

Float Fishing - Panfish Basics

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In Indiana, as well as most of the country, panfish are the most sought after fish by the majority of anglers. Of this large family of fish, bluegills and crappie make up the majority of the anglers focus. Harvested numbers of these two fish typically exceeds 100,000 fish in any given year on a large reservoir or lake. And of these fish, a large percentage are caught on live bait.

There are many ways of fishing live bait, but for panfish some form of bobber fishing is the standard gear of choice. And while bait anglers or "bobber slingers" are frequently dismissed by some, these same people overlook the intricacies and science behind this type fishing. Like any other form of angling, depth and speed control are the two most important aspects of correct presentation. Bobbers, or floats as I prefer to call them, are absolutely deadly when it comes to holding a bait at a specific depth, and when the speed control needed is slow. And slow is usually the ticket with float fishing, giving the bait a chance to 'do its thing', attracting fish from both an olfactory sense as well as a built-in natural movement. But if you've spent much time observing live bait anglers in action, you will have noticed a huge range and style of floats being used, many unsuccessfully because of a lack of knowledge or understanding of the basics of float fishing success.

Floats serve two purposes in life. One is to hold or suspend a bait at a very specific depth. Fixed floats do this in shallow water, and slip floats are utilized in deeper water. The other big job of a float, and the one in which most anglers would tell you, is to signal a bite. It is this aspect of floats which is so misunderstood and where most failure in float angling success can be attributed. It all comes down to an understanding of how most panfish feed. Much like a larger predator, a panfish in most cases approaches a bait to within a close range and then attempts to suck in the bait when it decides to eat. However, unlike a fish such as the largemouth bass that have an ability to move a good volume of water into its gaping jaws, and subsequently the bait you're fishing also, panfish have much smaller mouths and so move a comparatively smaller volume of water. This means the bait doesn't go flowing into its mouth as easily, especially if being restricted by a faulty presentation. And it is this fault in presentation that causes anglers to not catch near as many panfish as they could.

Specifically, the fault lies in using too large a float, or by having a specific float improperly weighted. Because when you see a float wiggle, and when someone yells out "look, I'm getting a bite", what has actually happened is that you've already missed a fish that potentially could have been caught. The reason that float bobbed on the surface is because a fish tried to suck in the bait, but your float held that bait back, instead just rippling the waters surface at the failed attempt. If you're lucky, he'll come back and try again. If you're not, he either sucked the bait off the hook (stole), or he'll simply give up trying. But how could you have changed the outcome?

It all comes down to understanding how a float works. Every float is composed primarily of a body which is made from typically either wood, plastic or styrofoam. Based on the size of that body and the material it is made from, it creates a certain amount of buoyancy. For a bobber to be pulled under, a fish has to overcome that buoyant force, and for a bait to get sucked in, that float needs to give in to the attempt. If an angler is utilizing a properly sized float, matched with the correct amount of weighting down the line, usually in the form of lead split shot, then the outcome is more likely to be a positive one. And it is here that the majority of problems begin to occur. Let's look at an experiment I carried out to make the point.

I ran a simple test carried out in my kitchen using distilled water at room temperature and an assortment of 14 different floats typically seen on any given day in use by anglers. Each float had a small length of line with a hook attached to it, whereby I could add specific increments of known weight until the float achieved near neutral buoyancy. It is this level of near neutral buoyancy that needs to be achieved with any given float to maximize the sensitivity of the float. Near neutral buoyancy means the slightest pull on the bait lets the float give in to the consumptive demands of the fish. It becomes the signal that a successful bite has occurred as the float slowly gets pulled down and away, the fish feeling only the slightest resistance. It is the understanding of how much weight is required to properly neutralize the buoyancy in a float that starts separating the knowledgeable anglers from the novices. Let's look at a listing of floats tested and an accompanying chart that shows the data.

Looking at the above data, simply match the float number in the chart to its corresponding picture above. The amount of weight needed to neutralize each float is listed in the 2nd column. All weights have been converted into 32nds of an

ounce for simple comparison sake. Column 3 has those same weights converted to a decimal and rounded to the third place. The fourth column uses an equivalence based on the standard lead BB shot. In other words, how many lead BB shot would you need to add to a given float to neutralize its inherent buoyancy. Notice also that floats 'G' and 'M' are already pre-weighted from the manufacturer, meaning the stated amount required to neutralize doesn't take into account the additional weight already on the float. It actually takes more weight than listed, the amount determined by adding my test weight to the amount of the installed weight.

By looking at the numbers of required BB shot to neutralize a float, you can quickly understand most peoples failure. They are either using a float too large, simple because it requires so much weight to neutralize, or they are failing to add enough weight to the given float used to get that neutralization. Either way they are increasing the amount of force required by the fish to overcome that difference. The greater that difference, the less likely a fish is to successfully engulf the bait, which means the less likely you are to catch that fish. In most panfishing scenarios, you really only need a few different floats to cover a range of techniques that will catch bluegill and crappie all year long. For less than \$20 you can put together a pretty potent arsenal of floats, weights, hooks and jigs that will allow you to greatly increase the number of panfish you bring to hand. Let me share what I recommend and the techniques I use.

