



## They Shoot Canoes, Don't They?

By Patrick F. McManus

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McManus celebrates the hidden pleasures, unappreciated lore, and opportunities for disaster to be found in such outdoor recreations as camping, hunting, and fishing

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## **They Shoot Canoes, Don't They? By Patrick F. McManus Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #95177 in eBooks
- Published on: 1982-09-15
- Released on: 1982-09-15
- Format: Kindle eBook

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"Patrick McManus is a treasure." ?*The Atlantic*

"Everybody should read Patrick McManus." ?*The New York Times Book Review*

"A style that brings to mind Mark Twain, Art Buchwald, and Garrison Keillor." ?*People*

### About the Author

**Patrick F. McManus** was born and raised in Idaho and now lives there and in Spokane, Washington. He is a regular contributor to *Outdoor Life*, and a five-time *New York Times* best-selling author. *The Grasshopper Trap*, *How I Got This Way*, and *The Night the Bear Ate Goombaw* are among his best-known books.

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### They Shoot Canoes, Dont They?

#### All You Ever Wanted to Know About Live Bait but Were Afraid to Ask

Surprisingly, many anglers are ashamed to admit that they fish with live bait. You'll run into one of these so-called purists on a trout stream and ask him what he's using. He'll say, "A Number thirty-two Royal Coachman on a three-ounce leader." Then he'll get a bite, snap his line out of the water, and there will be a worm on his hook. "That's the problem with these tiny flies," he'll say. "You keep catching worms with them."

The truth is that live-bait fishing has a long and noble history. Live bait was totally unknown to the early cavemen, who had to make do with a rather limited assortment of dry flies, nymphs, and a few streamers. One day, whether out of exasperation or simple impatience, a caveman made a backcast with a gray hackle he had not bothered to remove from a sage hen. Instantly, it was taken by a brontosaurus. The caveman was elated by his discovery, even though it was several centuries before anyone learned how to take a brontosaurus off the hook.

The caveman reasoned that if you can catch a brontosaurus with live bait, you can surely catch fish with it, and he immediately began conducting experiments. He tried live chickens, ducks, and geese, but he soon found these very undependable, particularly on casts that passed directly overhead.

When he was about to give up and go back to dry flies, the caveman decided to bait his hook with a worm. He cast out into a deep, dark pool and immediately received the surprise of his life. A five-hundred-pound wild boar charged out of the brush and chased him for eighteen miles, and he never did learn whether worms were good bait.

Thus the discovery of worms as fishing bait was left to a humble cook in the army of Genghis Khan. After a busy day of conquering the Civilized World, the Khan decided he would like fish for supper and dropped a casual hint to one of his lieutenants. The lieutenant, who had had considerable experience with the Khan's casual hints, nearly trampled three foot soldiers getting the news into the kitchen. Dismounting, he said to the cooks, "Guess what? Old G.K. wants fish for supper." Since fishing had been extremely poor and no one had had so much as a nibble in days, the kitchen staff immediately bought tickets and caught the first stage out of town, the single exception being a little hors d'oeuvre specialist, Leroy Swartz, who knew absolutely nothing about fishing. Leroy had never developed the knack for plundering and pillaging--though he wasn't bad at

razing--and as a result his total loot for the campaign was a spade with a broken handle. For a reason known only to Leroy, he started digging up the ground with the spade. The lieutenant, assuming he was digging a grave, said, "If we can't get G.K. any fish for his supper, you might as well make that big enough for two." Then Leroy started picking up worms and stuffing them into his pocket, tomato cans not yet having been invented. He grabbed a fishing pole and went off to the nearest river, from whence he shortly returned with his limit, in those days as many as you could carry plus one fish. Everyone danced and shouted over Leroy's discovery that worms were excellent fishing bait. Even the Khan was beside himself with joy, a condition that caused Mrs. Khan considerable annoyance since they slept in the same bed. Leroy Swartz was henceforth known as the Father of Worms, a title he did not much care for, but it beat employment as a battering ram on the next fortress to be attacked.

Toward the latter part of the eighteenth century, grasshoppers were discovered to be exceptional live bait. Up until then they were thought to be good only for devouring grain crops and causing widespread famine. One day an angler was walking along a country road in search of a good place to dig a supply of worms. He happened to glance out into a field fairly alive with grasshoppers and noticed a man leaping about on all fours and slapping the ground with his hat. The angler thought the fellow must be crazy to behave in such a strange manner and walked over to see what he was up to. It turned out the man *was* crazy, but the angler didn't discover this until he had helped him catch a dozen grasshoppers. Since by then it was too late to dig any worms, the angler decided to bait his hook with grasshoppers--and the rest is history.

