

Fishing Big Bluegills in Metro Area Lakes

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Disclosure: I am CEO and Senior Partner of Fisherbeck LLC, a small entity corporation that has trademarked the name Fisherbeck and has patented the bluegill lure, Fisherbeck Easy Thread jig, called the Gillerbeck. In my descriptions of bluegill fishing in Metro area lakes, I have fished exclusively using the Gillerbeck, baited with wax worms, rarely with leeches, or a one inch white plastic twister tail.

West Metro Bluegill Lakes

Hunting big bluegills, the furthest west Metro lake I fish is LAKE OSAKIS. Since Osakis is about 100 miles NW of Minneapolis off Hiway 94, it isn't really a Metro area lake. This is a bluegill lake I would compare to Lake Mille Lacs, a walleye lake. Just like walleye anglers must fish Lake Mille Lacs, my nirvana for big bluegill is Lake Osakis. I try to fish it at least twice a year during open water season. It is on this lake where I have most consistently, using the Fisherbeck Easy Thread lure with a small white twister tail, caught bluegills at or just under one pound. I use the public boat access on Battle Point, off 210th St on the NE part of the lake. Almost all of the good bluegill fishing has been in the north arm of the lake. Sometimes the big gills are in the middle of the northern most bay and sometimes off the weeds in 10-12 feet of water at the drop-offs from the various points on the north end. We have also found big bluegills in deep water (20-30 feet) off Lakeshore Resort point, off the rockpile S of Battle Point and along the W weedline of the main lake. You often have to really hunt to find the big fish, but if you do find them you can really get some lunker bluegill.

PELICAN LAKE in Wright County south of Monticello off Hiway 177 is a large shallow lake that can be very dangerous for small boats when strong winds blow. A few years ago the Federal government had plans to make this a duck rearing and hunting lake. The MN DNR started netting large numbers of pan fish and game fish from the lake to stock inner Metro lakes. There was a large backlash from the thousands of anglers that fish the lake for trophy bluegill, crappie, LM bass and northern pike. The DNR stopped netting, water levels have slightly increased, fishing pressure has greatly increased and the average size of bluegill has decreased. This is one of the lakes I used when testing for the best color of the Fisherbeck Easy Thread jig to catch more and bigger bluegills. I have caught several >1 pound bluegill and pumpkinseed from Pelican Lake using the orange and black lure. On open water, from the public boat landing, my favorite big bluegill area is in the small, shallow southern basin. You need to read the weeds and find woody structure. The best presentation has been popping a bobber next to structure and weeds and straight line jigging off the side of the boat. Other areas I have found big bluegills on open water has been on the weed breaks off the points along the west

bank and around the island and deeper water off the weeds in the north basin. In the winter, I have had the best luck on the fringes of the concentration of other anglers. My biggest bluegills have come on the Fisherbeck Easy Thread with two waxies. My biggest ice crappie have come from the deepest water I can find, also using waxies. This lake should continue to produce the occasional trophy bluegill until the next winterkill occurs.

On the west end of Hennepin County off Hiway 55 is Lake Rebecca Park Reserve within which is LAKE REBECCA. Some friends had reported good pan fishing from Rebecca in the spring. No gasoline motors are allowed on the lake. The one time I fished Lake Rebecca, I caught a few small to medium bluegills on the N and W drop-offs and lots of small crappie off the S weed beds. There may be some big bluegills in this lake, being connected to Lake Sarah, but I don't think it worth spending much time hunting them.

