Atchafalaya: Still Good Provider Of Crawfish

Sounds carry on near the water. In the early morning, when the crawfishers are launching their boats, you can hear their voices, muffled and mixed with bird songs and the roar of outboard motors.

At this time of year, the water is dropping fast in the Atchafalaya Basin and the crawfish have matured into hard-tempered, hardshelled crustaceans that are almost as red when they spill out of the trap as after they are boiled. By next month, the Basin crawfish will be gone, burrowing down in the mud to lie dormant until the water comes up again next winter and spring.

But, before they burrow into the mud they will mate. Then the female crawfish will carry the five male sperm until August, when her eggs will be fertilized. She carries the eggs and the young crawfish under her tail.

Crawfish live in and along lakes and rivers of every continent except Africa. They range in size from one inch to the giant 16-inch, eight-pound variety found in Tasmania. The Louisiana red crawfish reaches four to five inches.

The Louisiana crawfish is the poor man's friend. When the water starts rising in the Atchafalaya Basin in November and December, many men working in the oilfields and in nearby towns quit their jobs to go fishing. Some make enough money during the crawfish season so they don't have to work for the rest of the year.

Ben Hayes, who lives on the levee in St. Martin Parish, has made his living all his life with crawfish, fishing and fur trapping in the Basin. When the crawfish season is over, there are always catfish, frogs and freshwater crabs to be caught and sold. The Atchafalaya is a generous provider.

It can also be treacherous. Go into the Basin on a cloudy day and even a man who knows can get lost. Strong currents in some places can suck a man under quickly if he falls out of his boat. And, of course, there are snakes, including the quick-tempered water moccasin which will fight a boat if he's irked enough and may even try to get in it if he smells the fisherman's bait.

"When I was a little boy, we'd go crawfishing in a little pond and take them to town in a wagon to sell," one old crawfisherman said. "We sold them then for six or seven cents a pound. That was all. People didn't have money then like they do today."

Crawfish are caught in wire cages with a blue. The cages are baited with fish, meal (cow pancreas) and oil cakes. The crawfish are attracted by the smell and enter the traps. The flies are hard, though not impossible for them to get back out of.

In the trap, the crawfish soon strip the bait fish of its flesh, leaving only delicate, yellow-white bones. Since fish are just as fond of crawfish, fishermen must often take time to pick crawfish heads out of the trap whose tails were bitten off when they stuck them out of the trap.

One fisherman tells a story of finding some young crawfish out of the water, clinging to a tree.

"Them little crawfish were in a jam," he said, "on one side of the tree was a coonass and on the other side a big catfish was waiting for them."

It's man who gets les ecrevisses there are all sorts of ways to eat them - boiled, in omelettes, pies, salads, fried, stuffed, in a bisque, bouillabaisse or etouffee. No wonder that in Southwest Louisiana there are entire communities whose principal industry is catching, cooking, peeling and selling crawfish.

By the way, crawfish enthusiasts who enjoy digging around inside crawfish heads for the fat will probably be happy to know that that's not all, but a combination liver-pancreas, they are enjoying.

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