

Gerald Almy Sports Column Writing W18

Gerald Almy: Lures imitating rats and mice offer exciting fishing

By Gerald Almy

The Northern Virginia Daily

Tossing the lure towards the edge of the milfoil, I cranked slowly on the handle of the baitcast reel. After two turns, the vegetation exploded as a five-pound largemouth broke through the “aquatic salad” and hammered the soft lure shimmying across the surface.

Following a brawling fight, I worked the fish in close and carefully slipped the hook out of his bony white jaw. None the worse for wear, the bass flipped its tail disdainfully and darted back into the lake.

The rat lure had come through once again.

Few lures are more exciting to fish than a topwater rodent imitation. Although these small animals are not common food items for fish, many species feed on rats, voles, moles and mice whenever they get the opportunity.

Besides bigmouths, I’ve also caught smallmouths, peacock bass, pickerel, pike, trout and muskies on these lures. I’m sure other species will strike them as well. In some coastal areas saltwater drum (redfish) feed on rodents. In fact, it’s doubtful that any predatory gamefish would pass up a small rodent when given the chance.

A variety of rat lures are available. Typically they are made of soft plastic, with either solid or hollow bodies. Various methods are used to make them mostly weedless. And that’s a good thing, because the best results with these lures come near cover such as stickups, brush piles, log jams and weed beds. Some of the rodent lures have hooks embedded Texas-style inside the body, while others have double hooks barely protruding on top. Both arrangements work well.

To set the hooks persuasively when fishing these lures you need a rod with some backbone and stout line. As far as retrieves, it pays to experiment each day on the water. I usually start out with a slow and steady presentation. Then I try a more erratic motion. After that, experiment with both fast and steady and fast and jerky movements. The bass will let you know what they want on any given day.

Clear spots in beds of vegetation and open pockets are especially good spots to try. Bass and pike often hang out in these locations waiting for a morsel to swim by. Inch the lure up to these openings and then slowly twitch it across them, as if the mouse or vole is trying to escape. Points are also great spots to try as well as places where logs hang out over the water from shore. It’s easy to picture a hapless mouse walking out on the log and then accidentally slipping in, offering waiting gamefish a tempting meal.

Rodent lures will also catch trout in rivers where voles are common. Large browns and rainbows are inordinately fond of these creatures. Use a slow, smooth retrieve to tempt these

outsized trout. Most of the time they'll be found hovering beside logjams and sweepers along shore waiting for the rodents to stumble in.

It's often tough to set the hooks solidly with mouse and rat lures. Usually the best bet is to hesitate after the fish strikes. That's hard to do. But if you strike too fast you'll likely pull the lure away before the fish has it fully in its mouth. Wait until you see the mouse disappear and feel the fish's weight. Then pull back hard.

Tips for fishing rat lures

- If a fish strikes, but misses the lure, don't immediately reel in. Let the rat sit motionless for a minute, and then twitch it a little. The fish will think it wounded the rodent with its first attack and return to finish it off.
- Insert a glass rattle into the lure to add sound appeal.
- Put a stinger hook on if you are missing strikes.
- Try adding weight to the mouse if topwater action is slow, to make it less buoyant. Rig a slip sinker in front of the body or insert a piece of shot or a ball of cotton to soak up water.
- Fish mouse and rat lures early and late and on overcast days for the best results.

Gerald Almy: Judging age of bear is tricky challenge

By Gerald Almy

The Northern Virginia Daily

First of a Two-Part Series

Seeing a black bear in its natural habitat for the first time is a captivating experience. It's a rare hunter, naturalist, hiker or wildlife photographer who doesn't get a chill when they catch sight of a bear easing through the woods or lumbering across a meadow with its glossy black fur coat rippling in the sunlight.

But after the thrill of seeing that first bear, and hopefully others after that, we eventually become more curious. How big is that bear? Is it a yearling male expanding into its own territory, a middle-aged bear, a mature animal, or a senior citizen of the bear clan?

It's also a challenge to know what sex it is. Hunters like to harvest male bears when possible. Yet even though males are preferred, around 35-40% of bears harvested in Virginia are females. That's a good indication how hard it is to judge the sex of a bruin. Estimating the age and weight of a bear is equally challenging.

To get some tips on how to identify a bear's sex and whether it is young, middle-aged, or old, I spoke with Katie Martin, co-lead of Virginia's bear management program and a statewide deer, bear and turkey biologist for the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources.

"This is a bit tricky for most folks to get figured out," she said. "Some tips and tricks, though, can help a person know what kind of bear they are looking at."

“Young bears can be equated to teenagers...very gangly and all legs! Yearling bears (those between 1 and 2 years old) often will look tall and slender with very little belly fat making their legs appear long for their body, much like a young deer. If you can see a lot of daylight under the bear’s belly as it walks, it is likely a young bear. As it gets older and bigger, the bear will appear much shorter with less daylight under the belly as it fills out.”

Martin notes that there are exceptions. “You can have old skinny bears, too, so size alone isn’t a totally reliable way to judge age. Some bears, especially females, can be quite old but never get very large—100-125 pounds at 15+ years. Habitat quality obviously plays a big role in overall size with bears that have more high-quality habitat available developing into much larger animals than those with poor resources or bears that need to travel long distances to achieve all their food needs.”

