



You never really have all the fishing gear you need. About the time your boat is all tricked out to the point you may never come off the water again, a new generation fish-finder comes on the market. Maybe it's something as simple as a new chartreuse jig that your fishing partner swears by. Could be you just want to stop off for some minnows or a cold pop on a hot afternoon. Regardless, if you fish, you have a favorite haunt to look at gear, buy bait or learn what's biting.

DICK'S BAIT BEFORE THE FLOOD—Weather beaten walls led the way to Dick's Bait Shop in Cedar Falls. The two-room shop was "loaded to the gills" with bait, tackle, camping equipment, pop... and advice on what was biting until the Flood of '08. The nearby Cedar River inundated Dick's with mud and floodwater, rising past the street address number above the doorway.

The Back Road Bait Shop

BY JOE WILKINSON PHOTOS BY BRIAN BUTTON AND JOE WILKINSON



It might be the big box store, with 15 of everything, as well as clothing, jewelry, auto supplies and groceries. It might be the marina where you launch your boat. Or it might be an obscure bait shack, the one that's always been there.

You don't leave home without your wallet nor do you go fishing without checking the pulse of local anglers. Those back road bait shops not only offer conversation from opinions about the economy or last night's ballgame,

but most of all, they offer tips on where fish are biting and what it takes to catch them.

Anywhere you fish across Iowa, there are places like that; the lakeside bungalow bait shop near the boat ramp, the third generation store on the county blacktop or a brightly lit full service shop on Main Street. This is by no means a "best of" ranking. As I talked with anglers and fisheries experts, though, they steered me toward some great places. I could start again tomorrow and come

PHOTOS BY BRIAN BUTTON



Bait shop owner Fred West scoops minnows for a customer. West would let customers know what bait was working on the Cedar River, as well as nearby lakes and streams. His free advice extended to politics and life. West says 'mom and pop' bait shops keep anglers in tune with what is going on; something he says you can't get at the big box stores.

up with a brand new list. For now, though, let's stop in and see if the coffee's on.

DICK'S BAIT & TACKLE, CEDAR FALLS

Everybody knew where Dick's was. Fishing the Cedar River? George Wyth Lake? Anywhere around Cedar Falls? Fred West (he worked for Dick, eventually bought it and kept the name) could tell you what's biting. But mostly, he'd tell you what he thought...about anything. If you didn't like it, you could leave. Some did. Most would stick around.

His two-room garage was stocked to the ceiling with tackle. Walleye spinners and barrel swivels hung on the pegboard above the propane canisters. The old Pepsi menu board listed bait; nightcrawlers and minnows that you might pick up about anywhere. Here, your choices included "leaches" (spelling is not a priority), turkey liver, clams or frogs, too.

"You need to understand the bait. Most other (big) places handle damn little live bait, like minnows and crawdads. They don't know what to do with them!" preaches West, his voice rising incredulously as he explains the exact water temperature for keeping minnows. "Most of the anglers know more than you anyway. You got to listen to them, you got to listen with your mouth open...and your ears shut."

With free advice like that, plus his opinion on any political issue from city council to the federal deficit, you didn't just buy bait or tackle at Dick's. You bought an experience. The anglers kept coming back; another scoop of minnows, some 6-pound line...and a tip on where they're biting this week. Tough economic times couldn't get rid of him. Neither could competing businesses. But the river may.

West knew the Cedar River like the back of his hand, right up to the day last summer, when it rose up and backhanded him. "It flooded up to the top of the light fixture; 7 1/2 feet. Sure, go ahead and look inside," nodded West on a hot summer day. He lit another cigarette as he sorted debris-caked tackle at a makeshift table outside the shop.

Matted streaks of shelled corn lay underfoot; washed over from the elevator across the street. Up and down the road, debris in the yards and tell-tale dirty streaks showed how high the Cedar River had risen. By mid-summer, it was a mud-caked mess; people salvaging what was left. In the tackle shop, that wasn't much.

It was hard to see the high water mark. That's because nearly the whole building was underwater. Inside, rows of metal pegs were empty. Hundreds of packets of jigs, swivels, hooks, lures and other tackle had just washed off as the water rolled through. A few remained, filled with the fine silt that settled on everything. The ancient, brass-keyed cash register still sat on one of the muddy benches. Plastic catfish-bait cartons sat above empty bait tanks.

