# Targeting Citation Bluegills:

Cherished Fishing Memories!

## Tipping the Odds in Your Favor

by Brad S. Hierstetter

Volume 1: Optimizing Location

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**Targeting Citation Bluegills: Tipping the Odds in Your Favor (Volume 1: Optimizing Location)**



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# Table of Contents

**Preface** i

**Introduction** iii

**Step 1: Identify Worthwhile Waters** 1

**Step 2: Refine Where You Will Fish** 5

- **Winter** 7
- **Case Study: Applying the Framework** 11
- **Early Spring** 15
- **Pre-Spawn & Spawn** 17
- **Post-Spawn/Summer** 23
- **Fall** 25

**Ponds: Do Not Discount Them!** 29

**Closing Thoughts** 33

**Appendix A: Common North American Panfish** 35

**Appendix B: *In-Fisherman's* Bluegill Length to Weight Conversion Chart** 41

# Preface

**ANGLING CONSISTENCY IS ROOTED IN AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE QUARRY, NOT IN CHANCE.**

You want to catch more big bluegills, more regularly; however, you often fall short of this goal -- more often than not, if you are perfectly honest. Without question, proven ways of tipping the odds in your favor exist. In fact, this two-book series will provide you with a reliable framework through which to understand these specific methods and means.

The purpose of this volume is to convey how you can identify prime locations for larger bluegills (herein referred to as "citation gills") at both the macro and micro levels. Before delving too aggressively into this first book, however, you should be aware of my strong contention that **lack of effort will not cultivate angling consistency**. It never has and it never will, regardless of what you fish for.

If you count yourself among those anglers who desire to catch citation gills more consistently (more specifically, those who are truly committed to learning about their behavioral tendencies), I encouraged you to proceed confidently. You will reap rewards over time, because anglers who understand their quarry -- those who have made the necessary investments, in other words -- achieve their objectives with increased regularity!



# Introduction

Bluegill fishing is a time-tested pastime replete with intrinsic virtues. That bluegills are, in many respects, an 'equal opportunity employer' is, to many, their most appealing quality. They are distributed widely and are thus readily accessible to large numbers of anglers. In fact, male and female anglers of all ages and skill levels can (and do!) enjoy catching bluegills year-round. Plus, they can be caught using a variety of equipment spanning the gametes of cost, complexity, and ingenuity. Lastly, did I mention that bluegills **(selectively harvested, of course)** are easy to clean and cook, and so very tasty?

Now, I fully recognize that not every angler pursues bluegills with the primary objective of consistently catching the biggest of the bunch. Truth be told, many bluegill anglers fish for a host of other reasons, all perfectly legitimate, which have little or nothing to do with the size of their catches. If you consider size an important determinant of successful bluegill fishing, though, I encourage you to continue reading.

Wise anglers acknowledge two fundamental prerequisites to catching citation gills with increased regularity. The first is optimal location; a sound approach is the second. If you commit to meeting these two conditions, in the order presented, you will no doubt greatly tip the odds in your favor!

**ANGLERS WHO OPTIMIZE LOCATION AND THEN PLAN AND EXECUTE A SOUND APPROACH CATCH MORE CITATION GILLS, MORE OFTEN.**

Throughout this two-volume series, I will outline and describe a framework that will enable you to clearly identify specific actions you can take to enhance where and how you fish for citation gills. Remember, though, that with citation gill fishing, angler intervention -- in the form of learning about the behavioral tendencies of bluegills, planning, and making occasional adjustments -- is a necessity. It is in fact unavoidable because bluegill success, or the lack thereof, is determined by countless varied factors. No angler can predict or control all of these elements.



The initial tasks at hand, then -- which are the sole focus areas of this first volume -- are: 1.) To explain to you how to find waterways containing worthwhile citation gill populations and 2.) To assist you with narrowing where within your chosen waters you will fish. After all, even the best approaches will be predestined to fail if citation gills are non-existent in the waters where you will expend your fishing efforts.