A favorite lake of mine for fishing big bluegill is LAKE SARAH, located west of Loretto off Hiway 11. Lake Sarah has, despite heavy fishing pressure, continued to produce many limits of >8" bluegill as well as some nice crappie. Open water fishing for big bluegill is fun because using a small white twister tail on the Fisherbeck Easy Thread jig, the bigger bluegills will hit it while the smaller fish don't seem to be interested. I like to anchor in about 10 feet of water, cast toward the weeds, slowly retrieve and jig off the boat before casting again. The bigger fish will either hit during the retrieve or at the side of the boat after following the lure in. I do most of my open water fishing in the west basin. I always try west of the public boat landing off the docks and weeds, across the lake from the landing off the sandy beach, NE of the landing off the shallow water buoys, and off the docks at the narrows between the E and W basins. Winter ice fishing Lake Sarah can be feast or famine. This past winter when the ice was finally thick enough to drive on, the big bluegills were in very deep water. One week they were near the bottom at 37 feet. The next week they were suspended at 25-30 feet in 45 to 50 feet of water. This is tough finesse fishing, but very respectable bluegills. For this deep water fishing, I prefer the east basin. Set up among the fish houses. They are fishing crappie but you can find the big bluegills a bit deeper.

LAKE INDEPENDENCE is located south of Loretto off Hiway 19. Several years ago I was able to find some big bluegill off the point on the S end, SE of the Y camp island and off the hump on the east shore. Lake Independence public boat landing in Baker Park is part of the Three Rivers Park system and you need an annual pass (\$35) or \$5 fee to launch your boat. Since the invention of the Fisherbeck Easy Thread lure, I have only fished this lake on open water. All the bluegill have been small to medium. The fun surprise with this lake is that using the Fisherbeck Easy Thread lure with a small white twister tail in the places I used to catch bigger bluegills, I now catch many 1-3 pound LM bass which put up a nice fight on my ultralight equipment. This lake is best fished for game fish as there are better bluegill lakes in the near vicinity.

West of Lake Minnetonka and N of Minnetrista off Hiway 92 is LITTLE LONG LAKE. This lake has some enormous northern pike. The one time I have fished this lake was shortly after ice out last year. The big bluegill were in a sunny shallow bay along the Hiway. We caught many really large (8"+) bluegill and pumpkinseed with the jig and wax worms 12-18 inches under a cork and later with a small black popper and fly rod. I think this lake is worth further exploration to find where these big bluegill hang out in the summer time.

In northern Carver County off Hiway 30 is LAKE WACONIA. The public boat access is at mid-lake east shore. I have fished this lake twice, both times on open water. The first time in mid-summer, we anchored in 18 feet of water almost in the center of the lake south of a shallow weedy area called Keg's Reef. My fishing partner was using a half of a small leech and I was using the Fisherbeck Easy Thread and a 1 inch white twister tail. We jigged straight line off the side of the boat. The fish were just off the bottom and all were 7-8 inch bluegill. For me it was as fast and furious big bluegill fishing that I can remember. Of course the second trip was not as successful. Moving along the weedy flats in the NW area of the lake, we found several schools of decent bluegill at 9-12 foot depths. Casting, slow retrieve and jigging off the side of the boat proved most productive. I have a standing invitation from Waconia Mayor Jim Nash to fish the lake this summer but I have several closer lakes to explore for big bluegill before I make that 35 mile trip again.

WEAVER LAKE is a small lake off Hiway 101 in Maple Grove. The public boat landing is shallow and tricky and best used by smaller boats. Even with a small boat, high boots or wading is usually necessary. This lake has a lot of smaller bluegill but I can usually find a nice catch of decent sized fish by cork popping waxies or, later in the spring and summer, twister tail lures just off the edge of the heavy weeds. The bigger fish seem to be shallow, 6-8 ft. in this lake and like the lure to be slowly moving. You will catch several LM bass and crappie when exploring for bluegill. Always try the small bay at the boat landing, the SE corner and in deeper water (10-12 ft.) on the NW shore where the weeds come far out into the lake. Although most ice fishing is done in the S and SE areas, I have found only small fish. My best big bluegill area ice fishing is at 10-14 feet, 100 yards or more off the NE shore.