"Clean up and sort it out. Salvage what I can. You wanna buy 1,000 treble hooks? They're all rusty," deadpans West. Will he renovate or rebuild? "I've thought about it every day," he admits. "Then I look at the high water mark and say, 'you dummy.' We may not have seen

her worst! The river might come up 6 feet higher (next time)." He spent months after the flood sorting inventory; selling some ice fishing gear. As spring approached it did not look promising.

Part of the problem, West explains, was that his bait shop—like a lot of others—sits by the river, in an older, flood-prone neighborhood. "You need that low overhead to make it. In good times, it keeps you close to the resource. "You need to read the river," he explains. "Thirty to 40 percent of customers are river anglers. If the river goes beserk, you can go to the lakes. You're not tied to a specific body of water (where) if it goes sour, there goes your business."



J&L'S ONE STOP, HARPERS FERRY

This town of 330 swells to twice that on a good weekend. This is the upper end of Pool 10 on the Mississippi River. There's good bass fishing in the backwaters, walleyes, too. Most anglers are from out of town. They might have a summer cabin, but they have plenty of opportunities to stock up on boats, gear and other big ticket items before they back down at either the private marina or the county-run ramp in town.

Turn right off county highway X-52 to get to those ramps. Turn left for J&L's One Stop. And it is just that. Bait, tackle, licenses, gas? They're all here. Groceries, too? Laundry? Lodging? Car wash? Sure, after all, the sign does read "One Stop." How about its two-bay garage with a hoist? Not your typical bait shop.

But Joyce and John Grissom don't go head-to-head with the full-line outdoor stores. They carry what customers need now. A lot of times, it's information. "Right now, the northerns are going crazy," offers Joyce to a customer. Nearby, crankbaits are offered at 30 percent off. "But the grass on the river now makes it hard to troll. That's when maybe these jointed lures work better."

While some anglers might throw flashier spinnerbaits at them, northerns were attracted to the deeper running crankbaits throughout the summer last year, especially in nearby Harper's Slough. "It was a tremendous year. We have good northern populations up through here,"

J&L ONE STOP SHOP—Owner Joyce Grissom and bait shop dog Muttley, outside their Harpers Ferry store. From live bait tanks outside to the grocery store/tackle shop inside, anglers are well provisioned here, just a few hundred yards from the Mississippi River. Beyond the full-service garage—with hoist—are room rentals and boat winterization with on-site storage.



emphasizes Guttenberg-based DNR fisheries biologist Scott Gritters. “It rivals, well, Minnesota lakes right now.”

Sometimes, the jigs and lures you pack along just don’t attract the attention of all those Mississippi River fish. A trip to J&L’s features terminal tackle that has been backwater tested. A wall is filled with one-eyed shiners produced across the river in Prairie du Chien by Mert Woll. “Nobody paints them like he does,” underscores Grissom. “We carry a lot of his stuff because it works. We don’t do much with trends—what



salespeople tell you is hot and the newest thing.” Grissom says most of her customers know what they’re going with. “We kind of specialize in trout (too). We sell live bait year round—waxworms for trout fishing; very small hooks, ice fishing jigs.”

While she talks, Grissom gets up five or six times to wait on customers to sell a 12-pack and a license or a soda pop and cigarettes.

Earlier in the day she marked several likely fishing spots for vacationers from Winterset to try. Ryan King comes in for a couple of seven-day licenses, for himself and his wife. They and their toddler daughter just got

in from Texas. “I grew up here. My parents live here all summer. It’s where we come for vacation,” says King. “They have good tackle selection here,” threw in dad, Gary. “A lot of bait shops just have minnows and gas. Here, they know what’s going on.”

Last fall, the parking lot was ringed with boats that had been winterized...another one-stop service. Inside, Steve, one of the locals, speaks of a great panfish spot. “It’s out of the current. In the summer you can catch 40 panfish a day on these quarter-ounce jigs. Go as small as you can,” he suggests. Information is currency. And the customers aren’t afraid to share the wealth, either.

PHOTOS BY JOE WILKINSON

FIN & FEATHER, IOWA CITY

When his Fin & Feather Outdoor Store moved two blocks to the other side of Highway 6 on the south side of Iowa City in 1998, Roger Mildenstein's focus remained on the Iowa River, a couple blocks away. "Fishermen come in to get bait and then they head right to the river. We sell bait because we are a fishing shop as well as a general outdoor store. We have since day one, when I came here 30 years ago. My predecessor did too."

