

March Reservoirs, Time for Scouting

By Steve Welch

For those of you that fish flood control reservoirs. The Army Corp of Engineers drops their lakes to winter pool each year. On Lake Shelbyville they drop the lake six feet or from 599.9 feet above sea level to 594.

This exposes stumps and down trees and brush piles for everyone to see. With today's electronics and GPS systems you can mark waypoints for you to return to when the water rises.

I don't care what species of fish you like to catch this really helps having so many waypoints to run and gun. I use stumps for walleye and muskie and even big crappie like isolated stumps if the depth is right.

I have nine hundred waypoints on Lake Shelbyville and add more each trip. So many we had to separate them from other lakes and store them on an MMC card. How you say do you keep them straight in your mind. Easy the Navionics mapping tells me by their location and proximity to deep water.

I have waypoints out in deep water marking very deep stumps and old down trees that I use for summer white bass. They love deep wood, as do the huge buffalo that we catch hiding with the white bass.

I also have waypoints on points and edges of big flats that hold stumps that I use to catch walleye. These same points hold plenty of largemouth bass and at times big muskie.

Of course the best structure you can use is a huge down tree with all its branches still intact. There are so many down trees on this lake that it makes it hard to pick which ones to fish. At winter pool you can see all the root balls and then follow the main trunk out into the water and determine how many if any of the branches are left.

I can use my side imaging and look at each tree and it takes a picture of every branch and will show fish within the branches. This eliminates trees so fast.

At winter pool the fish all pull back to river channels and if you have a shore line with the channel right on the bank and even better a bend in the river channel or a point on the shore line and a down tree then you have a tree that in winter you have hit the mother load. The fish school up in these such locations and only in the winter can you just tear them up and get limits from just one spot. You find these spots with your topographical map or with the Navionics mapping you have on your GPS.

Once you have done all your homework it is time to fish. In the winter full sunny days are what you want. This will get those fish out on the extreme deepest end of the down trees to suspend in the highest branches. I have trees in forty feet of water that still have branches within ten feet of the surface. The light wind and sunny days will penetrate the water and cause it to warm. We love to bask in the spring sun and the fish do as well. It is like curling up next to a winter's fire.

Now they are still finicky and for the most part their diet has consisted of very small organisms so I keep my baits small this time of the year. In the fall I like to use the biggest baits I have because the fish are feeding on huge shad but not in the early ice out season.

I like to use my Deep Ledge Jigs simply because I can probe a deep brush pile and with the braided line I use for even more sensitivity. I can feel even the slightest bite and just as important I can feel the branches within the tree and knock my jig into them and this helps with reaction strikes.

This is also a time that scent plays a huge role. In spring and fall the fish bite so well you don't need it but in the ice out period and first month or so of your season it really helps. Everyone uses Berkley Power bait Nibbles. Simply the best attractant out there. The problem is getting them to stay on the hook. You can lay them out in the sun and dry them or do what I do and inject them into the Midsouth tubes with my Bait Pump. It is an extruder that injects nibbles and no matter what the weather you can still get nibbles to go into your tubes. You just simply put a dozen or so nibbles in the pump and turn the screw. They come out as a paste and inject right into the tube. Now you can get a bunch of them in your tube and they will stay in there for an hour or so.

Most wouldn't think about fishing in late February and all of March but this time period when the fish are bunched up can be very productive. Location is key and the ability to hold the boat over your structure and not move around. Twenty feet deep is tough enough without your boat moving everywhere and getting you hung up all the time. Just hold the bait as still as you possibly can and the fish will just hammer it.

Lake Shelbyville, like most big lakes will become very clear in the winter with little or no run off. I keep my tube color selection down to the slightly stained or clear water colors. For me that is light blue speckled or smoke glow. Both of those just tear them up if clear water exists. Then I throw in your typical colors like white and chartreuse, red and chartreuse, pink and chartreuse or chartreuse sparkle. If we have a more stained to almost dirty water I have black and chartreuse or brown and chartreuse or chartreuse glow. Pretty simple. I know they make hundreds of colors but for me I will drag the same color to twenty spots and look for the water color I want and the active fish within that cover.

Unlike most of you winter pool is my favorite time to fish. You just have to use common sense on this massive lake. Any slow tapering bank you need to keep way out in the middle of the lake when you pass it. This lake has many huge flats that are very shallow several hundred yards from shore. Also Shelbyville has a few islands out in the middle of the lake you can hit. Not as bad with winter pool as it is in April when the lake is two-feet higher. At winter pool you can see these spots but not in April.

I have a huge Ranger bass boat with a big front deck so I can set three seats right on the nose to aid in vertical fishing. This along with a big, heavy low riding boat allows me to hover motionless and make your day easy. So if any of you have those winter blues and want to get some early season crappie in your freezer give my guide service a call 217-762-7257 or go to my website at www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.Com. I still have many March trip available and a few April and May.

Many of my regulars have been calling for my June combo walleye and my summer white bass trips so if you are contemplating giving those a try better call soon.