# STEP 1: IDENTIFY WORTHWHILE WATERS

**L**ocation, of course, has everything to do with where you fish and, certainly, fishing in waters where a sizeable citation gill population has been documented (or, at an absolute minimum, some citation gills are known to exist) will tip the odds in your favor. In thinking about where to fish from a macro view, always be mindful that few public waterways are intentionally "managed" with the sole or even the primary goal of producing or sustaining a noteworthy population of citation gills.

Conversely, and for several reasons, many waters are in fact overpopulated with bluegills. Citation gill anglers who fish waters where the density of bluegills far exceeds that ecosystem's capability to sustain their steady growth (a carrying capacity imbalance, in other words) are presented with additional challenges. Thus, it is best to avoid overpopulated waters if at all possible. These waters will likely be loaded with excessive numbers of smaller, "growth-stunted" bluegills.

Research will be necessary to identify bluegill waters in your area-of-interest that offer quality opportunities at larger fish. Contacting the government fisheries personnel responsible for managing the waters within your desired locale is a logical and often fruitful starting point. Be sure to give them enough relevant information to properly assist you; facts such as the time of year that you plan to fish, where you live, how far you are willing to travel, and whether you will be fishing from a boat or from shore often determine whether you receive a generic, high-level response or one more in tune with your specific goals.



The internet is another excellent tool for locating nearby citation gill waters. Entering search phrases such as "best big bluegill waters" or "big bluegills in xx" (where "xx" is your state-of-interest) into your favorite web search engine will yield valuable information. With search engine results, though, be sure to delve beyond simply the first or second page of listings.

Certainly, as you move past pages one and two, the odds of the results becoming less relevant will increase, but within this mixed bag of listings is often a gem or two most worthy of your time and attention. Lastly, never underestimate the value of perusing websites built specifically with bluegill anglers -- especially, anglers who target larger bluegills -- in mind and do not hesitate to network with these site's administrators and/or regular contributors. One such site is *Bluegill -- Big Bluegill* (http://www.bigbluegill.com/); others include *Bluegill Fishing Magazine* (http://www.2lbgil.com/), *Bluegill Slayer* (http://bluegillslayer.com/), and *Bluegill World* (http://www.bluegillworld.com/).

Preexisting perceptions aside, social media -- *Facebook*, in particular -- can also effectively narrow the search for proximate citation gill

waters. Just be mindful that people often create topic-specific pages on *Facebook*, which sometimes fizzle once the excitement that initially accompanies them diminishes. The result can be a page with few recent posts. Skimming the information posted when visitors were more active often yields worthwhile information, though. On *Facebook*, be certain to review *Big Bluegill, Big Bluegill Fishing Magazine*, *Bluegill Fishing*, and *BLUEGILL Ultralight fishing* -- all of which exist as of this writing -- and be sure to check for new pages regularly.

Also, do not overlook more traditional means of identifying convenient citation gill waters. Local bait and tackle shops are one such information source. Relatives and trusted friends, regardless of which fish they currently or primarily target, are other potential sources. Remember, bluegills served as an angling obsession for some young anglers and as an introduction to fishing for countless others. Skimming current and back issues of printed multi-species fishing and outdoor magazines such as *In-Fisherman* and *Field & Stream* can also prove fruitful.



# STEP 2: REFINE WHERE YOU WILL FISH

Now that you have completed your macro-level research and analyses, you will next want to narrow where within your chosen waterways you will fish. At this stage, you will do best to rely upon an understanding of the within-year movements and general behavioral tendencies of bluegills. It is prudent to allow the observations of biologists and experienced, successful bluegill anglers guide your choices in this regard.

Like many other species, bluegills (regardless of where they are found) generally engage in predictable movements in response to

changes in air temperatures, and thus water temperatures. Use water temperatures as your primary gauge and fine-tune where you fish to align to these water temperature-based movements. Keep in mind, too, that many of these movements generally correspond to regional seasons or to the transitions between seasons. Changing where you fish based upon water temperatures is a surefire way to tip the odds in your favor!



# WINTER

**Winter Tendencies:**

In early winter, bluegills may continue to hold close to the shallow covers they gravitated to during the fall, especially if fall weather was relatively mild. Near this wood (brush piles, sunken logs, submerged trees, boat houses, docks, and piers), rocks, and decaying vegetation, they will actively feed in anticipation of the much colder temperatures that will soon accompany mid and late winter.

