

Fall Crappie, Back In the Shallows

by Steve Welch

Towards the end of September, after the lake turns over. The crappie will move to the back of the many feeder creeks and coves on Lake Shelbyville. This pattern of catching crappie with a cork and jig will last until the end of November.

This is the season I tell my regular clients that I wait for all year long. I like this period way better than the spring spawn. The weather is more predictable and the patterns for catching the fish will remain more constant. Throw in the spectacular fall colors and just knowing that finally the ski boats are gone rendering the lake back to the fisherman for three good months of fall and winter crappie.

For this to happen the lake has to turn over. That means the cool nights will bring down the surface temperature to where it is cooler than the bottom of the lake and this will trigger the warm water to rise thus fall turn over. This happens when the water temperature on the surface gets to about sixty-one degrees. The best way to spot this is just look at the water. It will have a greenish tint to it and you will see clumps of moss scattered on the surface.

The fishing will be very slow during this period. But luckily it only lasts for a week or two. I start my fall fishing on the main lake in a little pattern I call root ball running. This gives me an idea as to what depth the fish are moving up to. Lake Shelbyville has hundreds of fallen trees. All I do is look for the ideal size of trunk that I want. Preferably only about twelve inches in diameter. Too big of a tree and the top will have broken off and there will be no small branches too hide in.

A lesser-known and slightly more difficult pattern I use is ledge fishing on the sheer drop off on a big flat. I have fished these same brush piles all summer now and I know the fish that live on flats are more aggressive because they live close to the white bass. This is your best pattern during and shortly after the turn over.

After we have our first killing frost the shallow action gets very good. I can go up Wilborn Creek and fish in the back of the creek or just get right on the bank of the West Okaw and throw a slip-bobber set only a foot or so deep with a jig and tube under it. No need for live bait, fish this shallow will hit the first thing they see. Same thing works in Whitley and the Kaskaskia but you will run into more duck hunters over there.

The tackle that I use for this depends on the terrain. If I am tossing a cork into spots that have a lot of small brush and I need to just drop it into a small hole then I opt for a slip-bobber and a sixteenth ounce jig, weed less of course and on the business end I will use a mid-south tube in some form of chartreuse. Usually a chartreuse glow gets the nod. If I am fishing a stretch that is just stumps and little cover then I go with a fixed cork. I can pop this cork and very slowly reel it by the stumps. If you use a slip-bobber on this pattern it just pulls the jig up to the surface rather than swim it at the depth you peg the fixed cork at.

I like to use an eight-foot pole to throw the jig. It is very accurate. I use a longer ten-foot rod if I am tight lining over deeper structure. I do however use a twelve-foot rod to sneak up on shallow fish if the wind is bad.

October and November brings many crappie tournaments to Lake Shelbyville and usually for a good ten fish creel you had better have at least ten pounds to get you a paycheck. That is an average of twelve inches long for your whole creel. I have seen fifteen-inch fish caught on this lake and usually one or two are caught by my clients each season. Those are two-pound fish, not bad for Illinois. But it is the numbers of good fish that keep my clients coming back season after season. We can expect to boat a hundred fish for three fishermen on any good day.

I now work a different job during the week and I am only guiding on the weekends. I apologize for not being able to keep up with the demand of my clients this spring. So if you want a guide trip for the fall I would not waste any time and get a hold of me. I now have a brand new twenty-one foot Ranger 521. You have got to come take a ride. They couldn't have made a better crappie boat if they tried.