

A large bluegill fish is shown in profile, facing right. It has a dark, mottled pattern on its head and upper body, with a prominent black stripe running from the eye down the side. The fish's scales are visible, and its fins are slightly spread. It is holding a lure in its mouth, which has a red body with white spots and a black head with a long, thin, curved appendage. The background is a solid dark blue.

THE QUEST FOR

BIG BLUEGILLS

A BLUEGILL OF A POUND OR MORE REMAINS A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME CATCH FOR MOST ANGLERS. BUT KNOWING WHAT CONDITIONS CREATE SUCH MONSTERS CAN IMPROVE YOUR ODDS.

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GO TO JUST ABOUT ANY POND, LAKE OR WARM-WATER STREAM IN NORTH CAROLINA, AND YOU

are likely to find an abundance of 6-inch bluegills. In fact, bluegills of that size are so common that many places don't seem to have any larger ones. No matter how old they get, they just don't seem to grow any bigger.

But there are other places where bluegills do get bigger, and some of them get a whole lot bigger. Large bluegills may be a one-time happening in some locations, but in others, mondo worm-nibblers are produced year after year.

For many fishermen, catching a true 1-pound bluegill never happens. For others, it may happen only once in a lifetime.

What are the elusive factors that come together to produce large bluegills? And can anything be done to manage fish populations to produce more big ones and fewer small ones?

I posed these questions to fisheries biologists who are also good fishermen. They provided interesting insight into some of the mysteries of when and where these big bluegills appear and offered good advice about how to catch them.

Two of the most important factors are competition and the carrying capacity of the body of water in which they grow. Just as a cow pasture can support only a certain number of cows, a pond or lake has a limit of how many pounds of fish it can support. That weight can be made up of either a lot of small bluegills or fewer large ones.

There is no doubt that an environment with a lot of available food and good water quality is critical for continued growth. But surely genetics plays an important part, too.

Bluegills can start reproducing when they are only a few inches long, and a pair can produce thousands of young each year. If a lot of the young survive, they soon utilize all available food, leaving none for growth. Six-inch bluegills can keep producing young each year, resulting in a stunted population.

Only if something limits the number of surviving fish can the remaining ones have enough food to continue to grow. That's where predation is essential, because only two of the thousands of young can grow to replace their parents; otherwise, the available food is divided among an increasing number of small fish. But there are places where conditions are right for producing the big bluegills.

COASTAL STREAMS

Some of our best bluegills are found in coastal freshwater streams and ponds, where the waters remain relatively warm and favorable for growth during much of the year. They often are shallow, fertile and productive. Add to this an abundance of predators ranging from bass, pickerel and bowfin to herons and other fish-eating birds, as well as mammals. These predators keep the bluegill numbers thinned. And low fishing pressure at some of these spots gives the fish time to grow. All of these factors provide the necessary ingredients to produce large bluegills.

Coastal streams that flow into the sounds may have salinities at their lower sections too high for bluegills, but the headwaters often are fresh or only slightly brackish. In some cases, the brackishness of the water may be sufficient to limit bluegill reproduction, thereby keeping their numbers low and thus providing adequate food for fewer fish to continue growing.

“Based on my observations, bluegill populations are most stable in our fresh-water rivers and streams,” said Kent Nelson, a fisheries biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. “Bluegill populations in rivers and sounds subjected to periodic intrusions of brackish water, as a result of either wind tides or drought, can fluctuate markedly depending on the severity and duration of the intrusions. Because of this, tributaries of the Albemarle Sound and lower Pamlico and Neuse rivers may harbor numbers of large bluegills, if favorable conditions persist.”

Many of the coastal streams have plenty of vegetation, which supports bluegills. Usually there is an area of open water immediately next to the bank in which big bluegills congregate, perhaps waiting for insects or other food to fall from overhanging vegetation. Popping bugs and very small spinner baits are especially effective in such spots.

Fisheries biologist Chad Thomas, also with the Wildlife Commission, suggested trying the Alligator River, Pasquotank River and its tributaries (Newbegun, Areneuse and Sawyers creeks), Scuppernong River, Northwest River and Tull Bay off Currituck Sound.

Sampling results indicate that bluegills are less abundant in the Chowan River, which is likely an effect of dissolved oxygen problems resulting from Hurricane Floyd in 1999. The Roanoke River contains good numbers of bluegill, but the average sizes tend to be smaller than the rivers mentioned above.

