

Winter Crappie, My Favorite Time

by Steve Welch

I have had many opportunities to guide people to fish this past fall. A friend of mine saw me fueling up the other morning and we had a chance to talk. He thought I was a little nuts still out in the boat with temps hovering around twenty. On my way out he said good luck. I told him I needed none because the crappie fishing was so good they made my job easy.

I informed him this was my time. I have so many GPS spots and brush that few can find and really nobody is out there anyway to find them. I see the same few fishermen every day. There is Denny a local man who rarely misses a day. Of course Rick and Jerry who are still out walking the bank in their trusty Ranger boats. They keep saying they are looking for me a pair. Much cheaper than a Ranger boat. Jerry has a Ranger but prefers to walk the bank. They can't cover the water I can, so no Ranger boats for me.

I know in November they are doing very well but not now. It is cold; water temperatures are in the low forties or high thirties. The shallow fish that they were getting are now slim. The water clears as it cools and the fish pack themselves into mid depth brush and leave the shallows.

Anyway those that know me and the way I can hover a boat like few others. They know that this is my time. I am a good deep fisherman. I cut my teeth learning how on Kentucky Lake and take what I learned and bring to my home waters of Lake Shelbyville.

I know brush on sandbars produce year round. I know brush on river bends are holding areas when they drop the lake. I know isolated standing timber needs brush around its base. However, the most important thing is always look for brush

on sharp drops, when locating brush or building your own make them big, very big.

I don't like to move much in the winter and huge brush piles can hold a hundred fish during the winter.

When we make brush we use a huge dead hedge tree. Thirty feet or more and if it doesn't have enough small branches we add them to make it a nightmare for anyone who casts. You have to hover to fish my spots. The reason for this, they hold a lot of baitfish and this attracts crappie.

Always put it on a drop in the ten to fifteen foot range. This gives you a year round spot on Shelbyville. Now at Kentucky Lake that might be too shallow. It is clearer so you need fifteen to twenty feet.

I usually catch my biggest fish of the year after Thanksgiving. I did it last year on Shelbyville a dandy fourteen-inch. This year I have one already so a fifteen will have to do. If I am lucky enough to slide down to Kentucky Lake during this time frame I always get fish in the two-pound range. My wife has a sixteen and a half-inch fish, nearly three pounds she caught in early December. It is mounted and on my fireplace mantle.

I change up a few things on my rod. I step down to four pound test, because the water clears so and when you fish deeper you can fish it better without it wanting to curl up and twist. I use Magnathin or Berkley Vanish. They are copolymer line and tougher than mono, I can't see it as well, but sacrifices

must be made to get that light jig that deep.

I use my Slater's jig a lot in the winter. It just plain catches big fish for me when the sun is out and the water is clear it is killer and really smokes tube bait. The sixteenth and number four hook works better than the eighth with the number two hook. So by going with the lighter line you can fish it twenty foot deep if you need to. Also my buddy Gary Mason has a fish formula named after him called white lightning and with the hackle and chrome colored tensile body that absorb the formula. I like it better than the crappie nibbles on } this particular bait.

I also use a power bait minnow. It is a little large by crappie bait standards but big fish really like it. I always start big during the winter and downsize from there. The bait is big and the fish are used to eating a large offering. They expend less energy by eating once rather than several small offerings.

Some of the items you need to winter fish are a quality pair of snow boots, a good pair of rag wool gloves with insulation and a quality snowmobile suit and face protection. I like the snowmobile suit over a pair of carhardts because of the large pockets. I usually fish with one glove on and the other hand in my pocket to take the fish off the hook with. The insulated rag wool over many other brands of gloves just because they are cheaper and they can survive putting them on the heater and they resist water and yet stay warm when wet. The other essential, I have is a Mr. Heater and a propane tank strapped to my front seat. You need to be able to take the chill from your hands or you can't make it all day when the temps are in the low twenties.

I love fishing on both Shelbyville and Kentucky Lake during the winter. This is when guides go on vacation. You will see eagles on both and people on neither,

a combination that is truly a fishermen's dream. You top that with the chance to get the fish of your lifetime and that combo is too much to turn down.

I will see you all at the shows this winter my first being the Collinsville show in early January.