

SMART ANGLER'S NOTEBOOK

CRAZY CRAYFISH

by Walt Dietz

Most anglers know that crayfish make great baits for bass. They probably also know that crayfish are related to crabs, shrimp, lobsters and even zooplankton like the water flea (Order Decapoda). But did you know there are 12 species of crayfish in Pennsylvania? Did you know that crayfish make great baits for other fish like trout? There is even a crayfish that has been introduced to our waters from other states. Let's take a closer look at crayfish.

Crayfish are easy to recognize with their pincers and armorlike carapace. Some people also call them "crawdads" or "crawfish." They are like the army tanks of the aquatic world, thanks to five pairs of jointed legs (the first pair are pincers). They can move over obstacles and in any direction—forward, sideways or backward. Swimmerets (small appendages) under the abdomen help them with swimming and balance. A cluster of purplish eggs can sometimes be seen attached to a female's swimmerets. Crayfish can also shoot backward by flexing their tail fan and contracting their abdominal muscles in the jointed tail. Break a leg, pincer or swimmeret? No problem: Crayfish can grow new ones!

A hard exoskeleton protects crayfish. Crayfish must shed, or molt, as they grow. Those empty "crayfish shells" you see in the water are really shed exoskeletons. Crayfish are very soft until the exoskeleton hardens. These "softshells" are vulnerable to predators.

Crayfish have amazing adaptations. They breathe through gills under the carapace. Their eyes are on movable stalks to allow sight in different directions. Antennae sense prey and predators. They emit chemical cues to identify one another and signal mating. They can even change color to match their habitat.

Crayfish are important as predators and prey in the aquatic food chain. They are omnivores (feed on plants and animals) and scavengers. They eat snails, insects, worms, tadpoles, dead aquatic animals, algae and vegetation. Crayfish also make a tasty treat for fish, reptiles and mammals. When taken from clean water and properly cooked, crayfish are a great meal for humans.

