Sunshine peered through overcast skies as another Fourth of July holiday gathering commenced on the family farm. The smell of fresh cut grass rivaled the enticing aroma of barbecued chicken for sole domination of our olfactory receptors. A football was tossed to and fro as the dogs playfully pounced about the yard. It was a great day to celebrate family, friends and our American freedoms.

Beyond the food and fireworks, however, another favorite activity made the day even more memorable; perhaps it was the biggest highlight of all. This great American pastime took place down on the farm pond, and it included a fly rod, a meager assortment of flies and plenty of huge, hungry fish.

Many Pennsylvania anglers cut their teeth as youngsters casting bobbers to panfish on farm ponds. But, that doesn’t mean the fun has to stop once we grow up. In fact, farm ponds often harbor some of the biggest sunfish Pennsylvania has to offer. Catching them on a fly rod puts a unique spin on an old-time favorite and can provide some of the most exciting fishing action imaginable.

It’s hard to place an exact figure on how many farm ponds exist in Pennsylvania, but it’s probably safe to say at least one exists within a short distance from most anglers’ homes. Securing permission to fish these private water paradises is often a matter of reaching out to landowners in a friendly manner, asking nicely and promising to respect all their wishes.

One advantage to fly fishing is that barbless hooks used for flies are generally less harmful to the fish and more conducive to catch and release fishing—a huge plus when asking permission. Offering to help with chores from time to time can further increase one’s odds of gaining the green light, as it serves as a fair trade-off for both parties.

A 5- or 6-weight fly rod with floating line and a strong leader will bode well for managing the feeding frenzy most flies invoke from heavier bass and panfish, while longer rods make it easier to cast greater distances from shore. Farm ponds often feature open surroundings for false casting, which is great for inexperienced fly anglers still learning to control their back cast.

As far as fly selection goes, I’ve seldom come across picky pond cruisers. Most summertime farm fish are more than
happy to indulge on whatever presentations are offered, as long as the pond isn’t overfished. However, there are definitely a few flies that prompt more aggressive strikes than others.

The most effective bass fly I’ve used for pond fishing is a subsurface frog imitation tied with a weighted Sculpin helmet head and green fur leg strips. This fly sinks quickly and can be stripped rapidly to imitate a fleeing frog. It’s bouncing and sinking motion is irresistible to big Largemouth Bass cruising the shallows for an easy meal.

Another underwater option is the old standby Wooly Bugger in various colors and sizes. An extra wrap of weighted body tape or beadhead will help keep this fly slightly below the surface while being worked in alternating pauses to agitate trailing fish.

A foam hopper or beetle is tough to beat for fishing topwater during late afternoon, when fish become more interested in rising. Slowly skittering the fly across the surface and then letting it rest with an occasional slight twitch to provide a bit of action is often all it takes to get larger panfish interested.

If cattails or other forms of submerged vegetation are available, foam or cork poppers trailed by saddle hackle, dyed deer hair and a bit of crystal flash material will also elicit wildly hard-hitting strikes when worked along the edge of the cover.

Safely wet wading into these areas makes it easier to roll cast the fly parallel to the weeds and assertively pop it backwards in exaggerated strips. This is where the heavy feeders hang out, so the added control definitely has its rewards, even if it means getting your feet wet.

Fly fishing farm ponds can be enjoyed by anglers of all ages. Last Independence Day, my teenage nephew had just as much fun catching huge Bluegills as our nearly 60-year-old family friend who learned to cast a fly rod for the very first time. The steady action is great for introducing novices to the sport.

Even experienced fly anglers can appreciate this unique approach to an age-old fishing favorite. The next time you’re looking to add some excitement to your summer fishing fun, grab your fly rod and head down to the farm pond. It’s as all-American as grilled food, football and fireworks. ☑

Anglers who aren’t afraid to get a little wet are often rewarded for their efforts.