Fall means the end of another growing season and the beginning of a new winter. In Pennsylvania waters, it signifies a last-minute feeding frenzy before the water temperatures drop off and the fish become lethargic for the winter. When most anglers think of panfish fishing, they generally think of either the spring spawn, summer Bluegills under a bobber or jigging through the ice. The fall is generally an afterthought when it comes to panfish. There are seemingly so many other types of fish active in the fall that, unless you are a die-hard panfish angler, the thought of chasing them does not even cross your mind. However, if you put in the time and locate the fish, it can be one of the best times to catch some really nice panfish. In Pennsylvania, the three most actively pursued panfish are Bluegills, Yellow Perch and crappies.

The fall is a transition time for fish. They are leaving the summer shallows and heading for deeper structure, where they will stay until the spring spawn brings them back to the shallows. This will present a challenge for the angler who goes looking for them in one spot or the other. If you know the winter and summer habits of the fish that you are after, you are already in pretty good shape when it comes time to find them. If not, you will need to do some looking around. Use a depth finder that shows you the contours of the bottom of the lake. Each panfish tends to do something different in the winter months in each lake. When you locate fish, make a note of that spot. Most likely, there will be a large amount of them concentrated in the same area.

Tackle
During this time of the year, the most important piece of tackle that you can take along is an ultra-light rod. The sensitivity allows you to feel even the most subtle strikes as we go from early fall to late fall, and the fish go from feeding heavily to hardly feeding at all. Next, you will want a light line. Typically, 4-pound-test line will allow you to get more strikes and help you to feel the strikes a little bit better.

Bluegills
When looking for Bluegills, you will find that they tend to move around a lot and be somewhat scattered throughout the lake as the fall progresses. They will go from being in the shallows around sunken structure in the early fall to deep water in the late fall. These fish will normally move to deep, sharp drop-offs, off of shoreline points and in the deeper bays and coves of the lake as fall gets closer to becoming winter.
For Bluegills, I’ll normally use wax worms, maggots, mealworms, nightcrawlers or red worms on a #6 or #8 hook with 1 or 2 size BB splitshot, depending on how fast I want it to get to the bottom. My favorite way to fish in these conditions is to drop the bait straight down and reel up a little bit after you feel the bait hit bottom. Your bait is just off of the bottom. Then, hold the rod straight out and feel for the bite. This is where the ultra-light rod will come in handy for these normally aggressive biters when they hit much lighter as the waters cool down. If you are not good at detecting light hits, a small slip-rig bobber is really helpful in this situation, especially after you locate fish at a consistent depth.

**Crappies**

When it comes to crappies, the biggest factor in finding crappies is the conditions on that particular day. During the summer, crappies tend to suspend off of deeper structure or deep drop-offs. As the water cools, fish tend to move around based on the air temperature. On most cold (normally under 40-degrees F air temperature) or cloudy days, the fish tend to move into deeper water between 20 and 40 feet in the main creek channel, off shoreline points and deep bays and coves. However, on warm (above 40-degrees F air temperature) or sunny days, the crappies will move into shallower water, where they will do their most aggressive feeding of the fall.

Typically, I’ll use a #4 or #6 hook with 1 or 2 size BB splitshot and a small minnow under a slip-rig bobber. If you don’t want to deal with bait and you know where the crappies are located, miniature tube lures and marabou jigs work well. When fishing deep water, I fish just off of the bottom. Sometimes, I’ll slowly troll along an area in hopes of finding an active school. On warm or sunny days, I rig a bobber about 4 to 5 feet above my bait to help detect the lighter strikes that you normally see from this species, regardless of the time of year. When you find one crappie, you will usually find more nearby. Once you catch one, just go back and re-fish that same area and chances are it will pay off with several more crappies.

**Yellow Perch**

Yellow Perch tend to be the hardest to find as the fall wears on. In the summer, they typically hang around deep drop-offs and deep, weedy areas, but they move into shallower water to feed around rocky shorelines in the fall. However, as the water gets colder most of them will move back into deeper water around the edges of weedy bays, drop-offs and sand or mudflats that are typically in about 20- to 40-feet of water.

My preferred method is to use a #4 or #6 hook with either a red worm, nightcrawler, small minnow (around 2 to 2 ½ inches works best) or a small jig with 1 or 2 size BB splitshot. I either fish the bait just off of the bottom in the deeper water or troll them closer to the shallows. When I have located a school of perch, I like to bounce my baits off of the bottom to entice an aggressive strike. Once the more aggressive fish have been caught, I will use the same method that I use for Bluegills.

This fall when contemplating what species of fish to go after, know that fishing for panfish is still a very viable option. It can be every bit as good, if not better, than focusing on them at other times of the year. ☑

Bluegills will normally be found swimming around deep, sharp drop-offs, off of shoreline points and in the deeper bays and coves of the lake throughout the fall.