

# Plastics pass the test

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I was still working on getting my new ice fishing rod ready when Eric Atherton reeled in the first sunfish of the day.

The P-B outdoor editor had his second sunnie -- a green sunfish this time -- through the ice before my jig was down to bottom of the lake some 20 feet below us.

His third fish made me wonder if Tom Sawvell was wrong.

Atherton and I had decided to field test Sawvell's tiny jigs tipped with a whippy, wiggly plastic tail. Eric would fish his usual way, using tiny jigs tipped with a butterworm or waxworm, and I would use Sawvell's jigs and plastics.

It wasn't a perfectly fair test, as Eric had a few advantages over me. Because of shoulder problems, I've seldom ice fished for a few years, so I was admittedly rusty. Plus, Eric is more familiar with his Vexilar and was very familiar with this particular reservoir and its light-biting fish.

Still, I agreed to the informal contest. I like the idea of the plastics -- you always seem to have too much or too little live bait -- and I like a challenge.

When I finally figured out where my jig was on the fishfinder, my rod tip lurched down and I reeled in a small crappie. Maybe, just maybe, Sawvell and others who are saying plastics can be as good as live bait are right after all.

Eric likes to jig vigorously to attract fish, then hold the rod steady when the Vexilar shows a fish coming up after the bait. I tried the same tactics, and I didn't do well at all.

Then I remembered what Sawvell said about the tails of the plastics he makes -- even with the rod held perfectly still, the tail will still sway a bit from subtle currents. In my hand, I couldn't hold the rod perfectly steady no matter how hard I'd try, so that meant my pink jig would wiggle as well.

So I sat on my bucket and tried to keep the rod still.

It worked. I began to catch fish, including some nice sunnies.

Eric admitted that he was surprised.

"I can't say that I've ever seen a plastic body catch that many fish through the ice," he said. "Drop it in the water and let me look at it."

I dropped the jig into the top of the hole, and Eric studied it. The plastic body's long tail moved very naturally.

"I can see why that would work," Eric said.

And it kept on working. After a couple hours, I had enough fish for dinner.

We estimated that we caught about 40 panfish, with me catching at least dozen, maybe 15. Considering the slow start I'd had, I concluded that the plastics worked more than well enough to keep trying.

And yes, Eric will be trying them himself the next time he goes onto the ice. But it's a safe bet that he'll have some waxworms along, just in case.