

May Has the Crappie on the Bank
by Steve Welch

I truly look forward to the month of May each year. I would take leave from work if I could and fish every day for the next six weeks. Only November and December ranks up there as high as May.

Once the water temperature hits fifty-five the males will move shallow and start preparing a nesting site. Depending on the lake you live on that could be anywhere from six inches to six feet of water.

The males will take on a dark color around their bellies and mouth. I call this their courting colors. Not to be confused with a black crappie. My clients ask me all the time when they get one like that if it is a black crappie. Both white and black crappie do this.

The beginning of the month has the fish in transition but by mid month the fish are very shallow and easy to catch. My guide service thrives the month of May. I have been doing this for so long now I can tell which spot will get you a quick limit. You still need to move around a lot to get plenty of fish.

This is also a good time to start buying some live bait. My rule of thumb is water temperature under fifty-five a jig will out catch live bait but not once the fish get right in the middle of the spawn in the sixty-two range. Then put the meat on the hook. You especially need live bait when they are coming off the spawn.

I usually take all my clients to Lake Shelbyville in May. It just is a better lake than Clinton or Lake Decatur. The two other lakes that are a mere half-hour from my home.

Both Clinton Lake and Lake Decatur have a fixed dam and this keeps water levels very stable and this also will have the crappie spawning a few inches from the shore. I look for any small tree or bush extending out into the water and take my twelve foot pole and dip a jig or a cork and minnow into any tight spot I can find.

I got a yearly pass last year at Lake Decatur and will do so again this year. It reminds me of Clinton Lake when it was young before the plant came on line. You can catch crappie so shallow you swear their backs are out of the water. Clinton has so much boat traffic and erosion and the fish have dwindled since the plant came on line that I never guide for crappie on Clinton anymore.

Lake Decatur isn't hit as hard and I love getting fish that shallow that you might see me up there more often.

But it is Lake Shelbyville that is still the king of the three that I just mentioned. It is a flood control lake and the water level can really fluctuate so that is intimidating to some people. That and along with it's shear size. You need a good-sized boat to cover water.

A ten fish tournament in May on Shelbyville will take over ten pounds to win. You can catch numerous fish up to thirteen inches and I have seen fifteen-inch fish. Clinton or Decatur it will only take high sevens.

Once May hits they will bring the water up from winter pool to summer pool. That is six foot of water and that allows the creeks to fill. They have got a good foothold of smartweed by now and once the channel gets to full the smartweed will flood and have a foot or so of water in them. This will hold shallow crappie as late as Fourth of July weekend giving me a few extra weeks of not having to deal with the ski boats.

You won't see more than a couple of boats all day up in the river and I like the peaceful setting. The geese will have babies swimming around you and I have even seen a river otter or two playing on the shore.

The tackle that I use during this period are twelve foot B+M Sam Heaton signature series rods and a pflueger underspin spooled with six-pound test line. I have a slip-bobber on it and a number four tru-turn hook and small shot and of course a lively minnow. I also will have another twelve-foot rod with a sixteenth ounce jig and a tube or Charlie Brewer Slider www.sliderfishing.com on it. Color isn't that important as long as it has chartreuse on it.

I use the long twelve foot rod when these fish are this shallow so I can reach out and fish them vertically without spooking the fish. If I am fishing out in deeper water then I use my nine-foot rods. They are stiffer.

By Memorial Day you should be looking for walleye boats up on the flats at both Lake Shelbyville and Clinton Lake so get ready. That will be another article.