

A close-up photograph of two fish, a pumpkinseed and a bluegill, resting in a black mesh fishing net. The pumpkinseed is on the left, showing its characteristic yellow and green mottled pattern. The bluegill is on the right, showing its blue and green scales. The background is a dark, textured surface.

BEST PUMPKINSEED AND BLUEGILL LAKES

of Northwestern Pennsylvania



Dustin Shay caught this Conneaut Lake, Crawford County, bluegill on a jig with plastic grub body.

by Marilyn Black

photos by Darl Black

Who doesn't look forward to "sunny days"? Sure, days of bluebird skies are great. But, I'm talking about equally enjoyable fishing outings for active sunfish. This is a joy shared by anglers of all ages, from youngsters to young-at-heart. May and June are among the prime months for catching sunfish, particularly the two best-known species—pumpkinseed and bluegills. These fish provide delightful catching fun on the water and tasty protein tidbits on a dinner plate.

Jeweled sunfish

To my eye, the most shimmering sunfish is the pumpkinseed. The pumpkinseed earned its unusual name, because its overall body shape resembles the pointed yet flattened contours of seeds from squash. *Lepomis gibbosus* is also sometimes called the common sunfish, kivvy, quiver, sun bass, yellowbelly or round sunfish.

I'm not alone in my admiration for this species. Henry David Thoreau wrote, "It is a very beautiful and compact fish, perfect in all its parts, and looks like a brilliant coin fresh from the mint."

A key identifying feature is the red outline of its black gill flap. Radiating out from its tiny mouth are iridescent



This bluegill took a Roadrunner with gusto.

blue/opal rays over the fish's cheeks. The breast and underbelly areas are usually gradients of yellow, gold, goldenrod and orange. The rest of the body has variegated dark green/brown speckling mixed with lighter greens and tan. On females, the speckles seem to line up into vertical, irregular bands. Spawning male pumpkinseeds show especially brilliant coloration.

In Pennsylvania, biological surveys indicate that an average 5-inch pumpkinseed is about 2.3 years old, an 8-inch specimen is nearly 7 years old, and it will typically take about 11 years before a pumpkinseed reaches a weight of 1 pound. However, pumpkinseed rarely survive more than 8 years. The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) does not maintain a state record for this sunfish species.

The top waters for pumpkinseeds in the northwestern section of Pennsylvania are (in order starting with best) Presque Isle Bay, Conneaut Lake and Pymatuning Reservoir. This ranking is based not only on the first-hand experiences of our angling family. It's also substantiated by spring trapnet sampling conducted by PFBC biologists in recent years.

Plentiful sunfish

Spring trapnet samplings also capture between 10 and 20 bluegills for each pumpkinseed. In fact, bluegills are Pennsylvania's most populous sunfish. Bluegills can produce more than one brood a year, with spawning occurring repeatedly from the time water temperature reach 67 degrees F in May through August. They are a very gregarious species, spawning amidst colonies.

Bluegills (*Lepomis macrochirus*) also have nicknames galore including bream, blue bream, blue joe, blue sunfish, coppernote, dollardee and the All-American panfish. Not nearly as showy as pumpkinseeds, bluegills most distinctive



At Pymatuning Lake, Crawford County, the author caught this feisty pumpkinseed.

feature is their dark gill plate tip. Body coloration shows more variety than other sunfish due to genetic strains and cross-fertilization. The metallic-looking blue hues of the lower edge of the gill flap and under the lower jaw are its namesake. The palm-shaped body may range from olive green to brown with 8 to 10 sets of darker, vertical, chainlike bars. Belly tones may be white, yellow or coppery-orange.

Bluegills increase in length more rapidly than pumpkinseeds, typically reaching 8-inches long during age five, and they have better prospects of achieving a 1 pound weight. The state record bluegill was caught in 1983 from Armstrong County's Keystone Lake. It weighed 2 pounds, 9 ounces.

When it comes to bluegill angling success, the top ranked water is Conneaut Lake, the largest natural lake in the state, where recent trapnetting yielded numerous bluegills averaging between 7 and 8 inches long. That work, plus angler catch reports, led to PFBC naming Conneaut Lake as one of "Pennsylvania's Best Fishing Waters" for bluegills and pumpkinseeds.



While fishing at Presque Isle Bay, Erie County, Mitchell LeFebre caught this bluegill.

Commonwealth waters have always provided outstanding fishing opportunities for a variety of popular fish species. Pennsylvania's Best Fishing Waters is



a program established by PFBC, using the expertise and knowledge of its fisheries biologists, to highlight statewide locations for different categories of fish to assist anglers in knowing the prime fishing hotspots. Confirmed by survey catch rates and the availability of public access, the waters offered as a resource by the Commission are intended to increase anglers' success and convenient access to this information. You deserve the best!

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Based on trapnetting conducted in March 2012, PFBC biologists predicted, "This should be one of the best years for panfish fishing ever in Pymatuning Reservoir," referring to pumpkinseeds, bluegills and crappies. In fact, the trapnet frequency for bluegill was the highest experienced since these annual surveys began in 1989 on Pymatuning Reservoir.

Based on my angling experience, additional prime waters in the northwest for bluegills are Presque Isle Bay, Lake Arthur, Canadohta Lake, Edinboro Lake, Shenango Reservoir and Crystal Lake (sometimes called Mud Lake) along Route 285 near Hartstown in the Shenango River basin.

According to trapnetting surveys, two previously decent sunfish waterways which have seen downturns, extremely few pumpkinseeds or bluegills, have been taken in trapnets at Woodcock Reservoir. Lake Wilhelm's sunfish population collapsed concurrently with a dramatic upswing in gizzard shad after an accidental introduction of the shad.

Tips for catching sunfish

During May and June, pumpkinseeds and bluegills are found in similar shallow-water habitats such as shoreline weed patches, docks, ramps and other quiet corners readily reached by anglers casting from shore or wading. I've generally found larger pugnacious individuals hugging or just beyond the deeper edge of weed beds.

Light-wire hooks, sizes 6 through 10, are well-suited to the small mouths of these sunfish. Standard inland regulations allow a daily creel harvest of 50 panfish of combined species. None of the lakes managed as Panfish Enhancement Special Regulation waters are located in the northwestern section of Pennsylvania.

Fly anglers seeking sunfish utilize dry flies, small sinking flies, nymphs and rubber leg spiders. They search for and concentrate on spots where rising sunfish create ringlets on the water's surface.

Many anglers use live bait, including worms, larvae, small minnows and crickets. Other anglers find success with tiny spinners, ultralight jigs, surface poppers and small spoons. My preferred approach is to suspend a larva-tipped jig beneath a tiny pencil-shaped balsa float or a clear slip bobber. ☐



This bluegill took a jig with an artificial leech trailer.