

Winter Getaway - Crappie Heaven

By Steve Welch

Like most of you I am ready for spring and this winter since it started a month early has me bouncing off the walls. Well from my home in central Illinois I can drive a mere five hours and get a taste of spring a month early.

Paris Landing down on the south end of Kentucky Lake is my home away from home in the winter and especially late February on through the entire month of March. Since Kentucky Lake runs from the south to the north you get warm water coming up from Pickwick in Alabama.

Most plan their trips down there in April so they can fish the spawn but I like the winter deep bite. The winter has the fish bunched up and they spread out in the spring. The fish school up on sheer river channel drops and if you get a day with a light wind you can expect fish over two pounds and a bunch of them. I have had nine over two pounds in a single day.

Since you are out in the middle of the lake you need light winds so you can hover and fish vertical. I have been going down to Kentucky lake for twenty years or more and just to Paris Landing for about ten years. I know all the best places to eat and all the best channel drops as well.

If I could just get the big tourneys to come that early. They tend to come in April and the local knowledge gets me every year. I am however very competitive in dead of winter. My wife and I fished one this past March and it is impressive to see all the top teams from all over the country and all the wrapped pro boats. Well anyway we had mid ten pound for seven fish. Just couldn't get those two pound fish located and our trolling motor batteries went dead with three hours to go. The winners had nearly fourteen pounds. We got twenty-fifth with ten and a half pounds. Here at home I have never seen a ten-pound stringer let alone a fourteen. All of our fish were over thirteen inches but that isn't much down there. I have however had fourteen pound days but all mine are in winter from January to March.

The best part about going early is you have the lake all to yourself. The locals don't fish in the winter, too cold for them but doesn't bother me. I have been down there in January and had nineteen-degree day followed by a fifty. It gets cold but just doesn't stay that way.

My big Ranger is set up to fish deep for three anglers. I have a special seating system that we had custom made to get three of us comfortably on the nose of the boat. I have a Lowrance HDS 10 on the nose with side imaging and down scan and GPS. This is networked to another Lowrance on my dash so I can share waypoints. I also have side imaging and down scan on my dash to aid in finding brush.

I have the side imaging and down scan on my trolling motor. The side- imaging really doesn't work that well on a trolling motor. You have to run a straight line with it and it just works better from the back of the boat. It is the down or structure scan on the trolling motor that is the really cool set up. It has a much narrower cone than regular sonar so locating brush is harder. You find the brush with your sonar then you split the screen and watch regular sonar and down scan. You can see the branches much more clearly with the down scan and you can see fish within those branches, which enables you to hover over the area where the fish are. If you fish stake beds you can see the individual stakes and fish within them and the second you slide off the stake bed you know it with the down scan. Running the sheer drops on the river channels the down scan can really be helpful as well. Sonar will confuse you in to thinking you are seeing bait but the down scan never lies.

Side imaging works very well on the top of a big flat but has problems shooting against the side of a ledge. It needs a clear shot to shoot its echo. But for those that haven't seen side-imaging work it is the real deal. I can locate any brush out to the side of my boat and then freeze the screen

and mark the waypoint and then just drive right over to it. I can even take a snapshot of the screen to download later.

At home I use the side imaging all the time to navigate along deep banks and look at down trees to see how many of the small deep branches still exist. We have many trees in forty feet of water that have branches hovering under the water a mere ten feet. You team this up with the down scan and you can locate the fish within the branches.

Paris Landing or the Big Sandy river is as crooked as a snake and at winter pool just as dangerous. That is why I use my Navionics mapping chip to help me find channels, points, bends on channels and most importantly shallow flats. Down there a shallow flat can be a hard rock bottom full of big boulders and extremely hard on lower units. I use the Premium chip that is one step down from the most expensive. I don't need overhead views of marinas or 3-D imaging of the bottom. This is info that slows the units way down and besides I have side imaging which is way better. I change my depth alert from five meters to ten and this makes everything in fifteen feet of water or less color in blue and shallower is darker blue. The deep water is white and you can see channels by watching the depth contours. The tight lines mean a river channel or steep drop. I can then follow a precise depth by just tracking along the blue edge. I use this method to fish for many species such as walleye and white bass besides the crappie.

This mapping chip will aid you in going to any lake you have never been to and once you understand seasonal movements of the specie you are targeting the sky is the limit. I know I can go anywhere in the country and find crappie, whites or walleye. They all love to hang on ledges and on river channels especially during the winter months. I use my mapping at Lake Shelbyville, the lake that I guide on all year to target river channel banks during winter draw down. Crappie hang out on the deep down trees in the winter on channel banks and especially on bends and points.

For this deep winter bite we don't need long rods. I have mine custom made at eight feet in length. I like a stout rod and the eight feet puts my rod tip just in front of my trolling motor which has the puck for my sonar on the bottom. I can then watch my jig on the screen so I can fish these hard to find suspended branches.

We use braided line to help with the feel and I like Fireline Crystal 8/3. It is supposed to be the only braid that fish can't see but I can so that is why I like it. A light jig is also not needed to probe depths of twenty feet or more. That is why we use my Deep Ledge Jigs. They are a quarter ounce jig with a small number four hook on them that bends easily. That way we can use the braided line with no stretch and the special jig along with the stout rod and we just give the rod tip a quick pop and the jig comes free from most snags.

This past year I started guiding full time and did 190 trips in nine months. I have always had the clients just not the time to get that many in. This year I am trying to get a list compiled to string some guide trips together and have them meet me at Fishtale Lodge down at Paris Landing and do some guide trips down there. I have a half dozen so far but would like twice those many. These trips will be from just after Christmas to mid March. I need to string them together so I can make it feasible since it is 300 miles for me as well. I cannot clean your stringers for you either since there just isn't any place to do it in the winter. We always take a big cooler and pack them on ice and they will keep for three days or so.

The fishing can be as good as any of you have ever seen. I have had days of ninety fish or a three man limit all over ten inches and bunches over thirteen and kick in a few fifteen or two pound fish. Like I said most have never experienced anything like it. But we need light winds and hopefully a warming trend. So late notice as to when we might go might help with proper weather and wind. Just keep your schedule open that is what I do.

To keep you occupied these cold winter nights you might want to check out my instructional

DVD's. I have one on Paris Landing taken in January last year. I am proud of that one just because I really got into the big fish. Just go to my website at www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.com and look over all we have to offer.