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Crayfish love their bacon

I like to think it was only a fluke that they came to live for a short while in those rocks where we fished them out. BY RHIANNON COPPIN

Before I discovered boys I discovered the perfume that bacon is to crayfish. After haphazard experimentation with various meats and cheeses, my father had divined the finest bait for luring the little fresh-water lobsters out of their cave-like dwellings. I only ever saw them eating leaves, though, and — assuming that's all they ate naturally — thought it funny that vegetarians were tempted by the lure of bacon (something I'd experience myself more than a decade later, as it turns out). There were hardly any houses in the neighbourhood then; mostly cabins, trailers, and un-cleared lots. This was our Sunshine Coast retreat and we took ownership of it in full: It was our lot, our road, our lake. Harvesting a little from the land, here and there, seemed perfectly reasonable. There were few people and the landscape looked ready to absorb our presence.



My diving-mask-clad dad first discovered the little critters when he dived off the swimming dock to retrieve a sunken beer bottle he intended to return for the deposit. When he surfaced with the bottle, something caused him to scream and drop it back into the lake. He went back for it, and briskly whisked it onto the floating platform.

It was scarier than *Thriller*: the whole dock seemed to shrink away as the prickly-looking pincer-armed beast crawled out from the bottle mouth, on to the deck, toward me. My dad picked up the poor little critter mid-back, from which stance the wee lobster couldn't do much damage to fingers. I took a closer look at the antennaed alien, and that solidified my decision not to put so much as a toe in the water for at least a few days.

Having no use past discarded ballet lessons, old red-stemmed butterfly nets owned by me and my sister became tools for a game of deception. My dad made me a fishing pole out of a dried arbutus stick, some fishing line, a metal nut for weight, and a good rusty hook.

I'd contort my body to find a steady platform to squat on among the rocks — rocks cascading steeply down into the lake, rocks that were once part of a cliff before it was blasted to make way for the road connecting the harbour to the highway.

I'd plop the hooked bacon in the shallow water, and watch the oily rainbowcoloured film released onto the surface spread out its smelly tendrils. I'd have to hold the rod in the perfect position, balancing the weight of the nut against the gentle lapping of the water, while trying to shade the water with my body so that I could see past surface reflections.

The trick was to let the buoyant bacon morsel dance in front of a suitable looking crack in the rocks, and lure a crayfish out enough to get the net behind him. When he gets spooked, a crayfish shrivels and darts backward like a shrimp.

Sometimes the crayfish would grab the bait and hook while gripped on the rock: his sticky pull was almost unbeatable, and he'd often let go of the bacon before the rock.

Other times, though — I guess in a lean season — he wouldn't relinquish the pork fat and my line would launch him into a splayed-leg silent flight through the open water. The net got him then, too.

Back at the trailer my mom would boil a big pot of water — one of those pots with the white interior and hideous black-andred print design on the outside — and we'd take turns dropping a bucketful of catches in one by one.

Morbidly fascinated, I'd watch each of the crayfish succumb and turn red. I ate the little pseudo-lobster tail nuggets with butter and garlic; my gastronomic drive (then and now) has little place for sentimentality. My conflicted conscience manifested itself instead in my nightmares: I once dreamed the crayfish were using themselves as bait, and some master crayfish was going to catch one of us unaware while feasting, and drag us by invisible lines down the hill and into the watery depths. We threw back young ones, and told ourselves that removing the big warscarred old timers had the effect of freeing up real estate for the babies. One summer we made several trips to the lakeside and each time caught more and more crayfish. The following year, there were fewer, but still we fished. The year after that, still fewer, but still we fished. And so on.

I started to wonder if we had gone too far, but soon the world of teenagers beckoned and I stopped thinking about the

lake, stopped visiting the lake, and forgot for a while about the crayfish.

Twenty years is a lifetime along the coast; everything changes. Cabins have made way for estates. Arbutus groves have ceded to prize homes. Local bears, some of whom used to congregate in the once public-access dump, are now being shot by conservation officers — some 40 last year, I heard in the gossip mill.

When I do go to the lake now, I search the old fishing spot, looking for signs of life. Old leaves rotting on the bottom and in the rock crevices made cakey layers of mud. I sit and stare, trying to catch any movement out of the corner of my eye. Below the surface, nothing moves.

I like theories. I like to think that the crayfish have moved on. I like to think the crayfish have natural population cycles. I like to think it was only a fluke in the natural order that they came to live for a short while in those rocks where we fished them out, among the occasional sun-bleached beer can.

Above all, I like to think the disappearance of the crayfish had nothing to do with me.

I feel like I know better. Rhiannon Coppin lives in Vancouver.