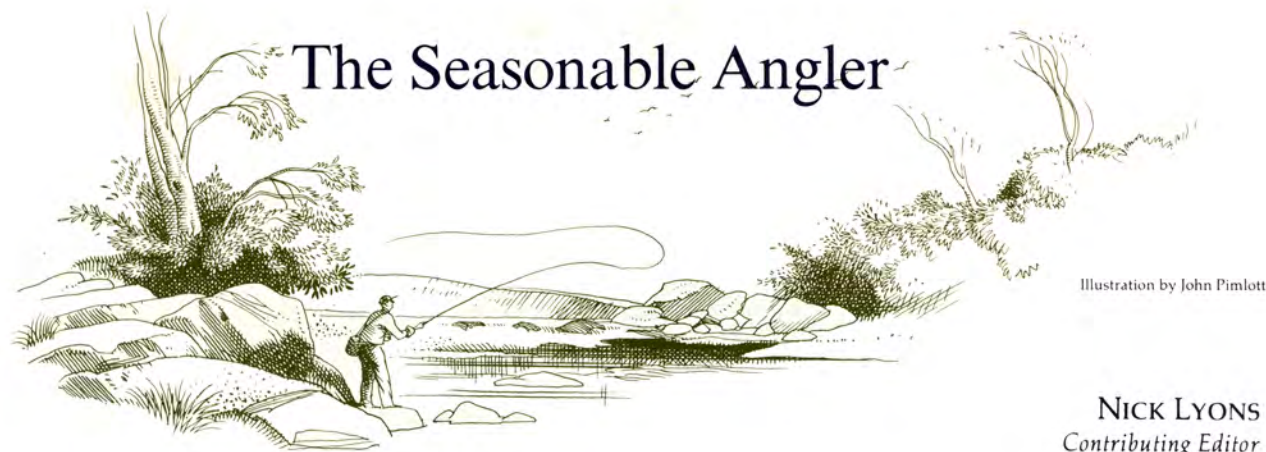




Homage à Bluegills—and Pumpkinseeds, Too

DUROCHER ONCE SAID OF EDDIE STANKY: “He can’t run, he can’t field, and he can’t hit, but he’s the best player on the Dodgers.” It could be said of bluegills and pumpkinseeds that they run to no size, can be caught in dreary field ponds, and will even hit cigarette butts—but I won’t say it.

They are the harlequins of kids’ hearts, grand and generous fish, whiffs of youth for many a middle-aged trout snob.

Me, for instance.

Lepomis macrochirus — it belies the lovely simplicity of the bluegill to drape it in Latin; pumpkinseed, *Lepomis gibbosus*, of the bright orange belly, with shimmering green-blue sides and that prickly dorsal you must smooth and lock back with a thrust of your palm: low on the pecking order, high in the heart.

They were the first fish I caught on a fly, the first I caught by *any* method. In my dotage, when the fly comes no longer lightly to the rise, I hope some good soul will wheel me to the bank of a weedy field pond with lots of pancake-size spawning nests in view, so I can slap my

Bumble Bee down while shuffling slowly through senility and off this mortal coil. Often enough, the fly comes not light even now—and a good substitute for throwing myself upon a sword when I’ve botched the trout game is surely to let the *Lepomis* massage my ego a bit with their ready antics.

If only they weren’t so small, I used to moan when I first caught them in South Lake and in the lake runoff (where they were positively stunted). The cork bobber, threaded through, would begin a spritely jig, then dart down at an angle; I’d yank, and there it was, flopping in the boat a second later—four inches, maybe five, of flopping blue, green, and orange. One didn’t particularly have to be a big-fish fisherman to desire more for one’s cranelike wait: they were midgets; they were—no doubt about it—a one-yank fish.

When I was sent, rather against my will, to a gloomy boarding school in Peekskill, bluegills and pumpkinseeds were my salvation. I credit them with no less. I was five, then six, then seven, then eight there—and they yanked me through. For all the gray of grayness, for all the chest-

Please backcast to page 86

Seasonable Angler. . .

Continued from page 88

wracking loneliness I felt in that old Victorian spook-house of a school, the little Ice Pond—a couple of acres of it—was green and live and generous. Though quite alone, I was never once lonely there. I can look intently at one photograph taken of me, knee deep in that muddy pond, in short pants and a sailor’s blouse, holding a crooked bark-stripped poplar pole, and there is no touch of loneliness on the face. The eyes are intent, awake, as if through my pole and cheap green line I am plugged into some life current.

It was only a muddy pond with no current, a big basin of tepid water near a highway, this Ice Pond, but it was the home of harlequins. I learned to wait and watch, to stalk with some caution, to *think* underwater. Mostly I caught bluegills, fewer and bigger than those at South Lake, and a few bright, mature pumpkinseeds that circled with tough tugs and had to be eased not yanked from their element. On a Saturday afternoon in May, when others went with their guests, I could stand there hour after hour, my toes curled into the mud, my corn-kernel can of dug worms on a nearby rock, my eyes unflinchingly locked to the cork bobber.

