

Friday, March 23, 2007

By Brent Frazee, [Kansas City Star Newspaper](#)

Donald Cranor's hopes of catching a big brown trout on the White River were rising almost as quickly as the water.

From his boat, he could see that the current had picked up, and rocks that were totally exposed only moments ago were now underwater.

That's prime time for a brown-trout fisherman. And Cranor was dreaming big.

"This is the time you wait for - when the water starts to rise," the veteran guide said as he fished the river in northern Arkansas. "If you can catch the front end of that rise, that's when the big ones will be out feeding.

"It gets everything active. The bait will be out stirring around, and the big trout will come out of hiding, too. This is when we'll catch a lot of our big ones."

That rise is created by hydropower production at Bull Shoals dam. When the generators are cranking, it sends current pulsing down the White River.

And that can activate the river's big brown trout in a heartbeat.

That's what Cranor found on a recent weekday. Not long after he threaded one of the river minnows he had trapped earlier onto a hook, he tossed it out along the current line and began to drift. The bait didn't get far until Cranor felt a solid hit and he watched his fishing rod slowly bend.

When he set the hook, Cranor knew he had what he was after.

"The big ones usually don't fool around," he said with a smile. "They don't peck at the bait.

"They just inhale it."

The fish made a powerful run, then rocketed to the surface and made an

acrobatic leap. But it wasn't long before Cranor had the brilliantly colored brown trout in the net.

"That one will go about 5 pounds," he said, almost disappointed at the size of his catch. "I thought it was bigger, but you never know.

"The way they fight, they can fool you."

Cranor, 40, has been carrying on that fight for most of his life. He grew up on the White River near the town of Cotter, which calls itself "The Trout Capital of the World," and he started catching trophy trout about the same time most kids learn to ride a bicycle.

At age 8, he already was making money off his fishing, selling the suckers he would catch for a quarter apiece to old-timers who used them for their crawdad traps.

By the time he was 15, he was guiding. And he's been doing it ever since, leading fishermen to some of the big brown trout that have brought the White River national fame.

"I'll never forget my first guide trip," he said with a laugh. "I was working at the Cotter Trout Dock, and they had a big group of fishermen in and they didn't have enough guides. So they said, 'Let's get the kid down the street.'

"I remember being scared to death. It had rained like crazy, and the river was as muddy as it could be. But we went out and caught trout, which is more than some of the other boats did.

"I got \$36 that day, and I thought I was rich."

These days, Cranor will guide more than 150 days a year, and he has guided customers to brown trout as big as 15 pounds.

The key to his success? He blends the down-home savvy he learned from hanging around the old-time guides over the years with the modern methods

he has developed on his own.

For example, one trip might find him drifting the current line with river minnows he collected. But the next trip might find him showing his customers how to work suspending Rogues or small Yum grubs through the clear water.

"Rogues are probably the best big-fish bait on this river," he said. "When you can work a bait through the current and stop it for a second, it drives those big fish crazy."

It did on a recent weekday.

Fishing with everything from minnows to Rogues to white grubs, Cranor, Larry Dablemont and I caught and released more than 50 brown and rainbow trout in the Cotter area.

But that was just an ordinary day to Cranor.

"Late February and March is a great time to fish down here," he said. "The fish are ready to eat, and there isn't a lot of food in the water. The crawdads and the worms are still buried in the mud.

"That's why minnows or shad imitations can work so well at this time of the year."