

Springtime, Watch Your Surface Temps

By Steve Welch

I guide on one of Illinois biggest reservoirs, Lake Shelbyville. This year I start my 17th year and along the way I have picked up a thing or two about this massive reservoir.

Lake Shelbyville is an Army Corp of Engineer flood impoundment and that means in December they lower the lake six feet to prepare for the spring rains. This causes massive fish and food migrations toward deeper water.

I have many good spring patterns on this lake that might work on yours as well. The first of which I just call ice-out. Like I said the lake is down six-feet and the upper ends of creeks that feed this lake are very low and all the stumps are exposed.

At ice-out the crappie will seek out the warmest surface temps they can find and for two weeks after ice-out you can catch fish in as little as a foot of water. After these two weeks they then tend to get into more traditional patterns. It is these two weeks we are talking about for now. The Okaw River is one the largest feeder creeks and the lake is so silted in that you can't get a boat up in it until closer to summer pool. You can however get quite a ways up it and it has many shallow stump fields.

The ice-out crappies are in this shallow water for two things. First of all comfort, like us they like to bask in the spring time sun. This water temps will be ten degrees or more warmer than any water you can find. Secondly the baitfish that were trapped in the ice and the wind has them pushed up on the shoreline allows for easy pickings.

I have seen just about every cove that has a feeder creek no matter how small. This pattern works in. After the two weeks they have the food gone and then they drop back to the normal early spring patterns.

I then traverse the deep south end of the lake and remain on this pattern until late April when the actual spawn starts. I use my Navionics mapping to find river channels along high banks to hide from the wind and then I look for down trees with my side imaging and structure scan. Just like in the ice-out period you want full sun and light winds. This allows the sun to penetrate deep into the water and this puts the crappie on the highest branches on either the down tree or standing tree with all sorts of horizontal branches.

This brings me to my second surface temp. for you to keep your eyes on, that is 48 degrees. This massive reservoir also has huge very deep coves with all sorts of standing timber across the front of the cove. These areas are where the crappie has spent their winter. Once the surface temps. get to 48 the crappie will just rise to once again bask in the sun. If the water has a stain look to it they might be only a foot under the surface in thirty feet of water or more. If it is a little clearer then they will be down about three-feet.

These fish are very spooky and since the water temps aren't high enough for the fish to be real active. A slow approach on the trolling motor, casting long distances with a fixed cork and a small jig under it will just fill the boat with big slabs. I have caught some of my biggest crappie and largemouth doing this. Once again this pattern develops late in the day with the sun working on the top layer all day long.

For me a fishing guide who must put a lot of fish in the boat and along the way you will get some big fish I rely very heavily in March and April on my river channel deep pattern. I routinely fish twenty-foot deep and catch crappie right where they have been living all winter. These other patterns will help you if you are having a slow day and just like to fish shallow all the time.

The third pattern and surface temp. to watch is 55-60 degrees. Now we are actually talking about

the spawn or more exactly the pre-spawn period. The males will move up out of their winter holes and be in that six to ten foot ranges. Be it in a big cove or along a river channel bank. If in a cove I target the first fifty feet of the mouth of the cove. Like I said the crappies are in the mouths of these big coves wintering so they merely navigate to the shore. The surface temps. now are warm enough that the male crappies are quite active and we are now towards the end of April. This is when I get out my spinning outfits and cast the Charlie Brewer Slider grubs. Once again keeping the offering high in the water column. The crappie has eyes on top of their heads and always look up to feed and like I have mentioned before the surface temps. are much warmer.

The next surface temp. to key in on is 60 to 68 or the actual spawn. This also happens about the same time the Corp closes the dam and allows the lake to fill to summer pool. I fish a jig for most of my crappie season but it is during the spawn that I stop and get minnows and large ones too. If my clients and I are going to fish live bait I tend to buy about fifteen dozen. No couple of dozen for me. Live bait means live bait. I make my clients pitch the minnow on jaunts between brush piles and no more than five minutes to a minnow. This also why I like larger minnows, they are more lively in a brush pile and this attracts the crappies attention. I have seen good jig fishermen refuse to put minnows in their boats and watch me trail them on brush they have just fished and pull big crappie from them. I did just that same thing in a Crappie U.S.A. regional and won a 20,000 boat so I know when minnows rule. Crappie will ignore a jig on their nest but absolutely hate a minnow.

Like I said the spawn is on and mid May is when the lake fills to summer pool. This is when the creeks fill and the fish will move right up them and remain up them as long as they have two things. Food and stained water are the two keys. I have caught fish along the weedy shorelines clear up to June 28th on just a normal year. If we get higher water conditions you can catch them up there all summer long. Very peaceful, no jet skis or skiers of any kind.

Hopefully these surface temperature clues help you in finding the crappie this spring. If not give my guide service a buzz and I will show you first hand. Nothing better than a nice mess of crappie. You can reach me at 217-762-7257 or my cell at 217-840-1221 or just go to my website at www.lakeshelbyvilleguide.com. I still have many openings for spring and clients are already booking the summer walleye/ white bass trips. So don't wait too long.