As falling water temperatures continue to head toward winter lows, the metabolisms of these now well-fed bluegills will have also slowed. These factors combine, triggering bluegills to

move to deeper waters. They will spend winter along nearby ledges, in holes, and near dams.

**Practical Winter Pointers:**

- In dammed lakes that contain a water intake tower near the dam's "walls", a concealed drain or discharge pipe often runs from this tower to a nearby and otherwise seemingly unattached spillway. In addition to the deeper waters around these main lake intake towers, do not overlook these spillways. Spillways are generally small and often harbor fish of many sizes. A larger, yet still suitable, bait and a slightly larger hook (e.g., a size 6 vice a size 8 hook) will often effectively discourage smaller fish.

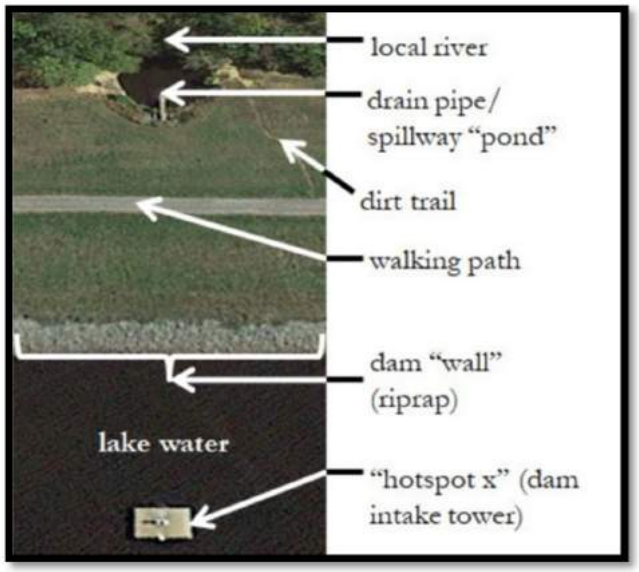
- A consequence of slowing winter metabolisms, bluegills are disinclined to expend energy widely searching for, or chasing, a meal. Remember, too, that larger bluegills naturally have slower metabolic rates than smaller fish. Still, most will not refuse a fresh, natural bait dangled directly in front of them. If you do not get "bit" fairly quickly, move to other likely wintering spots or -- if you choose not to



move to an entirely new spot -- be very, very patient. Regardless, do not leave your bait in one spot indefinitely -- occasionally cast to different locations and depths.

# CASE STUDY: APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

I live within 10 minutes of a 250-acre lake, which until this year I had never seriously fished for citation bluegills. Last year, while researching where to focus my winter citation gill fishing efforts, I entered "panfish in st. mary's lake Maryland" into my internet search engine. This search returned a link to an excellent article about this nearby lake, written by Holly Innes and entitled "ST. MARY'S LAKE: HOT MARYLAND FRESHWATER FISHING". In this article, Ms. Innes refers to the water intake tower depicted on the following page as "hotspot x". She also mentions the presence of fish in the adjacent spillway pond.




I then utilized the "Google Earth" cell phone application to hone in on the portion of St. Mary's Lake that contained what Ms. Innes described as "hotspot x". The view that Google Earth afforded me clearly showed that both "hotspot x" and the nearby spillway pond are a short walk from the lake's main parking lot and easily reachable via a well-defined, flat walking path and a dirt trail. This basic research yielded a very convenient place where I can reliably fish for bluegills throughout the winter.



**Tip:**

- Periodically review information about the locational tendencies of largemouth bass and crappie, which is rather plentiful in both published and unpublished (e.g., word of mouth) formats. Doing so can be worthwhile because these two fishes are members of the same family as bluegills. Being relatives, all exhibit some common behaviors.

