

Learning to Fish a Flood Control Lake

by Steve Welch

I have been fishing on Lake Shelbyville since I was a teenager. I have seen many changes to this thirty-year-old lake. The shoreline has been raped of its trees from all the fluctuating water. I have seen this lake nearly twenty feet over summer pool and down to six feet under summer pool. Believe me it fishes very differently at these massive level fluctuations.

First lets talk about where it is right now, winter pool or 594 foot above sea level. You have really got to be careful when you come down to fish the lake at this level, especially the north end of the lake. There are many huge flats on this end of the lake and you had better swing very wide of them when you are traveling around. You can be three hundred feet from shore and still be in four foot of water. There are huge sandbars that protrude out of the lake; both of these structures have huge stumps on them that can tear a lower unit off your boat.

I fish a couple of different patterns when the lake is at winter pool. First the crappie want to be up the rivers and will be stacked along the old river channel of the West Okaw River. I start at the Railroad Bridge and let the fish tell me how far up the river they are. I would like them to be all the way to the mouth of Wilborn Creek but it only has a couple of foot of water in it right now. Water temperature and the urge to spawn will have the fish up there by the end of April. >From the third week of April until mid June you will see me going further and further up the river as it gets more water in it. The other pattern that I fish is to fish in the deeper coves and the huge bays that have standing timber in them. Be it the north end or down the lake around Coon and Opossum creeks. Since these are very deep areas pulling the lake down has little effect on them. I fish the trees at the mouth and watch my depth finder for the depth at which the fish will suspend, because in the spring crappie suspend to catch the warming of the lakes surface. The fish will use the shoreline ledges in these coves to start their spawning movement. Look for this to start when you see your surface temperature get to fifty-five and above or usually the third week of April.

About the second week of May you will see the Corp start to bring the lake up to summer pool. If we have a good rain this only takes about a week. Anyway it is six foot higher than winter pool or 599.9 foot above sea level. Now the feeder creeks have six foot of water in them and I take my big Ranger up them as far as I can go. This is the only lake that I know of where you can catch nice size crappie in just a couple of feet of water until the last week of June.

The feeder creeks that were empty just a few weeks ago have smart weed growing along the shoreline that now have a couple of foot of water on them. The fish get in there and have excellent cover and shade. Any old stump that lines the shore will have a small circle around it that the weeds won't take over. You can throw a jig suspended under a cork around this stump or lay down and those big old crappie will just hammer it. Believe me I love to fish for crappie and go all over the country to fish for them and have many styles that I use to do so but I love throwing a cork the best. The sheer strike and knowing that a dozen or more good fish can be in such a small area no deeper than a foot.

This pattern works when the water is 599 up to about 603. After that you can't see the old channel and going up the creeks isn't that beneficial. So what do you do at 603 up to about 610. I fish the willows. You can see them anywhere there is a shoreline up in the creeks or around the Wilborn boat ramp area. The fish will bury themselves in them and you can have a hey day with them even in ninety degree heat. I have caught tons of crappie doing this when the water is high. Live bait under a cork works best and just look for anywhere you can get a bait into the willows. Especially if you see some wood in there. You must have about four-foot of water on the outside edge and this works even in July.

Now let us talk about flood stage and to me that means higher than 610. At this level you have to start using the high water ramps. Some of the parking lots will get some water in them. Willows are still a good pattern but now throw in parking lots especially gravel ones. I have filled the boat with white bass, walleye and crappie by fishing parking lots. The coal shaft bridge parking lot is one of the best. White bass will flock to this because of the gravel. I throw a quarter ounce jig tipped with a minnow and a white twister on it and let it go to the bottom and then just reel it back. This catches everything that swims. If the farmer that plants beans on point six was successful you can now drive your boat right in and throw down the rows for the white bass.

Standing timber is hard to find when the water climbs above 610 but the fish will still suspend around the ones you can find. There is so much new cover to look over when the lake is this high you don't know where to start but remember sharp shoreline drops into the old river channel can be deadly as well. I have tied up to the point six sign and thrown into the old Kaskaskia river channel with the same quarter

ounce jig and fished it up the drop. One season we did this every weekend for a couple of months. I bet we caught five thousand white bass in that time period.

Even though Lake Shelbyville can grow from its normal twelve thousand-acre size to nearly twenty-two thousand acres don't let it intimidate you. Maybe these guidelines will help you on locating fish at all these different levels.