Accessed from W Bass Lake Road, also known as Hiway 10, another Three Rivers Park District lake (boat parking permit or fee required) within Maple Grove, is FISH LAKE. I have fished this lake once many years ago before the invention of the Fisherbeck Easy Thread lure. I found only many small bluegill. I have friends who regularly fish this lake for northern pike and claim they have seen some decent sized bluegill. Sometime this summer I plan to try fishing at the drop-offs and deeper weed lines. At the north end of Fish Lake is a narrow channel that connects to RICE LAKE. There is no public boat access to Rice Lake. A friend who lives on this lake and has bought and used the Fisherbeck Easy Thread off his dock on the NE middle side, has caught

many very respectable 8 inch bluegill. He continues to fish and report excellent catches of big pan fish using the Fisherbeck orange and black lure.

EAGLE LAKE, located at the junctions of Hiways 694 and 169, is accessed from 63rd Ave N. off 169. The boat access is on the NE corner with boat parking a block east. In the past, when I fished this lake, I caught only small and medium bluegill. Since I started using the Fisherbeck Easy Thread, I am catching many nice bluegill and pumpkinseed. I start fishing the boat channel between the dense weeds on each side and follow the deeper weed lines off the east shore. I've had the best luck popping a cork at 3-4 feet, casting toward the weeds and continually moving the lure baited with a small white twister tail. I can generally count on a half dozen or more sunnies better than 8 inches. Almost every time I've fished this lake, I've had a big muskie follow my fish to the boat and scare me half to death.

BASS LAKE is a small lake accessed off Zachary Lane just S of Bass Lake Road (Cty 10) in Plymouth. The access is a half mile trail, so a light canoe, float tube or chest waders are necessary. There is a public fishing dock. This lake is my favorite for hot summer days when I don swimming trunks and paddle the weed edges from my float tube. Each year the really big bluegill have been getting more scarce. Flipping and jigging a baited Gillerbeck in pockets within weed beds and at drop-offs at weed edges along the SE shore to the first point can be quite productive. Along with a few 8"+ bluegill, you will catch several crappie. The crappie and northern pike populations in this lake have exploded.

Accessed off Hiway 41, SE of Excelsior is LAKE MINNEWASHTA. Winter bluegills can be hard to locate. I have found them in 10-12 feet in the northern bay and in Little Minne Bay at the same depth. If you are catching smaller fish, move. The bigger bluegills do not seem to mix with the smaller fish. In the summer, I have found some nice fish off the shade of docks. Drifting the east side of the lake between the 10-20 foot drop, and anchoring when you catch a bigger bluegill worked well for me. The fish preferred 2 wax worms on the Fisherbeck Easy Thread jig.

CHRISTMAS LAKE, just S of Hiway 7 in Excelsior has some really bragging size bluegill. The one time I fished this lake in the winter, I was unable to find any fish. Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to fish this lake at the present time. The Christmas Lake Owners Association has commandeered the DNR access and has erected a chain barrier. They claim they don't want invasive species introduced into their lake and I guess that if you are not a Christmas Lake property owner, you are an invasive species. Although I have had great luck with large bluegills and lots of 1-3 pound LM bass around Christmas Lake Point and the NW shore just off the weeds, I think it best to skip this lake until fisherpersons are again allowed access.

Several years ago when I was first experimenting with the first prototypes of the Fisherbeck Easy Thread lure, I discovered a small gem of a lake located just SW of the junction of Hiways

101 and 5. LAKE SUSAN had an exceptional population of very large (1/2-3/4 pound) bluegills and they loved the action and color of the Gillerbeck. This is one of the primary lakes that Dr. Peter Sorenson from the U of MN is doing his research on carp in an effort to understand carp biology and reproduction. Hopefully his research will lead to an understanding of carp that will help eliminate the threat of invasive Asian carp. When I had Dr. Sorenson talk about his research at a Fur, Fin and Feather Club meeting, one of the facts I learned was that bluegill were the primary predator of carp eggs. Maybe that is why the fish in this small lake attained such big proportions. Two years ago, bluegill fishing remained fantastic, but it seems that winter, the word got out to the ice fishing army about the nice bluegills. This small lake was literally "fished out". Last summer I finally found a few 8" bluegill on the SW and W shorelines, where previously, big bluegill could be found just about anywhere at 10-12 feet. I would cast a Fisherbeck lure, slowly reel and work the lure, and if a fish wasn't caught, jig off the side of the boat before retrieving and casting again. I would catch a big bluegill more than 50% of casts. This is one of the lakes where I think we should return the really big bluegill back into the lake and take the smaller fish home to eat. Take your pictures from the boat before release.