# EARLY SPRING

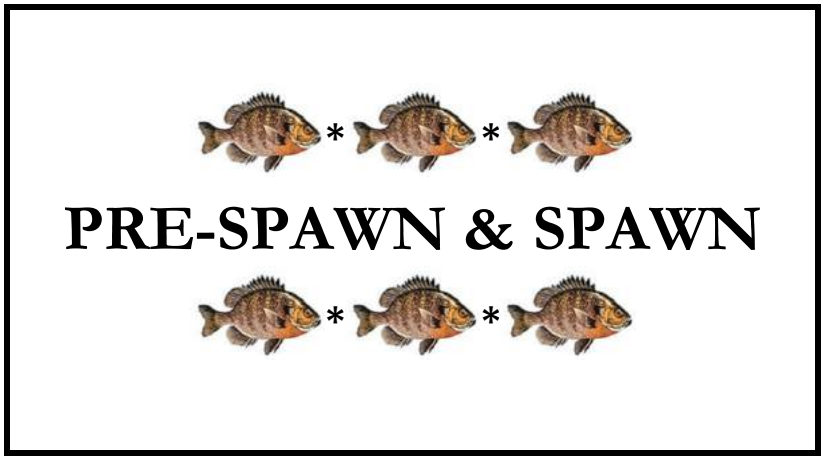
**Early Spring Tendencies:**

Water temperatures will steadily rise from winter lows as a result of several consecutive sunny, warmer days. As warming water temperatures climb into the upper 40 degree Fahrenheit range, bluegills will move from deeper wintering spots to nearby shallower waters. Here, they will concentrate in protective structures, which at this time of year are comprised primarily of rocks and wood (brush piles, sunken logs, submerged trees, boat houses, docks, and piers), not far from deeper waters.

**Practical Early Spring Pointers:**

- In early spring, waters in the upper portions (northern, in most cases) of lakes and reservoirs generally warm faster than waters in the middle and lower reaches. Focus on these upper waters first.
- Remember, fish that moved more shallow in response to climbing water temperatures can equally be triggered by an intermittent cold spell to temporarily return to deeper wintering spots. Likewise, the converse holds true. Be mindful of recent or real-time cold snaps when planning where you will fish.
- Always focus on shallower covers that are not far from deeper waters. "Shallow bluegills" consistently take up residence a short distance from deeper waters.






**Pre-Spawn Tendencies:**

During early spring, bluegills are notoriously somewhat lethargic, despite having moved from deeper to shallower waters. Pre-Spawn bluegills, on the other hand, are much more active. Warmer weather and longer days in general combine to significantly increase the activity levels of these bluegills. This period of heightened activity typically begins when water temperatures reach approximately 55 degrees Fahrenheit and will last until the waters warm to approximately 65 degrees Fahrenheit.

During the Pre-Spawn Period, bluegills will more steadily feed in and around the shallow structures that they previously chose during early spring. They will even stray slightly from these structures if deeper waters are nearby. They feast with one purpose in mind: to build the energy reserves necessary to execute a successful first-of-the-year spawn. Remember, spawning is an intense activity that is stressful for the fish. Bluegills also consume considerable energy during the spawn.

**"Thee" Practical Pre-Spawn Pointer:**

- Fish as often as you can. By bank or by boat, bluegills are arguably more accessible and more accommodating during the Pre-Spawn Period than during any other time of the year.

**Pre-Spawn Bluegill Folklore:**

Anglers who fish in Colorado may find this tidbit -- which was retrieved from the Jacksonville, Florida Zoo's website -- useful (or interesting, perhaps): "Back in the spring just about the time our cottonwoods leaf out and the lilacs reach full bloom, you know the bluegills are moving from their deep-water winter sanctuaries to the sun-drenched shallows of lakes and ponds



in preparation for their annual spawning ritual. This knowledge is based more on folklore and tradition than actual science, but it is surprisingly accurate for predicting bluegill activity."

**Spawn Tendencies:**

Male bluegills are nest builders. Using its tail, a male bluegill will sweep away bottom matter (sand, small gravel, and sand or gravel that is covered by mud) to create a circular nest. Each nest can be as deep as 6 inches and have a bottom diameter as wide as 12 inches.

Nest building activity typically commences in water temperatures ranging between 67 and 72 degrees Fahrenheit. Smaller males tend to build nests in water depths of between 1 and 3 feet, while larger males often utilize waters between 4 and 8 feet deep.

