

Suspended March Crappie
By Steve Welch

Lake Shelbyville my home lake is an Army Corp of Engineer Lake and that means they drop the lake six-feet in preparation for the spring rains. This pulls the crappie out of the many coves and into the main basin.

This lake is nearly twenty-five miles long and has thousands of down trees along the shoreline due to the lake always fluctuating. These trees all have deep branches that suspend in water of twenty-thirty feet of water. Plus the Corp left any trees they thought would be under the water enough for safe travel.

I have four Lowrance HDS units on my boat all networked together with both side imaging and down scan. This allows me to travel down these shore lines looking sixty feet or more to either side of my boat and any tree lying in the water I can see the under water branches plus I can see the under water tree tops.

The image you get with down scan and side imaging is unlike any sonar image you have ever seen. The image of a standing tree that tops out just a few feet under the water looks more like a snow scene in one of your favorite paintings. I use pallet two as my color choice and the tree is silhouetted against a black background. The tree has every branch and within the branches you can actually count how many fish are hiding within the branches. The same on side imaging, out on the end of a down tree you can see the branches suspended some twenty-foot down and the fish holding within its branches.

I use these type trees all winter and once again during the summer. The fish love the full March sun and simply suspend up on the highest branches that that particular tree has for cover. You can catch crappie on top of a suspended tree in forty-feet of water a mere two-feet under the water if that tree has branches up that close to the surface.

On cold fronts in March they simply drop back down to the thicker branches and pull closer to the trunk. This is their home both summer and winter. I just use a little different approach to how I fish them. In summer the crappie really get transformed into a minnow diet so we fish live bait 90% of the time but in the winter you can get them on jigs by putting that jig right in front of their nose.

I use what I call my three-step location method using my Lowrance systems. I have high definition maps on my system that shows all the river channels and the bends. So anywhere the old channel gets close to the bank I target these areas first. That is step one.

I then go along these banks scanning about sixty-feet to either side of my boat using my Lowrance HDS 10-inch screen. I love the huge screen because I can scan both sides and still leave a little of the screen set on down scan. I move the center setting of the screen over to allow about 80% to be side imaging and 20% down scan. On side imaging you want a large screen otherwise any information you might see will be too small to see.

Every tree be it a down tree or standing tree that has fish on it I simply freeze the screen and run my curser over to it and mark a GPS waypoint. I will mark several along that particular shoreline. That is step two.

Then since all my systems are networked each one of those new waypoints now shows up on my trolling motor depth finder. I simply walk up there put it in the water and return to my new waypoints. On this system which is also a HDS 10-inch screen. I split the screen three ways. On the left side of the screen I have down imaging so I can get a perfect looking picture of that tree that looks just like an oil painting. They do this by taking a thin slice rather than a round sonar image. I can see the fish suspending within the tree branches and I get an exact depth as to where they are suspended. However since it is a thin slice it is hard to see your jig on the screen

so I have 2-d sonar on the top right of my HDS 10. The 2-d sonar makes it easier to stay over a small branch on the end of a down tree but what I really need it for is to see my jig bouncing right on that branch. Then on the bottom right hand corner I have GPS mapping showing me all the lake contours and more importantly my waypoints. This is step three reel in those fish you just found. All this can be done in less than four minutes. So now you know why these new electronics are such an important part of my arsenal. Once they get on the bank anyone can catch them but winter and summer these fish are mine. Very few have this type of equipment and even fewer have any confidence in fishing this style.

This how my Deep Ledge Jig came to life. I needed a perfectly balanced jig that I could feel in deep water and thus run it into these deep branches causing the crappie to react and strike the jig. Also I wanted a jig with a more squared off top to allow the sonar to bounce off it easier. I also wanted a small number four hook but I knew with this small hook the barb needed to be on the bottom of the jig so it wouldn't get in the way.

I tell folks in my winter seminars that we don't fish this jig like normal crappie jigs that you pop it up and let it freefall back. But rather you swim it side to side once you get the exact depth the fish are suspending and the highest branch on that down tree that is holding them. I can actually tell my clients to hold their rods still once I get them to the right depth and I will pull the trolling motor back and forth causing them to run into the branches and thus creating strikes. They will feel a hard pop rather than your jig just bumping into a branch. You feel that you have a half-second to set the hook.

Most would never think of using a 1/4oz. jig to crappie fish with but I have gotten so used to it I prefer it 90% of the time no matter what depth I am fishing. If I am fishing in less than four-feet I do prefer a lighter jig because I am using it under a slip cork. This is why the Deep Ledge Jig design is now made in four weights. We have 1/4oz. 3/16oz. 1/8oz. and 3/32oz.

We also make these popular jigs with a small willow leaf blade and this has become my best big fish bait to date for both deep crappie and suspended fish. Anglers ask me when I started casting these jigs and my comment is I am still swimming it back and forth just like the original Deep Ledge Jig but that tiny blade is just swaying back and forth and I caught two back to back two pound plus crappie down at the Crappie U.S.A. Classic the first time I tried them. Made a believer out of me.

Anyone wanting to see how we catch these suspended crappie on Lake Shelbyville give me a call or go to my website at www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.Com. I have an up to date availability listing on the front page. My trips go fast and at the time of this writing (mid February) I already have over 70 booked for 2013.