Bluegills are also relatively abundant in the Neuse, Trent and White Oak rivers, as well as in the Cape Fear River below Lock and Dam Nos. 2 and 3. The Black River near Ivanhoe and Henry’s Landing produces good bluegills. Here, fishing from one-man boats using a fiberglass pole and jig flipped under overhanging bushes is effective.

FARM PONDS

Ponds with small bluegills usually have few bass or other predators. So many of the panfish survive, in fact, that there is too

Big bluegills can be caught on a variety of natural baits and artificial lures from many locations including farm ponds and coastal streams. The key to catching huge specimens is to find waters where the bluegill population is limited by many predators or other environmental conditions.

little food to be used for growth. Over time as they continue to reproduce, the average size might even decrease.

Some ponds, though, have good numbers of big bluegills. They usually are either new ponds in which the population is rapidly growing and expanding to fill the new habitat, or ponds with a lot of small bass. The numerous small bass eat most of the small bluegills produced, enabling the surviving bluegills to have enough food for rapid growth. Under these conditions the many bass stay small, but the bluegills grow to a larger size.

LAKES

Lakes throughout the state, even those in the colder western part of North Carolina, sometimes have good-sized bluegills. The bluegills are easiest to locate in spring and summer when the fish congregate in clear, shallow water to spawn. Their saucer-shaped nests are clustered, sometimes on long, sloping underwater points or in coves. The fish may not be numerous, but they sometimes reach a respectable size. Though most bluegills might be 6 inches and rarely reach 1 pound, real giants show up from time to time wherever conditions are right. Sometimes 2- or 3-pound bluegills are caught, and the state record is

a 4-pound, 5-ounce giant caught in Henderson County in 1967 by Danny Case on a catappa worm.

REELING IN

Finding a place with large bluegills is half the challenge; figuring out how to catch them is the other half. Most bluegill fishermen agree that you can catch big bluegills on the same baits and lures that you catch smaller ones, but getting close enough to the big ones can be difficult.

Spawning time in late spring or early summer is the best time to find these fish. They often spawn in clear, shallow water, however, and are especially wary. They may see you approaching, and waves made by a boat or sounds made by bumping a tackle box or paddle in the boat can cause them to flee to deeper water. Also, splashing a lure or bait into the middle of a cluster of bluegill nests can frighten them away. The really big ones grow large because they are wary. They know how to escape all kinds of dangers. But they are also aggressive during the spawning season.

“You have to sneak up on those really big bluegills,” veteran bluegill fisherman Bill Hinnant said. “If you are careful enough, you can slip up close and drop a hook baited with a cricket or worm into the cluster of

nesting bluegills. If you spook them and they run for deeper water, just sit still and wait for them. They will slowly return.”

When the mood to throw an artificial strikes him, Hinnant will tie on a Beetle Spin or use a popping bug with a fly rod.

Using a 7-weight fly rod and a weight-forward floating line, an angler can cast a small popping bug a long way from the



boat. The bug should drop right over the bluegills with almost no splash, minimizing the chance of spooking them.

Fishing with ultralight spinning tackle and jigs is another great way to catch bluegills. Not only are these lures effective, they also slide across logs and underwater brush without many hangups.

Just because you put your bait or lure at the right place doesn’t mean you will catch bluegills. Even when spawning, they go through mood changes. This was obvi-



The next day, I returned to the same spot and fished with the same popping bug. This time was different. The big bluegills showed a completely different attitude, swallowing the bug on every strike. Seven of the big bluegills totaled 5 pounds, 12 ounces.

Probably the most interesting way I have found big bluegills is by bass fishing. Especially when spawning, big bluegills are aggressive and will strike at bass lures, even big ones like a Devil’s Horse. One day, after repeatedly getting powerful strikes at the same spot with a bass lure but failing to hook the fish, I moved closer and was barely able to see the outline of a cluster of tremendous fish beds in the sandy pond bottom. They were huge beds, almost 3 feet in diameter. Later that day, I returned and, with a fly rod and popping bug, caught some honest-to-goodness 1-pound bluegills. They were in full breeding color and absolutely beautiful.

Wherever you find them and however you catch them, bluegills are excellent panfish. The big ones present an interesting challenge and are tough fighters. Pound for pound, they are some of our best game fish. ☒

