

Setting Up Your Boat with the Latest Electronics

By Steve Welch

In my business you need the best electronics you can afford. I tell folks that a crappie and white bass fisherman is off shore more than just about any other type fisherman and needs quality electronics.

I started using GPS way back in 2000 and they were accurate then but today's units are so much more. You combine that with Navionics mapping and get multiple units for different applications and side-imaging and now structure scan or down scan and you have a boat designed to find even the tiniest brush pile and now with structure scan you can see if fish are holding in it without ever wetting a line.

My boat is set up with four units some say overkill but I say let me show you how they work together in unison. On my dash I have a Lowrance color unit for sonar only with the transducer glassed in on the back of my boat. I use it for high speed running and confirmation as to what I see with the other units.

Then beside my dash I have a Lowrance unit loaded with the Navionics Premium chip for Illinois and some other states like Tennessee where I go on Kentucky Lake. I don't need the chip with the overhead views of marinas and 3-D images. The mapping is the same on the less expensive chip and that is what I want is the mapping. I set this unit up for the lake I am on and I move my contour scale from five meters to ten. This colors everything in fifteen feet or less in blue or dark blue. Since I use fifteen feet in several species that I fish for I can navigate along this blue ledge with the deeper white basin beside me. This really helps in finding points and inside cuts on ledges with the mapping. The river channels are clearly defined which really helps in the winter, as fish tend to travel these channels.

Then right above the unit I use for navigation I have a unit for side imaging and down-scan. I can idle along the ledges and see any brush pile out to the side and any hidden on the ledge itself with the structure-scan or down-scan. Sonar will miss brush hidden right on a shear drop but down-scan won't. Then the best thing about this unit if you see something you like just freeze the screen and move your cursor over to it and mark the GPS waypoint. Then you can just motor right to it. Now with the down-scan or structure-scan you can go over it and fish will show up in the branches as white images. If it is a big brush pile you can then pinpoint where in the brush the fish are and how deep they are suspending within the branches. On Shelbyville we have huge trees left standing in forty feet of water or more. They still have all their branches and top of the tree is about ten-feet under the surface. With the down-scan you motor over it and it looks like a giant oil painting of a tree not a sonar image. You can see the fish and go right to where they are. Coolest thing I have ever seen.

I really use the mapping and down-scan in locating the summer white bass and huge buffalo that hang out under them. I use the same method of idling along a deep drop or a point then I look for fish rather than structure. Don't get me wrong though if you find deep structure like old rotted down trees the whites will use them. Stumps left on drops are also white bass and buffalo magnets.

You will see huge schools of both whites and buffalo in small areas along these drops. I used to look for suspended schools of baitfish and don't get me wrong I still do but now I can see the schools of whites. Everyone knows there are way more schools of bait than there are schools of white bass.

My last unit, my most important unit is on the nose of my boat with the transducer on the trolling motor. I have a Lowrance HDS 10 on my nose and it is the brain center of the whole boat. I have it networked to my GPS on the dash so I can stop short of any waypoint I have and sneak up on it with my trolling motor. I use the screen split between GPS and sonar then once I find it I can split

the screen between sonar and down-scan or structure scan. The sonar helps you find the brush with its wider cone angle but the down-scan let's you dissect it further. The branches will show up as the thickness they are and if they have moss hanging from them you can see it. Sonar will give you a different look. The branches will be twice what they seem to be in diameter and the moss will look like bait within the branches. The down-scan will also show you the fish hidden within the brush. Down-scan is especially good when fishing over a stake bed. Sonar will hit it from the side and this gives you the impression you are still over the stakes. Down-scan not only tells you immediately when you slid off it but you can see the individual stakes. Most would think that a stake bed is packed full of stakes but in reality they are quite a few feet apart. Bigger fish like the stake beds that aren't bunched too tightly. Before this system came along I could find brush but couldn't really tell whether it was brush or stakes. Now I can go one step further and label my waypoints as brush or stakes. Fish tend to favor one or the other during different times of the year. In severe cold fronts I would stay away from stake beds. They like the security of huge brush piles, which I also label differently by coloring in my waypoint number different than the rest so I can make runs of just huge, gnarly brush. I like doing that in the dead of winter.

I have also gone away from the long limber crappie rods when I fish deep like this. I want a rod just long enough to extend in front of my trolling motor so I can see my jig on the screen all the way down until it hits the very top of the brush. No more guessing on how deep to fish. Big fish will take the very top of the brush pile or stake bed and by always going right to the bottom and slightly raising your jig you will miss these fish. Crappie won't feed down they can't see your jig.

I get my rods custom made for me and they are a nine-weight fly rod blank, eight feet in length. No need for a long ten to twelve foot rod when fishing twenty feet deep, you lose sensitivity I want the handle moved forward so I can get my forearm under the rod for strong hook sets. You can't slam a big crappie hard enough in deep brush. A jig most always goes through the top bone of their mouth and won't come out. So the whole paper mouth legend doesn't hold a candle with me. I set the hook and a little drag slips on my reel so I know I hit him.

The jigs I use also help me in fishing deep. My Deep Ledge Jigs are balanced and much heavier (1/4oz.) than most would fish with. I also have a small light wire hook on them that bends very easy if hung in brush. With the heavier rod and braided line Fireline Crystal 8/3 you can simply pop your rod tip and free the jig from most snags.

I know most of this goes against what you have learned but believe me it works. I guide on a deep lake with many down trees in twenty feet plus called Lake Shelbyville and I vacation and soon will be guiding on a southern lake that fishes very similar in the winter called Kentucky Lake or to be more exact Paris Landing.

This past year I went full time guiding and have done 190 trips thus far for 2010 at the time of this writing. Not bad for nine month season. In 2011 I want to put together some guide trips down to Paris Landing from mid December on through March until it warms enough to start at Lake Shelbyville. The winter crappie fishing down there is some of the best in the country. They will have to be strung together so I can stay and not commute so I am taking names of people interested at this time. You will just meet me at Fishtale Lodge and go from there. Same price as Shelbyville I just need several strung together to make it feasible.

I will be at many of the Illinois fishing shows this winter starting with the Let's Go Fishing Show in Collinsville on January 7-9. Then off to the Illinois Fish & Feather Expo in Bloomington on January 28-30. Then the Tinley Park Fishing & Outdoor Show in Tinley Park on February 12-13 and finally the Elmwood All Outdoors Show in Elmwood on March 5-6.

I have a booth at all these shows and I am giving seminars at most of them. I have a new power point demonstration to try out on the latest electronics and I will be selling my Deep Ledge Jigs and my new Candy Striper white bass/ walleye lure and my instructional DVD's as well as other products like the custom made rods and more custom made lures. So stop on by and see the

wife and me. We love to chat and share info on fishing ideas.