefer to catch large game fish, I get a thrill out of catching Bluegill. Give them a try this summer.

Happy fishing!