And so, on bluegills and pumpkinseeds, the hook was set deep, into the marrow and into the affections—and when the hook grew feathers, the fish were still there, still as happily accommodating. (I only wish my own children had come to fishing on them, for their trout days have been long and often fishless and frustrating.)

I was seventeen or eighteen when I bought my first fly rod for fly fishing; I’d had a telescopic steel rod first—after the cut or cane poles—then a twelve-buck Heddon bamboo that broke on a foul-hooked ten-pound carp, then an array of spinning rods with which I learned to perform prodigious feats. But I never used flies with those first fly rods, only bait. That summer in my late teens, while waiting on tables at a summer camp, I earned enough to buy an eight-foot glass fly rod, a dozen cheap, snelled flies, and a level “C” fly line and spool of level leader. I had been watching, with increasing awe, the fly fishermen who plied their elusive art on afternoons when I was about to leave the East or the West Branch of the Croton. They seemed no less than an advanced stage of evolution; there was grace and delicacy in what they did. Better, they never snagged bottom—and they *did* catch fish when even I, master of worm and spinner, could not.

So I bought the ill-matched mishmash of gear that summer, and since Ellis Pond was handy and I had my evenings free, I’d head off beyond the docks to a weedy flat near the bend of the shore and flail away. No one taught me—which showed. (And still does.) I put backcasts into rocks and shrubs, slapped the water to a thick foam, tangled myself in my level “C” fly line—and caught bluegills.

Did I catch bluegills!

That ragged #8 Bumble Bee could take thirty in an evening. Whipping and waving, I’d get the fly a few feet beyond my nose, down on the water like a tossed rock, and they’d riot for it. Against the soft bend of the rod,

“RAINY DAY—RESTIGOUCHE RIVER”



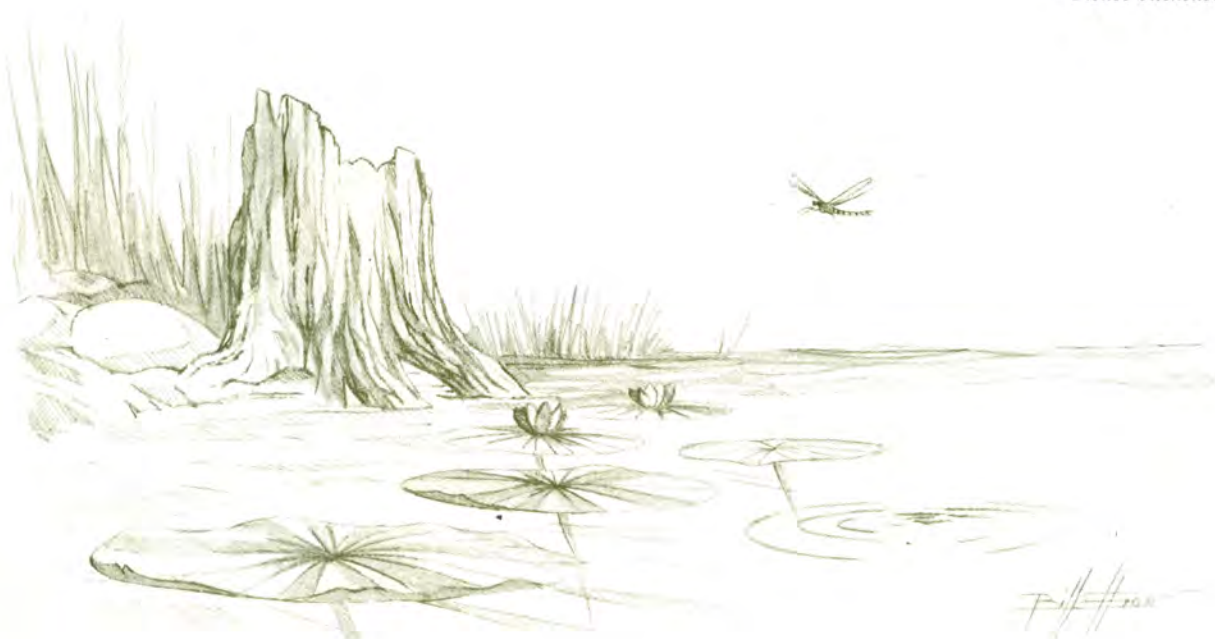
This is the first of a series of Hunting and Fishing Prints by

Churchill Ettinger

in
a Limited Edition of 400
printed on 80 lb. Rives Paper
Print Size 31 × 24
in full color.

