

# FEISTY LITTLE FISH

*Various panfish species can provide big action in the spring*

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

As temperatures warm, many anglers start thinking about panfish. Alabama anglers can catch more than a dozen panfish species, but most people simply lump them all together as “bream,” “sunfish” or “perch.”

Bluegills start spawning when water temperatures reach about 75 to 80 degrees and may continue into early fall. The highly prolific fish sometimes spawn every 30 days. When spawning, they occupy shallow depressions scoured into the bottom. In the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, bluegills usually make nests in sandy bottoms out of direct current such as on the downstream side of sandbars and major obstructions. Numerous delta tributaries and lakes make great places to find bluegill beds.

“The Mobile-Tensaw Delta and other coastal rivers have good panfish numbers,” explained Tommy Purcell, an Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division biologist in Spanish Fort. “Bluegills begin spawning in April or May, depending upon water temperature and levels, but are usually in full swing by



Photo by John N. Felsher

Amy Gable admires a bluegill she caught on a crawfish crankbait. Bluegills and other panfish regularly hit a variety of artificial enticements as well as natural baits.

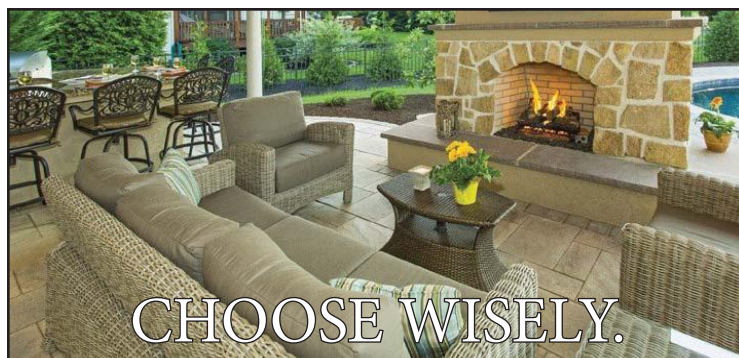
June. In the Upper Delta, fish the cypress and gum trees in the creeks and oxbows. In the Middle Delta, target woody structure and emergent plants like cattails. In the Lower Delta, any vegetation could hold fish. Try old duck blinds standing in the weedy bays.”

Redear sunfish, also called shellcrackers because they love to eat snails, also occur throughout Alabama.

Particularly abundant in the delta, redears grow somewhat larger than bluegills and spawn a bit earlier. In south Alabama, redears might begin spawning as early as March, but bedding season peaks in May.

“The best time to fish for shellcrackers and bluegills in the delta is on a low tide,” advised Don Green, an angler from Mobile. “I like it best from halfway through going out to fully low tide. Shellcrackers and bream get in the grass during higher water periods. As the water drops out of the grass, shellcrackers and bluegills move out to the grassy edges along the channels in slightly

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