You would think that LAKE MINNETONKA, the largest lake in the West Metro, would be one of my most favorable lakes to fish. The truth of the matter is, I can find few large (8"+) bluegill in any part of the lake. You can catch many nice sized crappie and LM bass, but invariably the bluegills will be small to medium. If you want a mess of good eating medium (about 7") bluegill, almost any of the numerous bays on this lake will suffice. Fish the outside edges of the heavy weeds. In the winter they are usually in the 12-15 foot range with the smaller bluegills plentiful at 8-10 feet. The only place I have caught large bluegills was a few years ago ice fishing the N bay of North Arm. I was testing colors for the Fisherbeck Easy Thread and I had a white jig about an hour before dark when a school of big bluegills came in about 12 feet and hammered my lure with wax worms until dark. This same pattern occurred regularly for a week to 10 days in February. Later, during the spawn that same year, I had found only small to medium fish. I thought I saw a nice fish right at the North Arm boat landing. So I tied an orange with black eyes Gillerbeck with a white twister tail and proceeded to catch a basket of big bluegills casting across the double boat landing. I went back there last summer and when small fish kept stealing my worms, I tried small leeches and caught only small fish. When I dragged large bass leeches across the boat landing, I began to catch some really big bluegill. I have caught medium eaters in Halsted and Priest Bays on the W end, Spring Park Bay and Black Lake in the NW lake, North Arm and Maxwell Bay, Wayzata Bay and Gray's Bay in the E end. I have yet to target the big bluegills in Lake Minnetonka. I'm just waiting to have someone clue me in to where the bigger bluegills are in this massive lake. Maybe I should be satisfied catching medium eaters as I hope you would be. Trouble is, I suspect there are some schools of really big bluegill somewhere in that lake.

Several years ago after attending a Fur, Fin and Feather Club meeting at the park on PARKERS LAKE located on Hiway 6 just west of 494 in Plymouth, I decided to see if the lake had a pan fish population. This is a very weedy lake, especially off the boat landing in the NE corner. I noticed several small bluegills under the dock while launching the boat, so I started fishing weed pockets just off the launch site. I caught several small to medium bluegill as well as some one pound LM bass. I noticed fish rising in small pockets in the weeds. Since I had my fly rod, I placed a small popper in the hole and a really nice bluegill hammered it. So I knew there were big bluegills in that small lake. After the invention of the Fisherbeck Easy Thread jig, I went back in the winter ice fishing. I caught lots of small bluegill, a few small crappie and a couple of small northern pike. The next summer I went back hunting the bigger bluegills. I finally found them off a steep drop in 16-18 feet of water. Each year since, I can consistently find big bluegills in this same location by anchoring at the correct depth and jigging off the side of the boat. Because this is a small lake, I only fish it once or twice a year and remove a dozen or so bigger bluegill. There is an abundance of LM bass if you fish the weed edges.

BRYANT LAKE, located just west of Hiways 62 & 169 is another Three Rivers Park System lake with wonderful facilities and a boat launch fee (\$5, \$35 yearly). I celebrated a birthday with relatives and friends at this facility and took groups of kids fishing the shore N of the boat landing. We caught small bluegill and medium bass. In spite of reports that big bluegill were being caught in Bryant Lake, when I came back hunting them with the Gillerbeck, I have not been able to find the big bluegill in this lake. For me, this is a good small bluegill lake. This lake is a place to take kids fishing for the joy of catching a lot of small pan fish.