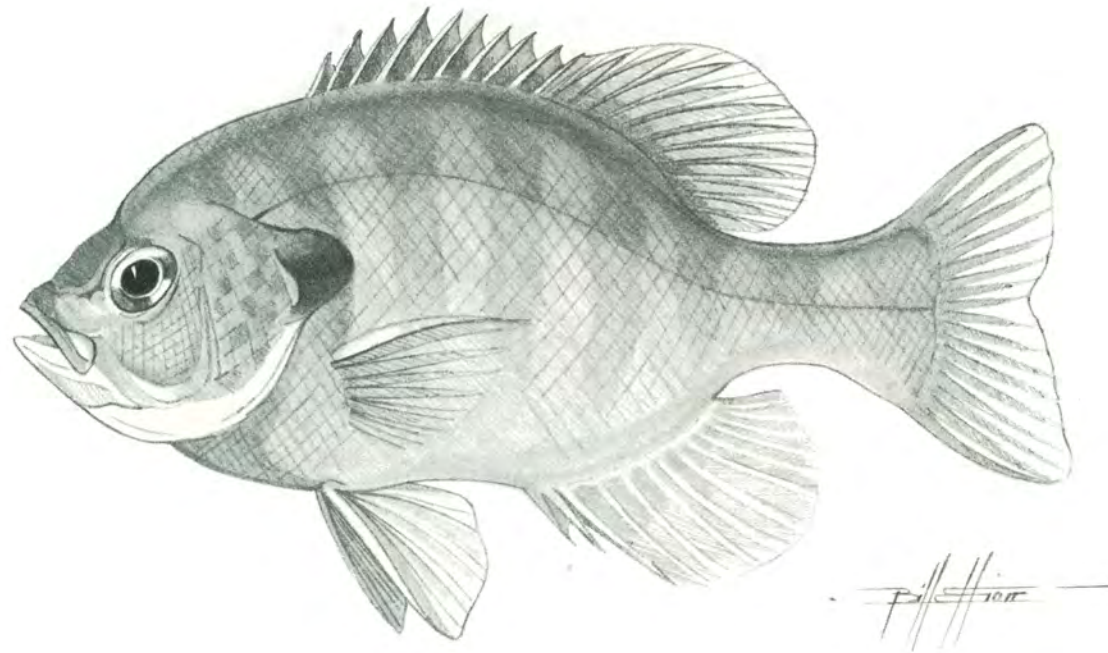
Signed and numbered
by the artist \$75.00
Remarqued prints \$125.00

**READ PUBLISHING,
INC.
PERU, VERMONT 05152**



MID-SEASON • 1976
Volume 7 • Number Six
Price \$1.50

Fly Fisherman



they couldn't be yanked, and I learned finger positions for drawing in line, getting it back on the reel, keeping it from tangling at my feet. We educated each other, those bluegills and I. By late August, they were warier, I was defter.

Not deft enough for trout, not nearly—but better. Good enough to cast, say, twenty-five feet. Good enough to jiggle the fly, twitch it just right, so it brought that pinched swirl that let me know a fish had taken the slightly sunken, battered Bumble Bee.

NOW AND THEN THE CHANCE COMES to taste a food you loved as a child—fresh wild strawberries, perhaps, or tart blackberries from a thorny bush. Berries with memories. Bill Humphrey and I had found his local creeks dead as trapped mice one hot June afternoon, and he whisked me up to a scrubby little pond on a neighbor's land. It was rarely fished. It was quite choked already with lily pads and long high weed. It was perhaps fifty yards all the way around. But what fat bluegills it had, and how readily they came to tiny popping bugs that evening! And what simple good fun we had, mingled with memories, as we stalked through the high grasses along the shore. We'd cast one of those six-for-a-buck poppers out, twitch it, let it sit, twitch it again. A midget would tap the thing, *splat-splat*, then a big gulp-rise and a plump bluegill was on, circling at right angles against the tug of the line, tugging with its jerky tugs, twice its weight in pluck.

They were fat, but if only they were still a little larger, I thought.

AND THEN, LAST WEEK, Thom Green called me from Tulsa. He is a big-fish fisherman of the first water. He takes big lake rainbows on his big Brown Leech; record white bass; cutthroats the size of your arm. He casts his shooting head a hundred feet and prowls big waters for big fish. There was this pond in Utah, he said.

Did it hold rainbows, big browns?

Nope.

Fat smallmouths, maybe?

Bluegills.

Bluegills?

"Well," he said, "I'd heard about it, and the reports told of bluegills up to a pound, pound and a half."

"Those're big bluegills!"

"I was working in that area last fall and got to speak to the local conservation officer. When I asked him about the pond he said, 'Would you believe two to three pounds?'"

"The conservation officer said that?"

"Can you go this summer, Nick?"

"To Utah? For bluegills?" I'd rather been working my mind into a salmon mood, or perhaps the Madison during stonefly time. I had Henry's Fork on the brain—and the East Branch, the Firehole, and dusk hatches in long Montana evenings.

"The man said, 'Would you believe two to three pounds?'"

"But that's two thousand miles. . . ."

"On popping bugs. Three-pound bluegills."

Lepomis macrochirus monstruosus! Wouldn't dreams of those enliven my dotage!

"Will you go?"

"I'm already there," I said. 🐟