Once it has built the nest, a male will attract a female (or females) to the nest by swimming in circles around the nest, "grunting" all the while. One or more "interested" females will respond by

temporarily visiting a male's nest. While there, each female will eventually deposit as many as 60,000 eggs into the nest. The male will then fertilize the eggs in the nest that he built.

The Jacksonville, Florida Zoo's website provides this more detailed description of the ritual: "When a female enters, they swim in circles. Eventually they stop and touch bellies, the male in an upright posture and the female leaning at an angle. She releases eggs and he sperm and then they start the process again by swimming in circles."

Remember, males build nests close to one another, thus forming nesting colonies. Maryland's Department of Natural Resources states that "the entire colony spawns on the same day, and the process may take anywhere from 6 to 12 hours."

Their roles fully executed, females exit the nest site, leaving the males to guard and care for the developing eggs. The eggs will hatch in 2 to 5 days. Males will remain on the nest, guarding the new fry for between 5 and 10 days after they hatch.



**Practical Spawn Pointers:**

- Males are often first found on nests in the upper reaches (typically northern) of lakes and reservoirs, because waters in this section generally warm earlier and faster than other waters. If you cannot locate any males (or if you notice significantly fewer males) protecting nests in a lake or reservoir's upper reaches, relocate and progressively seek nest-guarding males in middle and lower portions, where waters may have since warmed to temperatures highly conducive to spawning.

- Frothy bubbles along the water's surface may indicate the presence of actively spawning bluegills.

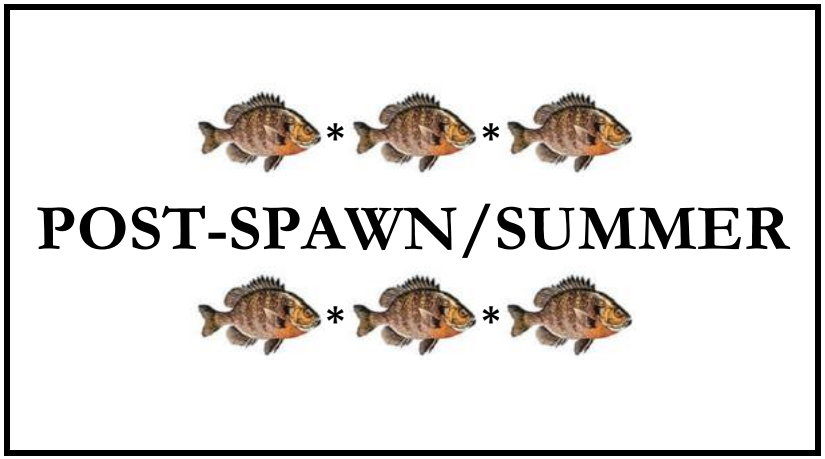
- Although not directly supported by scientific evidence, a significant number of anglers believe that a full moon, give or take a few days, draws bluegills to their beds.

- Many anglers have observed a tendency of larger males to build their nests in or near the center of nesting colonies. Still, fish "from the outside in". If you begin in the middle and hook a fish, the disturbance associated with

landing it will likely hinder your ability to catch any surrounding fish.

- Obvious, I know, but fish very quietly, and be as inconspicuous as possible.
- While on nests, males eat very little, if at all -- their primary focus instead being on aggressively protecting these nests. You can turn their protective nature to your advantage by patiently presenting baits to the same individual nest, perhaps thus triggering a male to strike out of its protective instinct.
- It is not unusual for bluegills to spawn multiple times in a single calendar year. In fact, some spawn for 2 or more months consecutively, through the months of August or even September in some locales. Revisit previously located nesting colonies to determine if this phenomenon holds true on your chosen waterways and, if it does, fish a bit deeper than where you did before.
- **Harvest nesting bluegills selectively and avoid keeping excessive numbers (well beyond what you truly need).**






**Post-Spawn/Summer Tendencies:**

After depositing eggs in one or more nests, female bluegills will move to deeper waters. Not just females, though, as many citation gills in general will leave spawning flats in search of nearby vegetation edges in deeper water. Frequently, they will also position themselves in holes or gaps within this same vegetation. Still others will locate themselves along nearby points or on the tops or sides of humps in deeper waters.