There are two primary boat launch access points on MEDICINE LAKE, the second largest lake in the west Metro, both of which require a fee. The larger launch area is in French Regional Park operated by the Three Rivers Park District on the north end of the lake off Hiway 9 (Old Rockford Road). The second launch area is on the SE corner at Harty's Boat and Bait Shop. Limited August boat launch is available on the mid-west side of the lake at West Medicine Lake Park. Located only 5 miles from my home in Crystal, Medicine Lake is my "go-to" lake for big bluegills year round. When I first moved to Minnesota in the early 2000's, the lake had lots of small pan fish. Since that time, Eurasian milfoil has heavily infected the lake and the average size of the bluegill has increased every year. Catching 8"+ bluegill is common when using the Fisherbeck Easy Thread orange with black eyes lure. In the winter there are two separate big bluegill options, north end and south end. On the north end, ice fish deep (17-20 feet) water on the west side off the boat launch. Occasionally big bluegills can be found shallow (7-10 feet) SE of the reed bed in front of the launch site or in the middle of the northern most bay. On the south end, ice fish in the entire weedy south, with the bigger fish mid-lake at 10-12 feet. These fish prefer wax worms impaled on the Gillerbeck lure. The places you can catch big bluegills on open water has steadily increased in the past couple of years. With this large lake, I have

confined most of my open water fishing to the north end. Immediately after ice out until the weeds grow in, the shallow northern-most bay channels hold large schools of big bluegill and medium crappie. Shore fishing these areas is very popular in the early spring. Small boats with shallow motors gets you to spots the shore anglers can't reach. Dragging or popping a small cork 12-20 inches above a Gillerbeck baited with wax worms or a white twister tail is great for a mess of 8"+ bluegill, and you will catch lots of medium crappie as well as the occasional LM bass. The entire east side of the West Basin is also a great very shallow, early season hot spot. Here you will find lots of big hard-fighting red-ear or pumpkinseed, especially around the docks and rock rip-rap. Later in the season as the water warms, you will find the bigger bluegills just off the dense weeds in sandy areas about 10-11 feet deep. Use electronics to find these depths throughout the entire north end of the lake and you will find decent bluegill. Later in the summer, plan your good bluegill fishing for early in the morning before 10am when the hordes of recreational boaters pretty much kill the good fishing. Medicine Lake has become a big bluegill factory and I plan to fish it regularly with Fisherbeck lures.

Two winters ago, ice out in TWIN LAKES off of Botteneau Blvd (Hiway 81) in Robbinsdale (boat launch), Crystal and Brooklyn Center revealed an unexpected die off of carp (total) and many game fish, including bluegills. This lake consists of 3 separate parts; north basin, middle lake and southern basin. The middle lake has the deep water while the N & S basins are shallow and weed choked. The die-off pretty much eliminated fishing in the shallow basins and killed most of the small bluegills. Ice fishing the middle lake this past winter revealed a good survival of jumbo perch, medium crappie and occasional very large bluegill. It was very tricky finesse jigging right off the bottom in 12-20 feet of water, but the jumbo perch fishing was fantastic throughout the winter season. The perch preferred a couple of wax worms on the Fisherbeck Easy Thread jig. The occasional bluegill, caught in the more shallow depths (10-12 feet), were large, over 8 inches. Perch fishing was best on the E & W sides, mid-lake. The north end held crappie as did mid-lake deep water. Last summer as the water warmed and spawning approached, large bluegills were found in shallow water off the sandy beaches. Later, the jumbo perch were in these same locations and nice crappie were under the docks and boat lifts. A warning! DNR surveys a couple of years ago showed that fish from this lake had higher than normal levels of mercury and warned that you should not eat more than one meal a week of fish from Twin Lakes.

CRYSTAL LAKE in Robbinsdale, when I fished it, had carp and musky. The pan fishing was virtually non-existent. Unless things have changed in the past year, this lake, despite its reputation, is not worth spending your time fishing for bluegills.