For hunters, a good way to judge bears is whether the animal fits in one of three categories: young (1-2 years old), average (3-4 years), or mature (5 years-plus). For your first bear ever, one in the average category would be a harvest to celebrate. More experienced hunters often prefer to hold out for a large mature bear.

Just as with deer and other antlered game, the basic rule of thumb should be that if you have doubts about an animal’s size and age, it’s probably best not to shoot or release your arrow. Once you make that decision, it’s too late to change your mind.

Learning

If you’ve never seen many bears, try to watch videos and study photos in books to see how different an old, heavy bear looks from a young bear. The more you sear the images into your brain of a large bear versus a small bear, the more likely you’ll know when an animal steps out whether it’s a brute or a youngster.

Biologists mostly use weight and age when talking about a bear. Hunters also are interested in two other factors: how big the squared hide will measure, and width and length skull measurements of the animal added together and divided by two.

“Black Bear Hunting,” by Richard Smith, is one of the best references you can find for learning about bear sizes and behavior. You can order that book, as well as instructive DVDs, from the author at Richardpsmith.com.

Next Week: More tips on estimating the age of a live bear

Gerald Almy: Start now to plan a big game hunt in the West

By Gerald Almy
The Northern Virginia Daily

There are probably very few Shenandoah Valley sportsmen and women who haven’t dreamed of a trip out west to pursue big game animals like mule deer, elk, antelope and moose. But taking such a long-distance, multi-day trip requires lots of planning, even if you book a guide.

The Western U.S. is a vast region with an incredible variety of game species, terrain and habitat. The appeal for a die-hard hunter is undeniable. Unfortunately, the states in this region have systems for issuing hunting licenses to non-residents that can be complicated and sometimes confusing.

For setting up a hunt, figuring out what animals to seek, deciding where to go, and then obtaining appropriate licenses and tags, the help of a skilled outfitter can be invaluable. And many states have early license application deadlines, so December is the time to get planning for a trip for fall of 2023.

You can certainly arrange and execute your first western hunt totally on your own. But there is so much research and planning required, so many logistical challenges, and so many big and little things that can go wrong that many people opt for a guided hunt.

This can either be arranged directly through the guide or with a booking agent. Not only will your chances for harvesting game be many times higher, you'll also avoid lots of problems and pitfalls that can ruin even the most carefully planned do-it-yourself hunt.

To help you hire the right outfitter in the best location for your needs, here are some planning tips from a hunter who has enjoyed many guided trips in this region.

Whether to hire or not

First off, when trying to decide whether to hire an outfitter and which one, you should ask yourself lots of questions. In the process, analyze your priorities.

Ask yourself what you want to get out of your hunt and how important different goals are. Is a trophy animal a must or will you be satisfied with taking a representative specimen for that area and species? Is meat to take home highest on your list? Escape from the pressures of everyday life? A getaway with a few friends? The experience of hiking, riding horses, and stalking wild animals in the vast open West?

How important is time. If you have a demanding job and can only get away for a limited period in fall, hiring a guide is definitely the best way to go. If dealing with all of the logistics and planning seem daunting, booking a guide is the clear choice.

In most cases, if you can't get out and scout the area before the hunting season, it's also probably best to hire a guide. Game could be abundant in one spot and scarce two miles away. An experienced guide will know those things.

What they offer

Guides offer plenty of services on hunts. And they earn their money, often working 12-18 hour days. They provide lodging, meals and transportation equipment, be it horses, boats, ATVs or trucks. They scout the area and keep tabs of the game movements and where the best chances for trophies are.

They often lease the best private lands and manage them to produce an abundance of quality animals. Beyond that, they offer their years of experience with and knowledge of the species being hunted.

Think about these things ahead of time as you plan your hunt. Once you decide for sure that a guided hunt is best, follow up by choosing which animals you'd most like to hunt. Then select an area or region and start searching for the right outfitter. Do this by contacting guide associations, wildlife departments and tourism groups, and doing research on the internet.

Selecting game to hunt

Available big game species in the West include mountain goat, bighorn sheep, moose, elk, mule deer, whitetails, pronghorn and black bear. Goat, sheep and moose are hunted on a limited basis and are best reserved for later hunts after you've traveled throughout the region and hunted for other more common species a few times.

Elk, mule deer, whitetails, pronghorn and black bear are the major species sought by out-of-state hunters. Those are the ones to concentrate on for your first visits to the West. Often you can hunt two, possibly three species on the same trip in the right areas.

Habitat and terrain

Besides selecting a state, you'll need to decide what type of western habitat you want to hunt. I've enjoyed hunts ranging from sage brush prairies and badlands for mule deer and pronghorn to timberline habitat for elk, goats and bears. Each unique setting offers a part of the special appeal of that particular hunt.

Tip: Goats, sheep and moose often require many years of license applications to build up "points" that help you qualify for a permit. You may want to start applying now to start this drawn-out process.

Next Week: More tips and strategies for planning your first western big game hunt.