

March Crappie on Lake Shelbyville

By Steve Welch

Lake Shelbyville, the lake that I have guided on since 1994 and fished since I was a young boy is an Army Corp of Engineer flood control lake. This means on December 15th they will drop the lake level from 599.6 to 594 or six-feet. They will try and keep it there until April 1st in which they bring it up two-feet and then on May 1st they bring it up the remaining four-feet.

Like any lake I have a few simple rules to finding March crappie. Rule one is look for food. On Shelbyville during that huge draw down the shad just allow themselves to be drawn with the current and therefore end up moving towards the dam. So I start looking at the first clear sign of a river channel on the north end and move south until I find bait.

Which brings me to rule number two, watercolor. The north end has a few deep wintering holes like just to the north of the RR bridge along the tons of standing timber. With the lake drawn down you can actually see the old West Okaw running right through the middle of the thousands of standing timber. For me this just isn't a pattern I like to fish. In that many standing trees they can be spread out just about anywhere. Side imaging really helps and I have used it to find fish hiding within the trees and believe me some of the biggest fish on the lake reside there. I like areas that have lots of down trees so I can target the deep ends of them and this bunches up the fish so I can get a bunch from a small spot. Anyway back to watercolor. The north end typically isn't that clear early season which is another reason I always fish south of Eagle Creek boat ramp.

I store my boat right by the Bo-Woods ramp and for most of the year we launch there but not in winter. February, March and first half of April I stay fishing a winter pattern. Even though in April the water warms and the fish will start moving back towards north end of the lake. There are always deep fish to be caught and weather doesn't effect their mood as much.

Which brings me to rule number three and that is comfort. Like I said earlier the north end typically is effected by incoming water and that makes the watercolor a more stained color and it also has very little of the down trees in deep river channels that I like to fish.

I said earlier that fish allow themselves to be pulled along the river channels where the current exists until they find a nice deep hole with structure where they can live throughout the winter. Rule number three comfort. From the Eagle boat ramp down to Lithia out on the main lake there must be two thousand down trees on river channel banks that have the necessary depth to sustain them until the spawn starts.

How do I pick a down tree to fish? Simple I utilize all of today's modern electronics. I have side imaging on the boat, which allows me to shoot eighty-feet on either side of the boat. You can go further but I have seen that eighty-feet and less gives you the best picture. This isn't a picture like normal 2-d sonar. If you are looking at a down tree it shows every branch on it and the fish hiding within those branches. The only thing that will move these fish for the next ninety days is wind. A sustained wind will move the bait and this in turn will move the crappie. In my fishing reports you will hear me say I am chasing bait. This is what I am doing. I can't get to comfortable running a milk run of the same down trees because any warming trend we have will give us a sustained south wind then cold fronts a north wind. So back and forth I go until it is time to start looking for spawning fish.

Then I use step two. Once I find a tree with fish on it I freeze the screen and move my curser over to exactly where those fish are hiding and drop a waypoint. Then I switch my electronics over to down scan. This also gives me a clear image of the tree. It looks like someone made an oil painting of that tree and all the little white specks within it are crappie. Bait looks more like a cloud and bigger fish have a larger image.

Now I have my waypoint so I can return to exactly where those fish were hiding and I have my down scan on and now once over the fish I freeze the screen again. I can move my curser down right to

the depth of the fish and get a depth reading and while I am doing that I throw out a marker buoy. Now I know I have fish under that marker buoy and how deep. On the very deep south end of Shelbyville bottom depth means nothing. I can be in fifty-feet fishing a high branch on either a down tree or a standing tree down a mere ten to fifteen feet.

I have been teaching this pattern to my clients for several years now and I am glad things are going out and having very good success on their own. They now understand about suspended fish and the proper equipment to catch them.

For those of you that fish north of Shelbyville and your lake freezes in winter. You will fish small baits and I know why. The crappie will change their diet in winter and go to small microscopic bugs. Shelbyville has no ice on it and the south end never really did have this winter. Our crappie remain feeding on shad and that means larger baits.

I use a jig that we developed called the Deep Ledge Jig. It is a 1/4oz. with a huge squared off aspirin type head and sunken prism eyes and we put a small number four hook on it. This allows us to get into some nasty brush and not get hung. Now I put a large 2 1/2 inch Midsouth tube on it and then I use my bait pump to inject crappie nibbles up inside the tube. I like using scent in early season. Later in the season it is not as important because they are very active and will hit just about anything.

I also use a shorter custom-made rod so I can fish it right under my trolling motor transducer. The DLJ has that squared off profile making it very easy to spot on your electronics. I am trying to line it up with the high branches on either the standing or down tree. Then with the heavier jig I can bump it into those branches and this gets the crappie's attention. We also spool our reels with 8/3 Fireline Crystal and the added feel and strength allows me to feel light bites and with the no stretch braid I can simply pop my jig free from cover.

Believe me word has spread about the DLJ and I make them all by hand and put five coats of very hard florescent epoxy paint and a clear coat to seal on the eyes and give it that shine. This jig is tougher than anything you will find on the market and just about everyone that is fishing on Shelbyville or any other lake in the area has them in their tackle box.

All my baits can be purchased through my on-line store, which can be reached by going to my website at www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.com. I am also booking guide trips if anyone is interested. Call early my spring trips fill very quickly. While you are browsing on the website check out our new fishing forum called Illinois Fish Talk and you might as well become a member as it is packed with current info about lakes in Illinois.