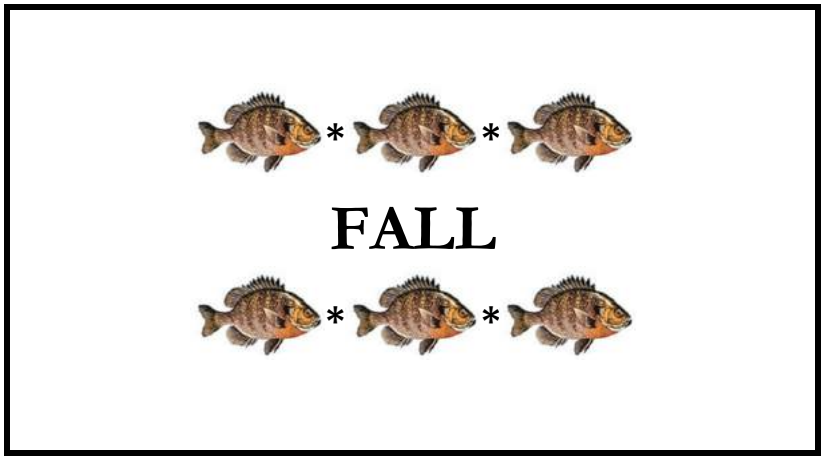
If vegetation is present in your chosen waterways, remember that, as summer progresses, the diets of larger bluegills become less reliant on microscopic zooplankton and more on

macroinvertebrates. Macroinvertebrates comprise aquatic insects (e.g., caddis fly larvae, dragonflies, and mayflies), aquatic worms, clams, leeches, scuds, and snails. Weeds provide these macroinvertebrates with optimal habitat. A reliable source of summertime foods aside, bluegills seem to have an innate attraction to weeds. Being fish that orient strongly to covers, my belief is that they generally "feel" more comfortable and less vulnerable amidst vegetation.

**Practical Post-Spawn/Summer Pointers:**

- Since, in some waters, bluegills spawn more than once during the same calendar year, be on the lookout for large male bluegills in shallow waters for several months after the completion of the initial spawn.
- Bluegills are disinclined to travel long distances after spawning, provided appealing deeper habitats are nearby. Study the areas adjacent to where they nested and focus first on suitable deeper water locales closest to their nesting sites. Post-spawn bluegills will not travel long distances without warrant and neither should you.






**Fall Tendencies:**

Much like during the Pre-Spawn Period, fall is also a time of heightened activity. As water temperatures begin to steadily drop from summer highs, bluegills will again move to shallower covers. The shallower covers they seek will be similar, and oftentimes identical, to those that they sought in early spring.

In stark contrast to early spring bluegills, however, fall bluegills will be aggressively feeding. Look for highly active fish in or near wood (brush piles, sunken logs, submerged trees, boathouses, docks, and piers) and rocks. Also, this time of year, be sure to probe the remnants of vegetation, which may have flourished earlier in the year.

Bluegills will feed aggressively and steadily, especially between early and mid-fall. Their main focus will be on building the energy stores they will require during the forthcoming winter. In other words, feeding heavily during the fall prepares bluegills for winter. In fact, it serves as a survival mechanism of sorts, one that greatly enhances their ability to overcome what are often harsh winter conditions.

This pattern of heavy feeding is far from indefinite, however. Dependent largely upon the prevailing weather, their feeding will eventually slow significantly. In fact, aquatic biologist and bluegill expert John Tertuliani, who is the author of an excellent book entitled *Catching Bluegill: Proven Methods No Matter How You Fish*, notes that "When water temperatures fall below 50 degrees Fahrenheit, feeding slows down; the fish spend less time looking for food and eat smaller amounts."



**Practical Fall Pointers:**

- Fish as often as you can, especially if you fish from the bank. Take full advantage of the accessibility of fall bluegills and their willingness to bite.
- Tactics that worked during the Pre-Spawn Period will work equally well, especially between early and mid-fall.
- Bluegills will often respond to an uncharacteristic stint of frigid weather by relocating from shallower covers to deeper waters close by. Many will move to nearby points, where they will position themselves along the point's edges. If the cold snap is followed by warmer weather, bluegills will likely return to shallow water structures. If, however, the colder weather proves to be more persistent, bluegills will likely use the sides of points as a transition between shallower covers and deeper wintering spots.

