

## Ice-Out Crappie

by Steve Welch

A strange phenomenon happens on northern lakes right after the ice comes off the lake. For about two weeks the fish go on a feeding frenzy and move into shallow water when the afternoon sun warms up the dark bottomed flats. This time frame varies from as early as the first of February down on Kentucky Lake to about mid month on Lake Shelbyville some three hundred miles north.

Lake Shelbyville the lake that I guide on is drawn down to winter pool about five feet. This moves the fish and congregates them. It is also the best time of the year to find yourself some good structure to fish when the lake does come up to summer pool. I can find fish up in the Okaw river area as shallow as a couple of foot of water, but most of the time you need to stay close to the old channel and watch your depth finder for the fish to suspend up off the bottom right next to standing trees. I can catch fish down about four feet deep in ten to twenty foot of water.

This is also a good time to hire a guide. They know the lake and can steer you clear of all the hidden islands and numerous stump fields that lurk in waiting to attack the lower unit of your expensive boat. This is also a good time to come up with some good spots for later in the spring when the water is back up to normal pool.

When the water temperature is still below fifty degrees I opt to fish a jig only. I will have a pole rigged up with a tube jig on a sixteenth ounce jig. I use a smaller tube this time of the year in chartreuse and red or white or black or just plain old chartreuse. Crappie Pro has smaller solid body plastic tubes. I opt for these in the first few outings. I will use the larger Southern Pro umbrella tubes and the Midsouth Super jigs a little later in the spring. I also like hair jigs and tensile jigs. I also rig up a pole with a slip bobber rig with a jig under the cork. If it gets tough I tip the jig with a wax worm or Power bait Crappie nibble. This is also the time of the year when I go to four pound line. The fish can be finicky and since they are up out of those thick brush piles and suspended the lighter line won't be hindrance. I use either the Stren Sensi-thin in hi-vis or the camouflage color depending on the water clarity.

I depend on my GPS unit to keep me on brush and the high power of my Mercury deuce and a quarter to cover a lot of water. Crappie fishing is all about covering water if you want limits. The waypoints on my GPS makes it a lot easier to cover water faster. I have over two hundred all programmed in on Shelbyville and about fifty on Kentucky Lake. I will fish fifty or a hundred trees in a given day, but I have a milk run laid out so I am not bouncing back and forth. It all depends on the wind direction and speed as to where I am fishing on that given day. The one thing that I like about Shelbyville over say Kentucky is that I can hide from the wind and make what may seem like a day you might have to reschedule to your clients. You can surprise them and tuck up under a high bluff and stay completely out of the wind.

I don't want you to confuse this pattern with the spawn but this shallow early bite can be one of the better periods of the year. I have frequently had over a hundred-crappie climb into my Ranger bass boat on a good day. Next month I will talk more about the pre-spawn period.

I have a little time left so let's talk a little about planning fishing trips and some tips that might help you. Most of you wouldn't dream of planning a trip down to Kentucky Lake in February or early March but that is when I like to go. The resorts aren't open as of yet though so staying on the water is a problem. I like to go before the crowds and while the fish are still out on those deep ledges and schooled up from the winter. I know it isn't a period where limits are the norm but big fish is what I go down they're for and this time frame is your best period. I go down to the Big Sandy area just because I like all those steep ledges. I stay at Fishtail Lodge. One of the newest places on the lake and close to the water and food. Gary Mason a prominent guide down there told me this past summer that he switches over to bluegills about April twentieth confirming my decision to go early. I will be speaking at numerous fishing shows in the central part of Illinois from January-March and taking bookings for my guide service. If a guide trip is to your liking then give me a buzz and set up a trip. But be forewarned with my Crappie U.S.A. tourneys and new job I don't guide as much and dates are hard to get so book early.

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