

Confessions of a Crankbait Junkie

It's an unyielding curiosity about how they work.



I have been a crankbait junky for a long time. I have boxes of Shad Raps, Wally Divers, Reef Runners, Bomber Long A's, Husky Jerks, Little Rippers, Thunder Sticks, Hot n Tots, Jointed Shad Raps, Countdowns and who knows what else. I could also appreciate some of the classics that don't get a lot of press but were extremely effective at the right place and time, like the Walleye Demon, Rogues, Power Dive Minnows, Sparkle Tails, Shadlings, Fingerlings and even the mighty Lazy Ike. It's surprising how popular and effective banana baits like Lazy Ikes and Flatfish were in fishing circles at one time and how so few anglers use them today. They still catch plenty of fish. The fish haven't evolved too much in the past 50 years.

I actually went some summers where I bought less than \$50 worth of bait in a season. The reality is that

The development of crankbaits has come a long way in the past two decades.



crankbaits catch a lot of fish. Some promoters will even go as far as to say that live bait is no longer needed. I won't go there, however. I'm a much better guide and angler by being comfortable doing both. You can catch fish some days without ever rigging or jigging, but once you get good at cranking, jigging, rigging, slip bobbers and using harnesses, you'll just about always catch fish. Versatility always wins.

About four years ago, I got the opportunity to work with a new lure company, Salmo USA. At first, I was skeptical as I already had so many baits, boxes and boxes of baits.

The only place I'd ever seen this lure was on a clearance rack. I had a hard time putting down a lure as productive as something like a Shad Rap for a line of lures that was collecting dust in the clearance bin. I remember thinking I would try a few of the lures just as a favor for a few friends who had recently bought the struggling company.

The first time I put some of the lures in my boat, I remember having such a low level of confidence. I thought that it would be neat to see if I could catch fish on a Salmo when the bite turned suicidal. I just didn't think the lure company would get anywhere, as new lures come and go almost daily.

One of the lures I tried was called the Hornet. The lure had an intense vibration for such a little bait, and almost buzzed with an action I had never seen. The lure caught fish. In fact, I couldn't believe how many fish we caught with that lure. We casted the lure, we trolled the lure and pulled the lure behind lead. Within a year, the Hornet became one of my go-to baits.

I started painting some of the lures in an attempt to match some of the more productive color patterns that worked so well on Devils Lake. We had a huge population boom of white bass that fish were keying on, so white seemed to really produce. I took white paint to many lures and used a black Sharpie pen to paint the back and added spots on the sides. This color was quickly dubbed the "Dalmatian."

My gosh, did that lure catch fish. It was absolutely incredible. We came up with a few different color schemes as well, notably a pattern called

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the Red Tail Shiner and Viking. Talk about being in the right place at the right time. It's really exciting coming up with color patterns, testing the patterns and getting a lure company to actually listen.

We pulled baits until the hooks fell off testing bill designs, shapes and color patterns.

Now, in the big scheme of things, I think the average angler worries about color too much. If you don't catch any fish after fishing all day, you have much bigger troubles than using the wrong color. But... when you're fishing over the top of fish, the right bait, and the right color can mean the difference between 20 fish and 6. There are times where every fish falls for one lure and usually, that one lure is the only one of its kind in the box.

What intrigued me about Salmo was their ability to build lures with no variation. For example, with many balsa and injection molded plastic baits, a few will absolutely kill fish while the next lure out of the box doesn't run quite the same. The lexan bills were easy to file and tweak. The eye on the bill was built with thru-wire construction so I could bend and adjust the tuning several times as I experimented with bill shapes and trolling speeds.

Some of the designs were flops, while some of the lures had some promise. Most of the lures took a few tries to get the right shape and action to consistently catch fish.

Some of the lures looked like they should have worked well and didn't so the plans were scrapped. There was one particular design however, that took several attempts to get perfect and now, the finished bait absolutely knocks walleye. That lure is a bait called the Frisky.

I am a big fan of the Rapala Jointed Shad Rap. I was intrigued by the triggering characteristics of jointed baits. The extra flash or flick the tail provides seemed to trigger fish. What I hated about the #5 Jointed Shad Raps, however, was the size of the hook required on the rear and the fact that these small hooks and rings often pulled apart or broke when we were fighting big fish. We wanted to design a shad or perch shaped bait that was jointed, but we wanted to be able to use larger hooks on the tail and not worry about the back of the bait popping off at the time you were skiing the jaws of a 9-pound walleye to the net.

The first few bill designs didn't

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give the bait enough kick. We caught a few fish with some of the early prototypes but nothing to get real excited about. Slowly however over the course of a couple of years, we started to get close. Some of the best baits are just on the verge of being unfishable. There has to be a counter action for every action so that the lure will run true, and the faster you can accomplish this action during the tuning process, the better.

We put a small fin on top of the jointed bait, giving the lure a realistic profile. We widened the bill and added a chime so the bill would grip the water, causing the bait to roll when the rod tip was snapped forward. The rear of the bait was built heavy enough to hold up to several fish, big fish included, as I never wanted to see a big walleye tear the back end off again.

Really high performing crankbaits are tuned and designed to the point where you can cheat by using larger hooks on the bait to increase your hooking and landing percentage. This is exactly what we did with the Frisky.

The final prototypes of this lure caught walleyes like some kind of fish cocaine. I couldn't stop using the lures. I often had the only bait of its kind in existence and I had all I could do to stop fishing with it. I always had to keep one lure out of snags or pike jaws so that we had a working sample, and that was tough.


Tony Dean caught wind of the lure and came to Devils Lake where we filmed a show. The Frisky caught fish that day just like any other. Scheels All Sports had heard rumblings of the new bait and some samples were sent to them. The rest, as they say, is history. Scheels then proceeded to buy all the baits, making the bait a Scheels exclusive. I even have to buy my Friskys from Scheels.

The lure has been the result of miles of trolling, a little bit of luck and a retailer that recognized the potential for just such a lure. Getting to do what I do, I sometimes have to pinch myself. Getting intimate into the design of lures, testing lures to make sure they catch fish before manufacturing is part of my job. And let me assure you that I work awfully hard at it.

Right now, we're working on a smaller version of the Frisky and are experiencing some difficulties with the balance of the bait. But be assured of one important fact -- when you see the finished bait in a sporting goods store, that bait got to that point because we didn't quit working on it until it caught fish. Not just caught a few fish, but I mean really caught fish, walleye cocaine.

When we are happy, we sell the lure to you and our customers become happy and sell more lures than I ever could by something called word of mouth.

That is the Salmo story. •



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