# PONDS: DO NOT DISCOUNT THEM!

Quite some time ago, when I was approximately 20 years of age, a former high school acquaintance (he then worked at a local bait and tackle shop) introduced me to two waters that would later repeatedly provide me with many fine bluegill fishing experiences. Located some 50 minutes from my parent's house, I admit that our destination was a bit of a drive, but was it ever worth it! It was a privately owned farm with two small ponds on the property.

These two ponds contained the elements necessary to produce a healthy population of fish, both largemouth bass and big bluegills. Both ponds have remained fruitful to this day. The

majority of bluegills in these ponds were and continue to be of citation-size, which, here, in Maryland means 8 inches of length or greater. All told, then, I secured access to a lifetime's worth of phenomenal citation gill fishing in exchange for the value of one-quarter of a tank of gas. That is a most exceptional deal in my book!

My point is that you should never discount ponds, private or public, as you search for worthwhile trophy gill waters within your vicinity. Nor should you subscribe to the erroneous belief that "smallish" ponds simply cannot capably grow and/or sustain citation gills. Many can, and many do!

It is helpful to view ponds as mini lakes or reservoirs. After courteously securing the owner's permission to fish his or her pond (if private), be certain to shorten your learning curve by gathering valuable data; ask the owner about pond characteristics, such as where water depths change, the presence of fish that prey on bluegills, as well as existing structures (naturally occurring and/or manmade). Seeing ponds as microcosms of lakes and reservoirs coupled with actively securing the "right" knowledge of the pond that



you intend to fish can greatly tip the odds in your favor!

If, as of yet, you have not been swayed by my personal experiences with pond bluegills, then perhaps pondering this fact will change your position: a review of state record bluegill data from the 2014-2015 timeframe reveals that, of the 48 states that maintained these records, at least 20 showed record bluegills as being caught from ponds!

# CLOSING THOUGHTS

As hard as it is for me to fathom, plenty of otherwise astute anglers and observers still hold to the false notion that citation gills are not at all difficult to catch. Perhaps this is because bluegills are widely accessible or because smaller bluegills are fairly easy to catch. I honestly do not know everything that contributes to the formulation of this incorrect conclusion.

What I do know for certain is this: bluegills are very much like other prized fish species, in that honest effort is required to catch the biggest of the bunch with any degree of regularity.

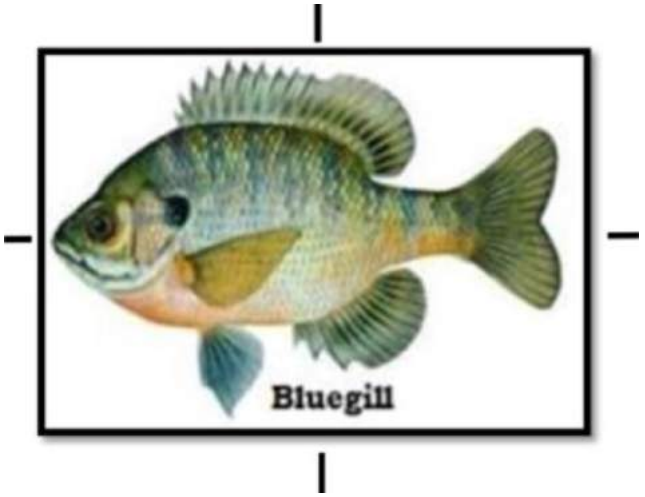
In reality, numerous factors -- some that anglers have no ability to control or predict -- combine to present anglers who fish for citation

gills with a formidable challenge. I hope that I have successfully conveyed to you key insights -- derived from the accounts of both biologists and experienced, successful bluegill anglers -- into the behavioral tendencies of citation gills. If I have offered you anything whatsoever that has increased your ability to recognize these varied elements and how they impact where citation gills typically locate, then I will feel as if I have achieved my goal in writing this book.

