

Setting Up Your Calendar for A Successful Crappie Year

by Steve Welch

This past year I have traveled more and got to see some fantastic crappie fishing. All within a short five-hour drive from central Illinois. I have operated a successful guide service on Lake Shelbyville for the past ten years but my full time job took a bounce and up and moved to Mexico. With that went my five weeks paid vacation my fourteen paid holidays and the flexible hours it took to have a second job, fishing over a hundred days a year. I have since gone back to school and fishing has taken a back seat for the meantime.

Whenever I do get a long weekend or just need a break my fiance and I go crappie fishing. We both love our little getaways and I have seen her progress into a fine fishing person this past year. It's funny her girlfriends all say isn't that so boring setting on some bank drowning worms and never catching anything. She responds I haven't seen that thus far we fish from a hightech Ranger 520 bass boat equipped with everything down to the kitchen sink, well not a sink but I am sure she wishes there was a pora-potti on board. Anyway she and I have had numerous days this year where we caught our limit of crappie some days where we have caught over a hundred in a single day and we have done this in ninety degree heat as well as twenty degree cold. Water temperatures that have run from ninety-two all the way down to mid thirties.

Let's set up a little calendar so to speak and maybe this will help you be a year round crappie fisherman. First it's early January and you are loosing open water every where in the northern end of Illinois. We here in central part of the state still have the twelve thousand-acre Lake Shelbyville. The north end will freeze but the south end is just to wide and the wind will keep it open, so it just fishes smaller. Last winter I was on an extended Christmas vacation and fished Shelbyville about four days a week from Christmas until mid January. We had to put in down at Opossum Creek or even all the way down to Ninth Street but the fishing was just fantastic. We would target steep clay banks with downed trees that had branches lying out in at least fifteen feet of water. That was as shallow as we would fish most days it was twenty-five feet or so deep. My two buddies and I would start about mid morning. No need to get up early the fishing was always best from eleven o'clock until about four in the afternoon. People sounded skeptical when I told them we had been fishing in open water and had caught over a hundred fish the previous day. The fish really school up in the winter and good electronics is a must. I have a Garmin 240 on the nose of my boat and a Garmin outfitted with GPS on the console. They both are excellent at locating both brush and fish. I set my depthfinder on the nose which has the transducer mounted at the bottom of the trolling motor on bottom lock and zoom the picture twice and then go in to my sensitivity settings and bump it up one or two from automatic. Set like this when a brushpile comes on the screen I get a much faster image, a larger image and this helps me to hover over it. The sensitivity turned up allows me to see my crappie jig on the screen thus allowing me to put it right on a crappies nose so to speak. I get this all the time at seminars people skeptical about seeing your jig on the screen but the next time you go ice fishing take your depthfinder with you and practice with a level transducer and no structure under you and you too will get better at interpreting information. Most depthfinders on the market today all will help you find fish. It is up to the owner to learn how to read them. If there were just two variables in fishing that I would pick as most important it would be boat control and depthfinders and of course a strong trolling motor is a must.

Now let's say ol Mother Nature has let go her grip a little and it is late February through mid March. This is what I call ice out. The fish go shallow for about three weeks or so until we start getting all those cold rains. Once again I am still at Lake Shelbyville only this time I am up on the north end as shallow as I can go throwing a cork the fish are so shallow. The sun warms the back of the creeks and the big crappie follow. We catch some of the biggest of the year at ice out. Wilborn Creek is a good start.

Once the spawn starts I like to travel and fish all phases of it. I get an early trip down to Kentucky Lake in just to break up the winter blues. I will keep my eye out on a warming trend anytime in the mid March time frame. The fish down there are still out in deep water using creek channels and ledges and it is a big fish period. The wind is a big deterance down there so my large boat helps. But even more so my GPS has allowed me to make myself a milk run without having to drift to find fish, I just hate that, to boring. I have either hired guides or watched fisherman and then when they leave I go over there and mark the coordinates. I have about forty good spots and these all are close to other spots. I take about ten buoys with me and if nobody else is in the area I will use my GPS and mark all ten spots then I can bounce from one to the other. The Garmin GPS is so accurate that I rarely miss by more than six feet.

I generally go down there two or three times from mid March to Memorial Day. The later trips are for the big bluegills they have down there. I have been going for years and have not targetted the big gills down there until this last year and believe me it was a ton of fun. We made two weekend trips in a row the second so my eleven year old could get in on this. We brought home about two hundred and fifty fish on both weekends combined and caught nearly twice that many. We fished stake beds and boat docks from the dam to Bear Creek. Hovering over them with a small crappie jig and a wax worm. My biggest was over eleven inches long.

I also love going over to Mark Twain Lake at Hannibal Missouri but I opt to wait until around Memorial day and fish all summer over there. They have a little better size than Lake Shelbyville and you seem to catch a lot of pound average fish. What I really like about this lake is you can fish over there on July 4th weekend and flat tear up the crappie on the bluffs and never see a ski boat at all. I have been over there about twenty times this year and have fallen in love with the solitude. You see Bald Eagles on most trips and turkeys are plentiful but the real draw is the crappies. Just pick you a bluff that drops off rapidly and believe me they are everywhere. You can be fishing in fifty feet of water just six feet from the shore. Standing wood is everywhere just throw your jig about six foot past the tree and let it fall back to you and the fish suspend about ten foot down. All summer I had hundred fish days.

I love taking my fiance with me and going down to Kentucky Lake on the July Fourth though. This year we saw houseboats done up with thousands of lights commmerating the occasion and the fireworks down at the dam are fantastic watching them with thousands of big million dollar boats. My twenty-foot bass boat seemed small in comparison. During the day we would crappie fish and we had the whole lake to ourselves in that respect. All the guides and the other fisherman would either be whitebass fishing or largemouth. I took several nice stringers into the bait shop and people just looked at me in disbelief . But I know that the two times of the year that crappie school is summer and winter so I used my Shelbyville tricks that caught me fish last winter and boom I am on them big time. My GPS is a must and I know that up on the north end the fish hang around out in the mouths of the creeks so you can forget about anything less than fifteen foot. We had stringers of about twenty nice fish a day and about that many short fish as well. We caught bass, sauger, bluegills, catfish; you name it all on crappie jigs and waxworms.

Now that we are into the fall season I love running the rivers on both Lake Shelbyville and Mark Twain. You can fish in water so shallow that you are churning mud and not see a sole. All those bass fisherman have put his or her boats away. At Shelbyville just pick between the Kaskaskia River or Whitley Creek or the Okaw River and Wilborn Creek. Mark Twain it is either the North Fork or South Fork. Just go up the river until it gets very shallow then turn around and start fishing both shorelines. Shelbyville is very similar. I guess that is why I like them both they fish alike in the fall.

The jigs that I used most of the summer were either a Bob Folder Tinsel Jig or a white and chartreuse Mid South tube on a Reeves jig tipped with a wax worm. I will use minnows but not when the water dips below fifty you don't need them.

I will still be out at the local fishing shows in the winter doing how-to seminars but undecided on the guide service as of yet. My schooling comes first.