Up until the Industrial Revolution and the invention of tomato cans and the flat tobacco can, there were no suitable containers for live bait, and anglers had to carry their bait around in their hands, pockets, and hats. In the case of grasshoppers, wealthy fishermen would sometimes hire a boy to drive a herd of them along the bank. In later years worms were carried in pokes similar to those used for gold coins. There is at least one recorded instance in which a card-playing fisherman narrowly escaped lynching when he attempted to bluff with a poke of nightcrawlers.

So much for the history of live bait. We will now examine some of the various kinds of live bait, where to find it, how to preserve it, and assorted techniques for using it.

First off, there are only two kinds of bait: live bait and dead bait. Worms, grubs, grasshoppers, minnows, and the like are live bait, unless left unattended in a hot car too long, in which case they become dead bait. I have on occasion forgotten to remove a can of worms from my car on a blistering July day, a mistake that has led to attempts to bait hooks with little balls of worm paste, not to mention the necessity of driving with all the car's windows open until approximately the middle of February. On the other hand, I've carried around salmon eggs and pickled pork rind until they were showing definite signs of life.

My favorite method of preserving live bait is to store it in the refrigerator until it is ready for use. There are two schools of thought on the proper execution of this procedure. Some hold it is better to tell your wife first, and the others claim it is better to let her make the discovery for herself. I'm a member of the latter group and have been ever since my wife came across ajar of my hellgrammites while she was sorting through the refrigerator in search of some mayonnaise. The incident would probably have passed without any lingering ill effects had she not at the time been entertaining her church bridge club. It is difficult to describe the resulting commotion with any accuracy, but I learned later that cards from our bridge deck were found as far away as three blocks and one of the olive-and-avocado sandwiches served at the party turned up in a ladies' restroom halfway across town. Our dog was asleep on the front sidewalk when the ladies left, and it was weeks before we could get all the dents out of him left by their heels.

I have on occasion attempted to lay in a supply of worms during the spring months while they are still near the surface and one doesn't have to dig down to the aquifer to find them. I'll stash a couple of hundred of them in a washtub filled with dirt and feed them coffee grounds. The reason I feed them coffee grounds is that numerous people have told me that that is what worms like to eat. Whether they do or not, I'm not sure. In any case, I've yet to find a single worm when I dump out the tub later in the summer. I'm beginning to suspect that worms can't stand coffee grounds (or maybe coffee grounds like worms). When you stop to think about it, where would your average worm develop a taste for coffee anyway?

The beginning angler is often of the impression that there are only three kinds of worms: small, medium, and large. Actually, the size of the worm makes little difference. Temperament and character are everything. These two characteristics seem to be determined primarily by environment. For example, I've never found a worm raised in a manure pile who could earn his keep as fishing bait. Manure-pile worms are soft and pale and accustomed to easy living. To a worm, a manure pile is a suite in the Ritz, a villa on the Riviera. He never has to worry about where his next meal is coming from. (If he knew, he would probably worry, but he doesn't know.) Manure-pile worms don't have any street savvy. Now, you dig up a worm out of a garden, an individual who has been through a couple of rototillings, and that worm has been around. He's going to go out and put up a good fight. Nothing builds character in a worm like a good rototilling.

Some time ago a sporting-goods company sent me a package of freeze-dried worms. Honest. At first I thought it was some kind of veiled threat, but then I found a note saying that if I soaked the worms in water they would reconstitute into fishing bait. I stuck the package in my backpack with my other freeze-drieds and a couple of nights later at a mountain lake took it out and soaked the contents in some water. It turned out to be macaroni and cheese sauce. "That's funny," my friend Retch Sweeney said. "I thought we ate the macaroni and cheese sauce last night." The freeze-dried worms never did turn up.

The most troublesome of all live bait is the grasshopper. By the time you've caught enough of them you're usually too tired to go fishing. Furthermore, grasshoppers are not content simply to sit around in a bottle waiting to be fed to some fish. Once a worm is in the can, he pretty well knows his fate is sealed and will lie back and take it easy until his number comes up. Not so with grasshoppers. They are no sooner in the bottle than they're plotting their escape. Every time the lid is lifted to insert a new inmate, half a dozen of the others will try to make a break for it. While I was still a young boy, I learned that the only way to foil their escapes was to shake the bottle vigorously and then slip the new grasshopper in while the others were still dazed. What apparently happens is that the grasshoppers get high from the shaking and like it so much that after a while you can hardly chase them out of the bottle with a stick. They just lie on their bac...

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