

## Ice-Out Crappie

By Steve Welch

Here is how I approach my start of the crappie-fishing season. On Lake Shelbyville. Once the ice comes off I go right back to where I left them which is the river channel drops on down trees. The only thing I change is my bait choice. Before the ice comes on the lake the crappie are still feeding on shad, which at this time are very large, so I use my biggest baits. My 2 1/2" tubes and solid shad baits. Color depends on watercolor but if the water is clear I stick to pearl white or very light blue, both good shad imitators.

Once the ice forms the crappie switch their diet to small microscopic bugs so I switch to a smaller offering but not for long. Once the water temps hit 40 their metabolism changes and they get more aggressive. I told a reader in December when asked why I was having such a good late season and was this year different than any other. I said you give me 40-degree surface temp and mild winds and I will tear them up every year. This past December was very mild with unseasonably warm weather and crappie fishing really is about winter. I will take that over the spring spawn every time.

Anyway at 40-degree surface temp the crappie and largemouth will suspend in treetops and along standing timber both out in deep water. All they have to do is rise up on sunny days and feel that one or two degree difference in surface temp. However they are also very spooky so I approach these trees and fish a cork. They don't want to chase a bait yet so you can't get away with casting and retrieving but that is coming. A simple fixed cork set at about two or three feet and cast it right past a standing tree or down tree and then reel it very slowly by the tree and I mean very slowly. Pop the cork every now and then and keep your line taught. Most times all you will feel is pressure on the line this is why we keep it taught and also why we fish braided line, better feel.

Now full sun is required for this pattern and even late afternoon full sun. What do you do if it is cloudy? Easy the fish just drop into the down trees or standing trees and suspend. Early season unlike the end of your season in December. The fish always suspend early season; this is what most anglers miss. They can't make that adjustment and always fish a foot or so off bottom. I routinely fish down main lake channel trees that the branches out on the end of the tree might be in 30-50 feet of water but the branches might only be ten-feet under the surface. This is how my three step location system works so well.

Step one use your GPS mapping system whether it is Navionics or Lakemaster and locate river channels that run up close to the shore and more importantly where they bend and move away from shore or do they sweep across the mouth of a cove. These spots give you points and you get some wind on those spots and that pushes bait to them.

Second step is to idle along these areas looking for any down or standing trees using your side imaging. You will see very plainly which trees have fish on them and the necessary branches on them to let crappie hide. A standing tree with no horizontal branches won't hold many fish and a down tree that is just the main trunk won't hold many either. Crappie like to school and without the many small branches there isn't room for their buddies. Once you find a good looking tree loaded with fish you throw a GPS waypoint on it.

Step three I then go back to the waypoint I just dropped and now I have switched my Lowrance HDS to down scan and then once I get to my spot and see the fish I freeze the screen and up pops my cursor. I then move it to the exact depth that the fish are suspended and I get a read out of how deep to fish and now I have confidence of knowing there are fish under me and all I have to do is find the color they want and size offering they will hit.

Today's electronics are that good and both side and down imaging is a big part of my success, especially when I am fishing deep. I have four Lowrance HDS systems on my boat and I am getting ready to add a fifth. I have side and down imaging on front and back and all four are networked

together, meaning I can add or take away a waypoint from one unit and it adds or takes away the waypoint from all four. I can also set up on the front seat with the trolling motor out of the water and watch my big ten-inch screen and see what the screen reading on the back is doing or vice versa. I can look at any screen from any screen in the boat.

I had the busiest guide season of my life last year and this year I intend to break that record. I guided all the way to December 31st and limited out on every crappie trip for sixty plus day's straight. I am taking reservations now for the upcoming season and many have already booked. We generally start guiding mid to late February and the March and April trips can be the best I have all year. Once we get mid month in May my thoughts go to walleye for two months.

So if you want to book a trip just give me a call at 217-762-7257h or 217-840-1221c or go to my website at [www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.Com](http://www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.Com). While you are there check out my new Illinois Fish Talk Forum and my On-Line store.

My new line of jigs called the Deep Ledge Jigs really shine and most folks around Shelbyville Lake can't get enough of them. They were precision cut and designed by my partner Alan Corzine who is a Mechanical Engineer. They are perfectly balanced and have inset eye cavities to hold prism light reflecting eyes. The light wire hook on them just bends and you can get your jig free from most any snag. We make four sizes of them to accommodate any depth you might want to fish.

My other bait the Candystriper we designed for white bass but we have now taken a good look at them for other species of fish. They are a tail spinner type bait and many are available on the market. We feel however that we took what was slightly wrong with the other baits and fixed it in the Candystriper. We make three weight sizes and I use all of them depending on where the fish are.

What really surprised us this past year is that crappie and walleye love this bait. If you have a lake that fishes bridge pilings with little or know snags then you have to give this bait a try. We hammered the crappie pendulum fishing bridge pilings this past summer using the small 3/8oz.

I knew walleye would hit this bait and this is why we painted some with an orange stripe. Little did I know I would break my personal best on Shelbyville this year with a nice eight-pound fish and thirty more legal fish on same trip. We caught hundreds of walleye on this bait this past year.

It is the white bass that we designed this bait for and now the word is out. You won't find a boat fishing on Shelbyville that doesn't have some of these in their arsenal. We made so many that my wife and I were building and selling over a hundred a day out of the back of my truck and at the three retail locations I have them in. Chip's Marine, D&M, Atwood Armory and my on-line store. I will be adding more retail locations this year since the lure business is really taking off.

I still have two Outdoor Shows left, The Tinley Park Show and the Elmwood so stop on by and see me and once there make sure you attend my seminars. We have a very good PowerPoint presentation packed with cool screen shots taken from the Lowrance HDS system and of course great fishing tips.