

Open Water Ice-Out Crappie

By Steve Welch

I guide on Lake Shelbyville and it is an Army Corp flood control lake which means they have dropped the lake from 599.9 to 594 in preparation for the spring floods. This brings fish out to the main lake river channels and they hug the bottom along old natural cover. Plus they bunch up at the mouth of the deeper coves in which they will move into to spawn in a few months.

I have found that crappie remain very active in water temps above 37 and right after ice out these temps can be found easily. Seeking the warmest water temps you can find during this time frame is a big plus.

I prefer seeking out old stumps on river channel bends. Big crappie think they are a bass and are loaners. They seek the heat generating from a big log or old stump. Spindly brush piles don't provide them with what they need and that is the room to turn quickly and attack prey. If you find bigger fish on these such spots most likely they will suspend above them especially on sunny days.

During spring a nice overcast day is what you prefer but not ice-out you want preferably three to four days of full sun and light winds that allow the sun to penetrate the water's surface. This warms water quickly and fish will suspend to find that one degree of warmer water.

Now how do I find these big stumps on river channels? I research my Navionics map and find all the old channels on my depth finder. Then I simply drive along them with my Lowrance HDS gen.2 ten-inch screen on side imaging set at about fifty feet to both sides.

I can easily see any wood and if you have your contrast set right (always set to the low side) which means you want it darker and we use pallet 2 and usually 45-50 contrast is fine in 20 feet of water. Wood will shadow when it is off bottom slightly and standing trees will have a shadow 90 degrees coming from the bottom of the tree.

Fish on the side imaging will appear as white dots and if you watch this screen long enough and take mental notes you will be able to decipher how big the crappie are by the size of the dots, and their location on the tree will tell you if they are active feeders or not.

With the side imaging you can drop a waypoint right on the fish by moving your cursor right over to them from the boats current position. Plus on my HDS I can scroll it back five screens of memory which means don't worry if the image went off the screen you can bring it back for further review.

Now I have my waypoint and since all four of my Lowrance HDS units are networked that same waypoint is waiting for me at the front of the boat. I run two Lowrance HDS tens on the back and two HDS eights on the front. With the bigger screens I can split them and still see a nice sized image.

On my two ten's on the back I run full side imaging on one unit so I can see the biggest picture possible and on the second unit I am splitting the screen between GPS mapping 2/3 of the screen and 2-d sonar 1/3 of the screen. On the front I run two HDS eights side by side. On the far left unit I have it split downscan and 2-d sonar and on the right side I have it split GPS mapping and either downscan or 2-d sonar. If I am pulling spinners or trolling I put the second unit on downscan but it is the unit on the back

and since they are all networked I can change pics to look at any transducer in the boat. If I am just vertical jigging the far right screen is for my client on my right shoulder. He can't see all the rest of the units since I am blocking his view. I want him always looking for his jig on the screen and not just fishing blindly.

Now once I get to my waypoint I throw a buoy and always do. This tells me and my clients where that brush pile or stump is and I throw it right on the other side of whatever I am fishing then I pick out a third spot on shore and keep the boat in a straight line. Boat, buoy, spot on opposite bank. This keeps clients from hanging the buoy.

Now let's get out the rod we want to use for this. I prefer to use a seven-foot medium/heavy walleye rod when fishing twenty-feet deep. No need for that long ten to twelve foot rod a shorter rod will give you better feel and a better hook set on these deep fish. I have a small ultra-light spinning reel spooled with Fireline Crystal 8/3 braided line. With no stretch you feel them sneeze on your line.

My partner and I developed a heavy 1/4oz. jig we call the Deep Ledge Jig. It has a small number four hook on it so you can get it into tight spots and not get it hung up. It has a squared off top so it will show up on sonar easier and it is perfectly balanced so it always hangs horizontally. We put on a plastic tube (Midsouth) or one of our new hand tied Brush Bugs. These really hold up well and during the cold water months they will out fish a plastic tube hands down.

I have my clients come right up on the nose of the boat with me. We made a special seating system to allow all three of us to be up on the front deck. Then I instruct them to fish just a foot or so each side of the trolling motor. The transducer for the front unit is under the trolling motor. If they do so we can easily see our jigs on the screen so I know if they are fishing the right depth. During this time frame fish will suspend over structure on sunny days and if you just go to the bottom every time you miss these opportunities and most of the time these are the biggest fish in the area.

Once the depth is set I then instruct them to move that heavy jig back and forth slowly trying to hit a branch or the stump. If they are moving it too quick I tell them to hold it very still and I will move it back and forth with the trolling motor. They don't want a fast moving bait and this is why we don't jig it up and down. We are trying to knock a little slime off the tree which mimics a baitfish scurrying away. You always get hit when that heavy jig bounces over that branch and with the braided no-stretch line and the shorter stout rod and that big profiled heavy jig boy do they hit it. There is no doubt you have a fish on.

This is the pattern you will see me using clear on up to females setting on nests or sixty plus water temps. Anglers are too quick to give up on this stable pattern in search of something shallow. These deep fish aren't as effected by cold fronts and big fish are always the last to spawn and most of them spawn deeper than you would ever imagine. This is how they managed to live so long.

On Lake Shelbyville you will see me using this deep water pattern from ice-out in mid-February all the way to the very end of April. Then I get out the live bait and chase them on beds.

I still have three more shows for you to stop by and get your jigs and attend our seminars so just go my website at www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.Com for further info.