The river below Iowa City has a loyal following. "The walleyes were really stacked up in there; guys were two deep in spots, waiting for their turn," relays Mildenstein on a pre-snowstorm day last December. Still, it's not unusual for calls to come from Des Moines, Cedar Rapids and elsewhere, to ask what's biting on the Mississippi River, Lake Macbride, or the Coralville Reservoir. Iowa City might be a metro area—by Iowa standards—but it has great fishing prospects on all sides.

"Right now, they're catching lots of crappies through the ice on Macbride. A guy told us he kept 18 nice ones and threw about 60 back," offers Lloyd Bender on that winter day. He staffs the fishing department part time and is often a source of information. Bender fishes as much as he can, with Macbride and Coralville his first choices.

Those updates actually come from a bait shack—of sorts. When the store moved, part of the renovation included an indoor shack, tin roof, pseudo-chimney and all. That's where

the live bait is stored. "Our customers come in looking for information. We are a source for it," says Mildenstein. "And it goes both ways. If the same guy comes in buying minnows three days in a row, you know he's catching fish. (That gets) relayed along to other anglers."

KABELE'S TRADING POST, SPIRIT LAKE

In Iowa's Great Lakes region, there's no shortage of bait and tackle shops. Catering to a crowd that is huge on outdoor recreation, these shops are big to small and include factory outlets, guide services and tackle shops. You can buy a card of jigs and rent a room at some and buy a trolling motor or an open face reel at others. Some offer bait that just an hour ago resided in the lake.

On a summer morning, two regulars wrap up a morning coffee and bull session outside Kabele's, on Hill Street on the north side of the town of Spirit Lake. The store sits on the north end of East Okoboji Lake, almost between that lake and Spirit Lake itself. Inside, you can follow your nose to the popcorn, looking over the variety of tackle, bait and equipment.

Poke around the back rooms, though, and it's not hard to spot what co-owner Fred Johnson sees as their advantage. "We seine our own bait here. We don't buy it off a truck, two, three or four days after it was shipped," says Johnson. In a holding tank, 60 pounds of crawdads wait to be sorted and sold. They came out of the



STAN'S—Perhaps Iowa's widest assortment of bait and tackle shops is around Iowa's Great Lakes. At Stan's Bait and Tackle in Milford, owner John Wittkamp comes up with what's biting the old fashioned way—he goes out on the lakes and catches it. Besides local fishing tips, this store on Highway 71 offers a wide range of muskie lures.



KABELE'S TRADING POST, SPIRIT LAKE—At left, crawdad and minnow seines are stacked to dry out back. This day's haul included 60 pounds of crawdads. Bait tanks line backroom walls where bait is sorted and prepared for sale, fresh from the water. A couple of regulars, below, finish their morning break. Anglers can pick up the latest fishing tips outside, as well as inside, if they listen long enough.

seines—baited with cut carp—that morning. Against the back of the one-story building lie a couple dozen wood frame and wire mesh traps. “It takes time, effort and a lot of work,” underscores Johnson. “We’ve been here 40 years. Everybody knows what we have. They don’t have minnows or chubs at (the big box store).”

And if you want fish stories with location tips this is your place. Johnson points to the lake area where the walleye bite had been very good over the last two weeks. “The perch are biting, too. It’s been a good month on the weed lines. A lot of fishermen are using shad raps now; the 5s, the 7s.” Do they (the big stores) know where the fish are biting? No.”

In language often saltier than the popcorn in the store, Johnson downplays any inventory advantage; any pricing breaks that the “big guys” boast of. “If you’re looking for a deal at the warehouse size stores, we’ll compete with any of them.”

And in winter, when the water turns hard, there’s still plenty of fishing action on the big lakes. The product line just shifts. All those ice shacks hold cold weather anglers who need everything from fish finders, to augers to waxworms and a suggestion for where to find ‘em this week.

WHAT BRINGS ‘EM BACK? ATTENTION TO DETAIL...

That fresh bait...for a price, and information...free for the asking, are part of the appeal of classic bait shops.

Much like neighborhood gas stations of yesteryear that pumped gas, checked tires and looked under the hood, you develop a comfort level and a relationship.

The best of those “back road bait shops” provide what you won’t find down the road; whether at a big box store, or just the next Mom-n-Pop corner store. It might be crawdads that think they’re still in Spirit Lake. It might be the only groceries for 15 miles and *the* lure. Perhaps it’s a lead on where the crappies are biting on Lake Macbride.

“This is where the ‘fish stories’ get told. There’s a lot of that,” supposes Mildenstein.

It’s the intangibles. And often, they’re free. 🐟

