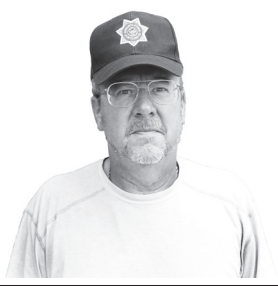
CRAYFISH OR CRAWDAD – DELICIOUS, BY ANY NAME



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

When I was just a youngster, somewhere around 4 years old, my family vacationed on a lake in Northern Wisconsin. It was a great experience for a young boy to be able to run wild in the Northwoods and play in the pristine waters.

We went to the lake one afternoon for a swim. I had an innertube along and planned on floating around and paddling in the shallows of the sand bottomed lake. As I stood on the dock, I looked in the water and noticed a strange creature. This creature had claws, seemingly large enough to bite off the lower appendages of someone about my size. He was extremely large, so large in fact, I believe he could be tracked on a ship's sonar.

Upon pointing out the strange creature to my grandfather, he told me that it was just a crayfish, or crawdad as he used to call them. He assured me that, yes indeed, that creature of the deep could indeed bite off my fingers, toes and just about any other body part that got near him, and that I best steer clear. Not being known for an abundance of raw courage at that age, I decided that the water was in fact, much too cold for a swim and decided to seek my entertainment elsewhere, far out of reach of those deadly claws.

Since that early traumatic encounter with a man-eating crawfish, I have eaten at least a boxcar full of them, and used an equal number as live bait for smallmouth bass. If a smallmouth is not afraid of them, and eat them whole, what have I got to be worried about?

Of all the crayfish in the State of Colorado, none of them belong here, and none of them are native. The most common crayfish, the one most likely to fill your traps in our area, is the rusty crayfish. He goes by his scientific name *Orconectes rusticus* in most social situations, but to us, he is a crawdad. Just so there is no confusion, crayfish and crawfish are interchangeable, and he will answer to either surname.

Faith and Chance Watkins cautiously hold a crawdad at Miramonte Reservoir. (Courtesy photo)

Rusty crayfish have large, very robust claws, unlike other members of the genus *Orconectes.* They are a dark reddish brown and have dark rusty-like spots on each side of their carapace at the base of the cephalothorax. They are native to the Ohio River Basin, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and expanded their region to Wisconsin and the Great Lakes Region, where he is likely the species I encountered as a kid.

This crayfish is not very particular about where he lives, inhabiting streams, lakes, ponds, any underwater rocky substrate, sunken logs and various debris, pretty much anything that has cover. They will live in pools of still water and fast-flowing streams.

Rusty crayfish mate in the late summer, early fall, and sometimes in the spring, depending largely on water temperatures. The female expels the eggs, which are then fertilized by the male. The eggs are then attached to the swimmerets underneath the crayfish's abdomen with white patches. These white patches are called glair, and the eggs stick to this mucus-like substance. The female will carry anywhere from 100 to 600 eggs.

Depending on the water temperature, the eggs will hatch in 3 to 6 weeks. Young crayfish will undergo 3 to 4 molts while still attached to their mother and remain with the mother for several weeks. Once the young leave home, they will undergo 8 to 10 more molts before reaching maturity.

Maturity usually occurs the following year. When mature, the crayfish will be almost 2 inches long. As an adult, the males will molt twice a year, while the females will molt once a year. Generally, the crawdad will reach

A close-up of Orconectes rusticus. (Courtesy photo)

a length of 4 inches, but can make it past 6 inches if he is not counting his calories. They appear much larger because of the oversize claws. In the wild, they can live to 3 or 4 years of age.

The rusty crayfish does not dig deep burrows but may dig smaller pockets alongside rocks or underwater debris. They are very aggressive and will force other species of crayfish from their hiding areas. Whenever threatened, they will take a claws-up ready to fight position. They will happily wrestle with other crayfish, eventually using those huge claws in an aggressive encounter.

These crayfish are voracious feeders because they have a high metabolic rate. The juveniles will often feed on fish eggs, while the grown-ups eat aquatic plants, snails, clams, leeches, insects, other crustaceans, fish eggs, and just about anything else not nailed down. They also feed heavily on native aquatic plants that are necessary for habitat of other aquatic species.

Initially, the rusty crayfish was introduced to the Great Lakes Region by fisherman who were using them for bait. It is believed that is how they found their way to Colorado. Rusty crayfish were first detected in Colorado in the Yampa River and Catamount Reservoir in 2009, then in Sanchez State Wildlife Area in 2010. Today they are pretty much everywhere.

Crayfish can be taken for personal consumption in Colorado, but care should be taken with their use and disposal. The Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), recommend the tails be removed immediately and packed on ice for transport home.

Next time you head up to do a little fishing on the banks of one of our reservoirs, take a couple crayfish traps along. Bait them up and let them have a good soak while you are fishing. You might be surprised by the crayfish that pile into the trap, and it is a great addition to a fish dinner. Boil them up Cajun style. But beware of the maneater size ones. I know there are a few of them around.

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Something old, new, borrowed, blue – Talking biochar in our national forests

By Michelle Putz, USFS

Special to the MDP

Sometimes something old becomes something new. For example, most people are familiar with charcoal, having used it to grill a summer meal. However, biochar, charcoal's twin, is new to a lot of folks.

Biochar is a carbon-rich soil amendment created by burning wood waste with special equipment at relatively low temperatures. Increases in wood waste —down trees, logs, branches— from fire hazard reduction projects can become something new when turned into biochar.

Resource specialists on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests wanted to see the process in action to learn more. They recently partnered with the Rocky Mountain Research Station to host a field demonstration of mobile equipment for making biochar out of poor-quality wood waste that could not be sold. The Research Station brought an air curtain incinerator to the forest. The Forest Service and Trout Unlimited will use this biochar to help restore a former mine under a Bipartisan Infrastructure Law-funded proposal.

Wood waste left from timber or fuel reduction projects, known as slash, is typically piled and burned under favorable conditions. This practice reduces excess fuels that can otherwise feed wildland fires but can also generate smoke and burn scars that impact soil productivity and allow weeds to invade.

See BIOCHAR page A3

The GMUG Watershed Program Manager leads a group discussion about the hydrology and wetland restoration that is part of the remediation at the Forest Hill Mine. (USDA Forest Service/Gina Rone)