

Early Season Crappie, Lake Shelbyville

By Steve Welch

Lake Shelbyville, the lake that I have guided at for the last 21 years, is an Army Corp of Engineers flood-control lake. This means they drop the lake some six-feet during the winter in preparation for the spring rains.

This brings the crappie out of main lake deep coves, putting them on the points leading in and the first hundred feet or so of the cove. River channel banks on the main lake will also hold a lot of fish where they have spent their entire winter.

Two things you need in the spring, wood and a surface temperature gauge. Mother Nature will warm up the surface on those two or three full sun days and the fish will suspend next to standing timber or on the top branches of a down tree. Two or three degrees can mean a huge difference with the bite.

Shelbyville has a ton of very deep coves with standing timber in them. You can put on a jig under a fixed cork and catch crappie suspending alongside these trees just a couple feet down in water as deep as forty feet or more. This pattern is completely ruled by the sun and its' ability to penetrate the calm water.

I tend to opt for the more stable pattern of fishing downed trees and looking for fish to be holding on the highest branches, some fifteen to twenty-feet down. With multiple branches, you have a better chance of finding a school of fish.

I use my Lowrance electronics to scan these steep river channel banks. I have four units that are all networked to share info with both side-imaging and down-scan on the front and rear of the boat. This system works so well I can drop a waypoint on a crappie from sixty plus feet away and set my jig right on that fish's nose within seconds.

I run a Yar-Craft 2095btX back-troller with a 200hp Mercury tiller on it. This boat is really set up for both walleye and crappie fishing. I installed two extra pedestals up on the front deck to allow my customers and myself to hover right over these brush piles and probe them with the Deep Ledge Jig that we designed for this purpose in mind.

Hovering is the key! You cannot move back and forth or everyone is hung up. This is the reason I use a MinnKota Fortrex 36 volt system. I can keep you on a dime in twenty mile per hour winds if need be.

The Deep Ledge Jig we use is a 1/4oz. so we can get better feel hovering over these trees twenty-feet down, if need be. I tell my clients to just hold the jig still. I can slowly move the boat back and forth to create bites.

But first I must be able to see your jig on the screen and it is with the shorter rods we use that I can see a jig. The jig stays in the cone of your sonar if you fish right next to the trolling motor transducer. I then know that you are right on top of the brush getting the most aggressive fish before probing down in the brush deeper.

With the heavy 1/4oz. we swim it back and forth rather than jig it up and down. My jig has a very small hook on it so you can get it in and back out of very thick brush. If you get hung up we use Fireline Crystal 8/3 braided line so it is strong enough to just straighten the hook then bend it back and start again.

We put a Midsouth tube on the jig and color depends on water clarity so I always carry a bunch of different colors with me. Crappie are very much a sight feeder so color is very important.

I mentioned earlier that surface temperature is so important during the spring. Crappie start their spawning ritual at about fifty-five degrees and this can bounce all over the place for several weeks.

Lake Shelbyville is really two different lakes. The north end, above the Findlay bridge, is very shallow and has huge flats with a very stained to almost dirty water color in spring. This end warms very quickly and the spawn will start several weeks before the south end. The problem is that all those cold April rains will bounce that water temperature all over the place and like I said crappie feed by sight and those water colors are pretty stained. I tend to play it safe and fish deep on the south end until I know the north end is in full spawn mode. Then you can always catch shallow fish easier than deep fish so we switch it up and get out the slip bobber rods. You can never tell when this will happen so you need a surface temperature gauge to monitor it.

The south end will remain very clear and you can fish for the crappie that are suspended right where they have been all winter. Once you understand a little about location and master holding a boat in one place as these fish are very deep over structure. So rather than fight the weather fronts and the unpredictability of the shallow north end I stay deep usually until the very end of April. Then you can find shallow spawning fish on either end of the lake once May hits.

Understanding location comes with map reading on either your Fishing Hot Spots map or your map on your depth finder. They will tell you any place a channel sweeps near a steep bank or more important right across the mouth of a deep cove. I tell listeners in my winter seminars that a map is as important as your side imaging. You need to know where those river channel bends are even if they are in the middle of the lake.

Like I said, I have been a fishing guide for 21 years now so I am booking trips for 2015. I have a website with an on-line store to look over our many hand-made products. I also run a forum called Illinois Fish Talk and we have a huge following with some of the best electronic guys anywhere on the web. My website is called www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.Com or you can call me at 217-762-7257.