Lastly, I would like to sincerely thank you for purchasing and/or reading this book. I also want to wish you the very best of luck with all of your outdoor endeavors, bluegill-centric or otherwise.



# Appendix A
## Common North American Panfish




The common name (bluegill) of our favorite fish attests to the bluish color that curves from its bottom jaw to around the bottom of its gill covers. Bluegills typically have eight to ten sets of "double" vertical bars on their sides, although these can at times become difficult to see on really large bluegills.

Whereas they exhibit bodily color variations that are influenced by genetic and environmental factors, two marks in particular are useful for distinguishing bluegills from other similar-looking, related sunfishes. First, the flaps at the

edge of their gill covers are solid black (no red along the perimeters of their gill cover flaps as with the "redear sunfish", for example). Bluegills also have a dark blotch or spot on the lower part of the rear section of their dorsal fins, which run along their spines.



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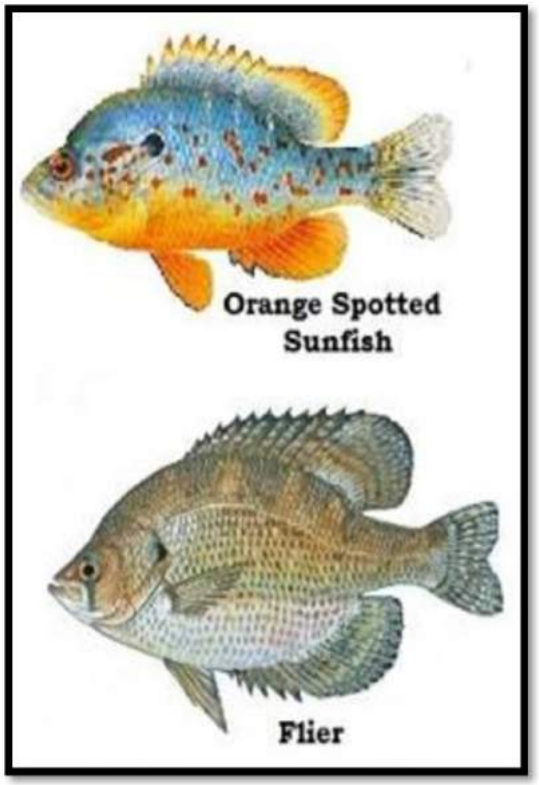

# Appendix B

## *In-Fisherman's* Bluegill Length to Weight Conversion Chart

| Length | Estimated Weight (lbs.) | Estimated Weight (oz.) |
|---|---|---|
| 5 inches | .09 lb. | 1.44 oz. |
| 6 inches | .16 lb. | 2.56 oz. |
| 7 inches | .27 lb. | 4.32 oz. |
| 8 inches | .42 lb. | 6.72 oz. |
| 9 inches | .62 lb. | 9.92 oz. |
| 10 inches | .88 lb. | 14.08 oz. |
| 11 inches | 1.21 lbs. | 19.36 oz. |
| 12 inches | 1.61 lbs. | 25.76 oz. |
| 13 inches | 2.10 lbs. | 33.60 oz. |

**Source:** "Bluegill Length To Weight Conversion Chart" by Dr. Rob Neumann, published on the *In-Fisherman* website and dated January 03, 2016

Commonly held misperceptions aside, bluegills are very similar to other prized fish species, in that honest effort is required to catch the biggest of the bunch with any degree of regularity.

Through this book (the first of a two-volume series), author Brad Hierstetter will provide you with a straight-forward yet highly reliable framework through which you can greatly tilt the odds of identifying optimal citation gill locations in your favor.

Know upfront that the author will challenge you to do a bit of work. Do not let this deter you, though; any efforts you expend are certain to be rewarded over time. Anglers who understand their quarry -- those who have made the necessary investments, in other words -- achieve their objectives with increased regularity.

Without a doubt, angling consistency is rooted in an understanding of the quarry, not in chance. This book will arm you with the information (most of which was drawn from accounts of the behavioral tendencies of bluegills as observed by both biologists and experienced, successful anglers) necessary to better understand citation gill locations.

**Volume 1: Optimizing Location**