

Summer Crappie: Plan Your Trip Now

by Steve Welch

I know most of you think crappie go off and hide somewhere and only bite in the spring when the Dogwoods are blooming. I am blessed to guide on the best lake in Illinois for catching those tasty summer crappie.

Lake Shelbyville is a deep lake and has good wind to keep the water churned up and push the bait around. About mid-July the crappie are back out on main lake river channels and in deep basins roaming in small wolf pack schools in search of bait.

All you need to know is how to fish a lake that has a strong thermocline which puts all the fish in the lake at the same depth and that is about 15-17 feet down in much deeper water. Now the trick is to have several spots that will get wind on them and have cover at the magic 15-17 feet depth. The wind will push the bait from out in the middle of the big basins over to the shore you are fishing. Boat traffic also helps with this. I know a real pain for us fishermen but an essential part of our success.

So imagine you and your family setting in my Yar-Craft casting deep slip bobber rigs and drifting them over deep brush while in your t-shirt and shorts. Plus catching crappie after crappie all day long. I have worked hard at becoming a very good summer fisherman and understand that it is about vacation and family time.

When I first started guiding twenty years ago I would just pick up some trips when the crappie were on the bank and then have to wait until fall when once again that would come back to the shallows. That is not enough trips to make a living on so I needed to become much better at catching them in the summer. That is when I started investing in the best electronics money can buy.

Today's electronics are night and day what they were when I started twenty years ago. Our GPS was lining up three trees on the shore for triangulation to get you close to the spot you want. Now I have GPS that will bring me right back to the exact spot miles from shore if need be. Then I have side-imaging to look out both sides of the boat and search trees for schools of hungry crappie. I also have down imaging that gives me an exact picture of a tree and all its branches and even the little white images of crappie hidden in the tree. Now all four of my Lowrance HDS depth finders are networked together so if I find a spot and want to mark it with a waypoint it is marked on all four at once.

The tackle we use is quite simple. I have my rods custom made to eight feet so we can easily fish a slip bobber deep without putting your bobber stop to deep inside the reel. Then I spool the reel with fourteen-pound Fireline Crystal braided line. The Fireline brand has a wax coating on it to aid in keeping your bobber stop in place. We then use a quarter-ounce weight down to a barrel swivel with a bead above it to protect your braid knot when the quarter-ounce weight hits it. Tied to the barrel swivel is one foot of fifteen-pound fluorocarbon line and then a number four Aberdeen hook and a cork big enough to hold everything up. 99% of the time when this rig breaks it breaks at the hook or fluorocarbon but most of the time you can straighten the hook. Folks think I am crazy fishing for crappie with such heavy line. I tell them it is not the crappie but the two-ton trees we are snagging.

Live bait is the real key to success and to keep your bait lively during the hot summer I did some custom rigging on my Yar-Craft boat. I have two twelve volt aerators wired into my starting battery and we ran air lines to several spots on the boat and put termination plugs in the boat. Plus I have on board oxygen

tank to give them a shot and my minnows are cranked up to the max. Then all I have to do is set my three minnow buckets right where my clients will be seating and I have a 60 qt. Yeti cooler modified to keep the majority of the bait and all my bait tanks have aeration all day long and with the Yeti the water stays a comfortable 55 degrees and I can carry about fifteen dozen minnows with no problem. No more d-cell batteries on my bait tanks.

I carry some jigs with me and my Brush bugs work very well and I have plenty of clear water colors with tensile and flash-a-boo. I will work a twelve-foot rod to fish along-side the brush while they drift minnows over the brush. This two way approach really works.

Now that I have been at this for twenty years I have plenty of regulars and in the spring it is almost impossible to get in the boat with me as I am booked seven days a week with a four month waiting period. Once we hit July through early October you can usually get in within two weeks or so but if you are really serious I wouldn't wait. All it takes is a phone call to hold the date. Kids love these summer trips as do moms. This is catching not fishing is what I am most told.