

A man wearing a tan knit beanie and a tan jacket is holding a small fish in his hand. The background is a snowy, outdoor setting. The text 'NO NEED TO BE PICKY' is overlaid on the right side of the image in a large, stylized, teal font with a white outline and a distressed, icy texture.

NO NEED TO BE PICKY

by Mike Bleech

photos by the author



Our trip to Edinboro Lake started out to be a fishing expedition for crappies. Dave Baker and I rigged our ultra-light rods with $\frac{1}{16}$ -ounce jig heads and small plastic bodies, each with a different color pattern with the hope of finding something the crappies liked. It had been since the previous year that I had been on this small

lake in Erie County. On the previous trip, we hit the crappies very well. We intended to go back to the place where we had that good fishing, but we met friends at the access area who I had not seen in decades. They gave us more recent tips, however, they did not give us any encouragement for catching crappies.

Nonetheless, we went to the area they suggested and started jiggling for crappies. We got hits immediately but failed to hook anything.

"I'll bet they're bluegill," I said to Dave.

At that moment, he finally hooked one of the fish that had been hitting, and it was a bluegill—a nice bluegill. But, we were after crappies, so back into the lake it went.

For the next hour or so, we caught bluegill after bluegill but no crappies. As is usually the case, most of the bluegills were on the small side, but one of us occasionally caught one that filled the hand, plenty big enough to fillet.

"These bluegill ought to be pretty good eating," Dave suggested. "Maybe, we should keep a few. I'm in the mood for a fish dinner"

"No sense arguing with the fish," I replied. "We might as well take what the lake will give us."

With that short exchange of words, we began a morning of very nice panfish fishing. First, we changed to jigs with smaller hooks. Bluegills have considerably smaller mouths than crappies. The colors we had been using were okay.

We moved from place to place, moving as soon as the action slowed, catching a few bluegills at most places. A few good perch made their way into the catch. Finally, late in the morning, I caught a crappie. It was one of just three we caught that day, but they looked good in our mixed bag of bluegills, pumpkinseeds and yellow perch.

My friend had more than enough for a great fish dinner.

That is the way it goes quite often when you fish for panfish. If you are flexible, usually you can have some pretty good fishing. All it takes is the right tackle and tactics.

Allowing that you can use other specialized tactics, you can be a very serious panfish angler by using one set of tackle and one set of fishing tactics. Your success should not suffer a bit.

Our more popular gamefish in Pennsylvania are black crappies, white crappies, bluegills, pumpkinseeds and yellow

perch. You could throw in white perch and white bass and nothing changes. Others could be in the mix as well.

Tackle can be the same since all of these fish are about the same size. Ultra-light tackle is well suited to all. Hook a nice specimen of any of these panfish on ultra-light tackle, and you are in for a good time. This is foremost on picking tackle, keep it fun.

The rod should be your focal point when putting together a panfish outfit. Pick a rod that is for line in the range of 2- to 6-pound-test line. While ice fishing, hands get cold, losing feeling, or gloves or mittens are worn, so sensitivity is done visually. You need a rod tip that is light and limber to detect the light bite of a bluegill.

With any fishing outfit, the rod is the balance point. It is the primary tool that puts the fun into fishing. Matched to the intended task properly, it will make fishing exciting. Improperly matched, either it takes the fight out of the fish, or the fish overwhelms it.



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The best all-around line for panfish is a 4 pound-test line.

One of the basic definitions of a reel suited to a specific task is that it should hold an adequate amount of the appropriate line but not much larger. Very little line is necessary for panfish through the ice. The weight of the reel should provide fair balance at the point where the rod is held, maybe not precise but close. Imbalance can be tiring, even with an ultra-light rod.

Since line for panfish should be in the 2- to 6-pound-test range, 4-pound-test line is in the middle range. Accordingly, it is probably the best all-around line for panfish. When fishing in weeds or sunken brush, 6-pound-test line may reduce line breaks. For very skittish fish, which may be the case with black crappies, a 2-pound-test line may result in more strikes. But, this can also be accomplished by using a light leader.

Monofilament, fluorocarbon or braided line, which should be used? Since we are looking at all-around use, stick with monofilament line. Braided line may provide some hook-setting advantage when fishing with a lot of line, because it has little stretch. However, it is seldom applicable with panfish in the winter. Fluorocarbon line may be an advantage for skittish fish, but a 4-foot leader should be plenty.

I doubt that there is any better lure for panfish than a leadhead jig dressed with a plastic body or a teardrop jig and tipped with some sort of bait, usually a grub, a maggot, a wax worm or a mealworm.

Jig body color can be very important. White, yellow and chartreuse are popular. These colors in combination with orange or red may be the most popular jig body colors for panfish. During midday, green or blue are effective, especially in very clear water. For some unknown reason, jig body makers like to make jig bodies that are red with white, yellow or chartreuse tails. I prefer the other way around, one of the lighter colors with red tails.

The fishing tactic is simple. Fish jigs very slowly around some type of cover. Weed edges, holes in weed beds, brush and other kinds of underwater cover are all likely places to find fish. If you need to keep the jig at one specific depth, rig a small bobber up the line. There is usually no need to reel in panfish through the ice.

Stick with these techniques, and you will have plenty of fillets for the dinner table. ☐

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