



Photo by John N. Felsher

Jen Carroll shows off a speckled trout she caught on a topwater bait.

## Topwater baits get big trout

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

For sheer exhilaration, few angling experiences compare to big fish exploding on topwater baits with force.

“Seeing big fish blow up on a topwater bait is the ultimate rush,” explained George Harrison of Harrison Inshore Charters & Guide Service (251-367-7685, [dauphinisland-fishingguides.com](http://dauphinisland-fishingguides.com)). “Once, I caught an 8-pound trout on a pink Skitter Walk. Seeing that fish come up and hit that bait, I immediately knew it was a big trout.”

Topwater baits can work any time, but typically work best at first or last light. Early in the morning or in late afternoon, speckled trout frequently move into shallow flats to feed on baitfish. They also work during overcast days when fish may stay in the shallows longer.

See **TROUT**, Page 24

# Ol' Five Pound foiled us

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Growing up in the age before video games and so many other time-robbing electronic devices, we made our own entertainment by roaming the fields and forests near our homes from sunrise to sunset. Nobody really cared where we went or what we did, as long as nobody called to complain and we returned home for supper uninjured and without a police escort.

Frequently, we explored every ditch and creek we could find to see what lurked there or to discover new fishing holes. Most anglers call their favorite places “fishing holes,” but many of our piscatorial pleasure pits really were holes! Occasionally, we found a real pond, but most were merely wide spots in local canals or drainage ditches. We could jump across some. Most reached depths of only one or two feet deep, but to us, each represented a heavenly oasis of freedom from chores, nagging mothers, cleanliness, homework, responsibility, girls and everything else we despised.

Dad had this nagging freedom-robbing thing call a job that often kept him out of our fishing boat. That really cut into our enjoyment. Not to worry, those of us too young to drive frequently bicycled to our secret fishing holes between times when our dads could take us real fishing.

Sometimes, we just jumped on the bikes and spontaneously headed to a nearby fishing hole — usually when the grass needed cutting or some other onerous chores awaited us. At other times, we planned our angling adventures down to the last details with more intricate machinations than Eisenhower used to land in Normandy.

As the chosen day of blissful freedom approached, we scoured our freezers and refrigerators for bait — frozen shrimp, chicken livers, leftover meats, old hot dogs, bread, cheese — whatever our mothers wouldn't terribly miss. Sometimes, we pooled our allowances to buy real worms or night-crawlers. (Side note, many mothers don't like to discover a paper bag full of squirming nightcrawlers in their refrigerators!) On rare occa-



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sions, we actually had shiners or store-bought crickets left over from some adult-led fishing trip.

When we couldn't find or buy sufficient bait, we caught our own. We scooped minnows, crawfish and grass shrimp from roadside ditches. We snatched grasshoppers and crickets from weedy vacant lots. We overturned pine straw to capture succulent worms. We tore apart rotten logs in wooded lots for grubs or kept some smaller fish from previous expeditions for cut bait.

With tempting bait secured, we grabbed our gear, stuffed the bait into our pockets — much to the chagrin of our mothers who usually discovered “leftovers” on wash-day — and pedaled our bicycles to our chosen honey hole. Fortunately, we didn't carry the amount of gear then that many anglers find so essential now. One hand clutched a rod and a handlebar while our other hand gripped a tackle box.

Often, we headed to our favorite honey hole: Ol' Five Pound Canal, also known as Fishing Hole No. 3.

Neither name will show up on any maps. We never knew the official name of this waterway, nor did we care. We did care that this muddy drainage ditch flowed through our section of town, widened briefly as it crossed under a four-lane road and had fish in it. Here, we could barely cast across it even when our reels weren't clogged with sand and mud. Under the bridge, it dropped to about five feet deep during wet weather.

Away from the road, the canal narrowed and became shallow again. Most days, it averaged one to two feet deep, but became a raging torrent after a severe downpour. The canal eventually dumped into a nearby river. Periodic floods brought new fish into our honey hole. During low water, fish became trapped in the relative depths under the bridge.

Occasionally, we spotted one wary old giant catfish, at least for those waters. We dubbed him Ol' Five Pound. For years, neighborhood boys — and an occasional girl — futilely chased Ol' Five Pound, who tormented us with his infrequent and unpredictable appearances. Sometimes, he surfaced just a few feet from us, daunting us and refusing all our offerings. We tried everything to nab, net or hook that cagey whiskered critter, including grabbing him with our hands. Nothing worked.

Infrequently someone actually hooked a big fish, possibly Ol' Five Pound. Inevitably, he broke the line, straightened or spit the hook and rolled back into the gray-green waters. Sometimes, he tore the guts out of our cheap and ill-maintained reels. I lost him myself several times and once even had him up next to the little beach where we fished before he popped the line and casually swam back to his lair under the bridge. Each year, his legend — along with his real and imagined size — grew.

Years later, I heard that someone actually did catch a 10-pound blue catfish from that hole. Same fish? Perhaps, but I prefer to think that Ol' Five Pound died of extreme old age after many years of daunting new generations of young anglers, or better, still rules his small muddy kingdom.