

Between June 15 and August 31, this rustic art becomes a consuming passion for some.

Anatomy of a Frog Hunter

Story By Joe McFarland
Photos by Brian Schilling

The frog legs hit the skillet at 1 a.m., just as the aroma of shallots and butter curled into the living room.

“What’s this?” my friend Bobber asked, leaning into the kitchen, nose uplifted, “a gourmet restaurant?” Bobber was rubbing his wet head with a towel after scrubbing himself clean.

Twenty minutes ago he was wearing pond scum and duckweed. We both had smelled of anaerobic mud, the kind that oozes through bare toes like grease.

We’d been frog hunting in the orchard ponds down the road.

“As a matter of fact,” I said, drizzling white wine into the skillet, “a gourmet only dreams about this.”

I felt superior. There are no restaurants where fresh-caught frog legs get served after midnight—or at any other hour. For the culinary perfectionist, the only way to acquire truly fresh frog legs (a jewel of French cuisine) is to go frog hunting yourself.

Drawn to the bathwater-warm ponds and swamps of Illinois in search of a limit, summer frog hunters immerse themselves in the ritual. Some hunters wade, others float small boats, and some simply prow the shoreline on foot to collect their daily limit of eight bullfrogs.



In Illinois, that means getting a fishing license, devising a frog-catching method, then descending upon your local bullfrog hangout between June 15 and August 31, the legal season for bullfrogs. Bullfrog hunting is regulated like sportfishing in Illinois; if you're required to have a fishing license (16 and older, unless exempt), you'll need one to go frog hunting.

The daily limit is eight bullfrogs, with a possession limit of 16.

Back in the kitchen, Bobber uncorked a sauvignon blanc while I prepared the

plates. June bugs thumped against the window screen. Several feet away, near the door, muddy boots and wet clothing reeked of pond scum. I turned off the heat under the skillet, laid the plates of golden frog legs on the table and raised a glass.

We are of both worlds, Bobber and me. The finest restaurants in the world offer frog legs, yet nothing this fresh. Despite their eagerness to dine on adventurous cuisine, few restaurant patrons involve themselves in the total experience. Otherwise worldly epicureans recoil at the notion of collecting their own frog legs.

Understand that frog hunting has no pedigree, no elegance. A trout fisherman, by comparison, might strut home with a fresh-caught rainbow trout and be received with state honors. Frog hunters are given directions to the shower.

We ignore social bias and dig in. "Here's to discriminating tastes," I toast, grinning.

"Money can't buy this," Bobber replies, and he is right.

The truth is, frog legs are not an acquired taste. The analogy might be tired, but they *do* taste like chicken—with a light hint of seafood. The texture of frog legs is similar to the meat on chicken wings, which is why a standard treatment is to fry them as one might fry chicken.

Frog hunting in Illinois was once the pastime of rural summer evenings. Hunters with carbide lamps would head to the swamps and backwaters of Illinois, wading and sculling small boats among willows and cattails in search of frog leg meat.

"It wasn't just for the fun of it," recalled 85-year-old Maurice Whitacre, a retired



If you've got a quick reach and a firm grip, bullfrogs can be snatched by hand. It's one of the legal methods for capturing bullfrogs.

fish hatchery manager for the Department of Conservation (now Department of Natural Resources or DNR) who spent his childhood in rural southwest Illinois. "It was putting food on the table."

Whiteacre said frog hunting was one of the many ways rural families survived the Depression during those lean years.

Today, frog hunting is both antique and wildly unique. Populations of bullfrogs are strong statewide, with the primary pressure on the species (humans excluded) coming from predator fish and herons. Yet frog hunters have plenty of opportunity. If anything, removing a few bullfrogs might help the wetland resource.

"A bullfrog will eat almost anything," noted Scott Ballard, DNR natural heritage biologist who monitors reptile and amphibian species in Illinois. "Other frogs, small turtles, mice, snakes, lizards—you name it; bullfrogs eat practically anything around them, including threatened or endangered species."

Bullfrogs may be taken by hand, pole and line fishing methods, pitchfork, landing net, bow and arrow or bow and arrow device, spear or gig. Firearms, air guns, gas guns or commercial fishing devices such as dip nets, hoop nets, traps or seines are not allowed.

DNR Director of Resource Conservation Mike Conlin said the capacious appetite of a bullfrog is stunning. He recalled one incredible frog hunt years ago when, after hauling in a particularly huge bullfrog from a pond, Conlin simply had to find out why the frog's stomach was so enormous.

"I opened it up and it had an adult red-winged blackbird inside of it," Conlin said. "I'm not talking (about) a tiny bird—it had an adult red-winged blackbird in its stomach."


Conlin added: "It's a good thing bullfrogs don't get any bigger. Otherwise, there wouldn't be any humans left on earth!"

Yet here we are. And when frog season arrives each year, hunters make their amphibian assaults, and here's how it's done:

Bullfrogs might be the king of their domain. But they also have a pair of fabulous weaknesses, which is their gluttonous appetite and their inability to recognize the danger of staring into a flashlight while a hunter approaches. During the day, anything dangled in front of a bullfrog—a colorful fishing jig, a bit of food on a hook, perhaps an automobile tire or a piano—will be gulped. At night, so transfixed are the bullfrogs by the light, hunters can approach within inches of the blinking frogs. Some hunters decide to forgo spears, nets and gigs (among the legal devices in Illinois) and simply reach out to grab the bullfrogs by hand.

It takes a quick reach. And it cannot be done in daylight. But there is great pride among frog hunters who are able to secure a limit of frogs bare-handed.

Bobber and I are giggers. A long pole with sharpened prongs on one end does the job for us. One of my friends uses a bow. Yet there is no precise method everyone must follow to hunt frogs. Sometimes hunters shove small boats through snag-filled swamps to reach the source of those tell-tale croaks. Others wade into the organic soup of summer water, immersed in the total experience.

What matters is what appears on the plate, if not everything else. 

How to cook frog legs? They really do taste a lot like chicken, which makes these spicy "Buffalo Frog Legs" a natural choice. For this and other frog leg recipes, check out: www.dnr.state.il.us/oi/site.htm.