I spend a decent bit of time each year fishing for panfish, and utilize a small but effective arsenal of floats for year round applications on both gills and crappies. My basic setups are in the picture above. That is a nickel in the picture for size comparisons.

A.) is my summer and fall setup for either bluegill or crappie. A very small slip float with some "shoulders" is what I use when fish have moved out into deeper, more open water. The extra bulk lets you use both larger shot weights as well as keeping the float up in the current and waves common in open water. The shot in the picture are larger #2 shot which weigh almost 1/8-oz each. One of these is sufficient to get both the weight you need to cast as well as getting your bait down quickly to the fish. The key is balancing the weight to the float. Ideally you want to use the smallest float you can and then just enough weight to keep it buoyant and doing its job. This allows for extra sensitivity and minimal resistance to a biting fish. For gills I use crickets with a long shank #6 or #8 hook. For minnows, a similar but larger #2 size hook is in order. Shot is placed about 8"-12" above the hook and no further. You want to give a little bit of room for your bait to have some action yet still register a take quickly to the float above. Additionally, the fish needs a little "slack" to be able to suck in your bait without feeling any extra resistance. This setup works great in those applications.

B.) is my spring bluegill setup. These are Mini Shy Bite floats from Lindy. The particular sizes I use are MSB2's and MSB3's, requiring only 1-2 BB split shot on the line to balance the float. Adding a third BB shot will actually sink this float. Again, the smallest float with the proper weighting for maximum sensitivity is what you are shooting for. Notice the little black rubber bands at both the top and bottom stems of the float. This is used to pin your line against the float and hold it in place securely without any damage to your line, as well as allowing for very quick depth adjustments. Never use the spring loaded clip floats if you don't have to. They will damage and weaken your line. I usually space the two BB shot out toward the bottom half of the line but again, no closer than 8" or so to the hooks. This setup is very effective from 1' down to about 5' of depth being a fixed float setup. Beemoths or crickets are the bait of choice with the same #6 or #8 hook from the summer setup.

C.) is my spring crappie setup. This is a waggler type float with a single fixed rubber sleeve on the bottom stem. There is actually a small hole in the stem bottom that the line slides through before sliding the rubber sleeve over the line to hold it in place. The reason for the bigger "body" in this instance is because I'm floating tube or hair jigs under this float and the extra buoyancy is needed to help suspend the weight. The smaller orange tipped float will hold up to 1/16-oz and the slightly larger yellow tipped float will work with weights up to 1/8-oz. No split shot is used with this setup. Again, a fixed line setup that works great from 1'-5' deep. I simply set the depth then pitch the float/jig setup to stumps, bushes, docks or laydowns. The small size and very light weight allow for a very quiet presentation in water as shallow as 1 foot around spawning crappies. Let the jig settle and then use small, intermittent twitches with pauses added as you tease those crappie into biting. Again, a perfectly weighted setup means almost no resistance to the biting fish on both setups 'B' or 'C'.

Lets take a quick look at baits to use with these setups:

- Tube jigs - Used with the Thill waggler floats for spring crappie. Thill floats are specifically labeled as to what amount of weight will properly neutralize a specific float. The two in the picture are designed to float 1/16-oz. and 1/8-oz. jigs. As such, I carry a good assortment of these two weights. Additionally, I like to also carry some 1/32-oz. and some 3/32-oz. heads just for specific conditions. The majority of my crappie fishing is utilizing tube jigs, so I always have a wide variety of these baits on hand. Any good tube in the 1.5"-1.75" range will team up nicely with the above jigheads. If you are around large fish, going to the heavier heads with a 2" or larger tube will sometimes work well.
- Crickets - Bluegill absolutely love crickets. The kind you find in most bait shops are actually grey crickets (*Acheta domestica*). There are many ways to hook these critters. I've tried going under the collar, through the back, even Texas-rigging of sorts. The best though seems to be starting at the hind end of the cricket and simply threading him on the hook so that the point comes out through the head area, which is the toughest part of a crickets body. Most times this

works well, though I have found some waters that get a lot of pressure where a hooking arrangement that left the cricket lively and kicking made the difference.

- Minnows - Commonly referred to as 'crappie minnows', what is actually being sold is a minnow called the fathead. There is a variation you'll find popular in some parts of the country called a 'Rosy Red'. Again, many ways to hook them; through the lips, through the eyes, under the back dorsal or even in the tail. I'm not sure it matters much. I really hate having to deal with minnows, so I do all my crappie fishing with artificials (tube jigs). I can usually always find enough biters that will eat a tube, so that's how I roll. Live minnows can be very effective though.

- Bee Moths - Actually the larvae of the wax moth. The moth sneaks by the bees and lays its eggs in the cells of a bee hive. The larvae hatch and eat the wax of the hive, often destroying it in the process. A really fascinating read. I like these for bluegill in the spring because they are readily available, quick and clean. I simply thread the larvae on the hook, starting just below the head and through the ligaments that compose the leg structures. Then thread the larvae onto the hook with the point ending up at the tail of the grub. You don't even have to expose the hook point. Rigging like this leaves the head to wriggle around a bit creating that all important movement, yet the body is soft enough that there are no issues with hooking fish.

This is all you need to know about tackle and rigging to successfully target panfish year round in most waters. The next time you're hanging around the tackle store, take a look at their float and shot collection and give these particular baits and methods a try.