

## Add food mimics to your bait menu

May 24, 2007

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It was blowing so hard there was an inch-high chop on the birdbath. The 47-degree temperature didn't bode well for fly hatches, and a light-but-steady drizzle didn't add to the day's attractiveness.

So the smart thing to do was to grab a spinning rod and go to a lake where a wooded shoreline provided protection from the 20-knot northwest wind and where the bluegills might be staging near the shallows where they'll start spawning in a week or two.

On this trip, I passed on the usual baits for bluegills -- worms, wigglers and maggots -- and tried several artificials from Berkley and Food Source Lures, artificials that the companies claim are as effective or better than the real thing.

The results were excellent. The gills happily took Berkley Gulp wigglers and Food Source one-inch mealworms, on this day showing a preference for green baits in each product.

I've been experimenting fairly extensively with both Gulp and Food Source lures for a year, mostly for bass, walleyes and salmon. But new bait regulations that we'll see this summer because of a new fish disease are spurring me to extend those experiments to other species.

Baits made from natural materials and biodegradable plastics will become more common as Michigan and other states take steps to slow the spread of viral hemorrhagic septicemia. Fisheries biologists worry that not only can the disease be spread by body fluids from sick fish, it may also be moved in the water from live wells and bait buckets used to hold everything from minnows to leeches.

New regulations probably will require that natural baits like minnows, salmon eggs, frozen herring, leeches and wigglers come from sources certified disease-free. That will undoubtedly raise the price of the naturals and make things like Gulp and Food Source lures more competitively priced.

Gulp lures, produced by Berkley, one of the big players in the industry, are made from biodegradable plastic and have achieved widespread acceptance.

Food Source Lures, developed by scientists at Auburn University in Alabama, are even more intriguing because the ingredients listed on the packages are "Fish food; flavor attractants; food colors; food preservatives." The company says some lures also contain small amounts of glitter, salt and amino acids, the latter also used extensively by European companies that manufacture complex carp baits.

Ed Rogers is president of Food Source ("And you can sometimes find me taking out the trash."). He said the lures came about when an angler wondered "if you can have a lure that looks like a plastic worm but is made out of food."

Rogers said the man posed the question because "his dog ate a bag of plastic worms scented with garlic and pork, and it got pretty sick. He lived near a place where eagles nested and worried that if the fishermen left plastic worms and the eagles ate them, they'd get sick or die, too. I don't think there was really any threat to eagles, but we were able to start a company commercializing on the technology that Auburn developed."

I found that Food Source minnows made excellent swimbaits for bass, and they also worked well for drop-shotting. And on a day on the Saginaw River when the carp and catfish ignored corn and paste baits, Food Source Carp Candies produced a couple of dozen fish.

Of course, these bait-mimicking lures don't always work, so having a selection of food mimics will certainly increase an angler's options.

Tim Giraud of Taylor said he bought some Gulp imitation minnows a few years ago when his local bait shop ran out of live minnows, "and they worked so well jigging for walleyes that I stopped using live bait."

"The (man-made lures) are so much easier. You can keep them in their packages for months and store hundreds of them in a soft tackle bag. And you can get them in all kinds of colors. That's been really effective," he said.

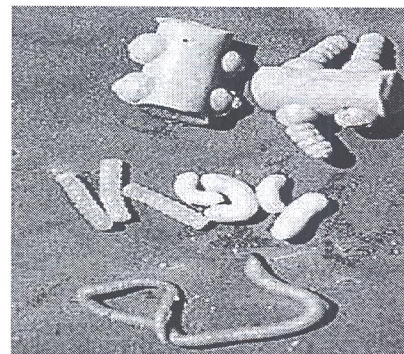
"We were out on Trenton Channel (in the Detroit River) one morning last month when nobody was doing much. I decided to try something a little different and switched from a minnow-colored Gulp fry to a color they call smelt, and I started getting fish. If I was using real minnows, I wouldn't have had that option," he said.

Giraud said that the minnows he uses sell for about \$5 a dozen, or roughly 50 percent more than live minnows, "but I think the artificials work out cheaper, because you can usually catch more than one fish on them. You get one minnow on a walleye, and it's usually chewed up so bad you have to toss it."

Last fall, I used Gulp and Food Source artificial salmon eggs and found they worked as well as or better than real spawn or the egg flies I tie from colored yarns. The artificial eggs stayed on a hook very well, so well they could be cast on a fly rod as readily as the egg flies.

I could also keep in my fly vest three little bottles of chartreuse, salmon and red eggs that would have taken many hours to tie in yarn.

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**Whether it's customized carrion for catfish (top), faux fly larvae (center) or ersatz earthworms, manmade baits can be effective.**