

## **Winter Crappie at Shelbyville & Kentucky**

By Steve Welch

Crappie unlike most species stay very active during the winter and this is also the time of the year that they bunch up and you can catch a ton of them from a small area. The lake that I guide on up here in central Illinois will freeze some winters and some not. When it doesn't I like to fish the deep river channels on the main lake. When they flooded it that left giant standing trees out in the channels in as deep as fifty feet. Of course there is also a ton of down trees that reach out in very deep water where the crappie live for the winter. They will just suspend in these trees and rise up to feed and feel the warmth of the sun.

I never knew these trees existed until I got my Lowrance HDS system. You can motor over them with the down scan and they show every branch and you can clearly see the fish hiding within the branches. Then with the GPS you can throw a waypoint on the school of fish and get an exact depth as well. At winter pool on Shelbyville this is a deadly pattern and few ever fish this way, mostly because they like me never knew these trees existed.

We use a shorter rod so I can see my jig on the trolling motor depthfinder. That is a must if you are to catch these suspended fish. We came up with a special jig designed to make it easier to see on your depthfinder and with it's small light wire hook you can simply bend it and get your bait back. The jig has a big aspirin shaped head with very square edges and sunken prism eyes. We call it the Deep Ledge Jig and it has really taken off as the go to bait for both Lake Shelbyville and Kentucky Lake and really any lake that you fish in deep water.

Like I said I guide some 225 days in just nine months on Lake Shelbyville and will guide right on through the winter if the lake is open. If it is frozen and all I can do is travel south for some big slabs then Paris Landing on the south end of Kentucky Lake is my home away from home. From mid December until mid March I go every chance I get. I carry a non-resident Tennessee license every year. You are actually about ten miles into Tennessee fishing on Kentucky Lake.

I have really invented myself as a good deep-water structure fisherman and I have my boat all set up for just that. I have a special three man seating system to allow us to fish right over the nose of the boat. That way we can all watch the big ten-inch Lowrance HDS system I have on the nose which also has both down scan and side imaging as well as typical 2-d sonar. This allows me to travel over a deep brush pile with the down scan and locate the fish hiding within the brush and I get a real life like picture of that brush or stake bed.

In order to watch your jig on the screen we use shorter rods, eight foot in length which puts your rod tip right in front of the trolling motor thus allowing you to see your jig on the screen. The Deep Ledge Jig we invented has a big aspirin style head on it but it also has very squared edges which reflect a sonar image very well. The fish like to hover right over the top of the brush or stake beds and if you can't see your jig on the screen you will simply go past them and drop to the bottom and you will miss most likely the biggest fish on the pile.

In winter at either Kentucky Lake or Lake Shelbyville we are typically fishing in 20-30 feet of water so GPs is a must to return to the exact spot. I have 1302 waypoints on Shelbyville and nearly 800 on Kentucky Lake. This really helps me day to day since I like to run thirty or forty piles a day and not repeat myself for several days to allow more fish to build back up on the pile.

Both of these lakes are flood control lakes and during the winter draw down you must be very careful as not to run a ground clear out in the middle of the lake. This is where Navionics mapping comes into play. All your channels and deeper water is colored in white and your shallow areas in dark blue. All your points are also mapped as is all your river channels with all its bends. This gives you good starting points because all species of fish use channel bends and points.

Most of my buddies like to go down to Mississippi to crappie fish partly because they don't like to

fish deep but not me I love it and besides at Paris Landing on a three day weekend we will catch close to two hundred crappie and out of that most likely twenty or more will be two pounds. We catch thirteen-inch fish like the ten-inch fish we catch at my home lake. All day long. Since it is two hundred miles closer for me over going to Grenada I can go more often and besides they really drop those lakes during the winter draw making it almost impossible to use a boat.

To anyone interested in going to either lake I would suggest watching the weather. You want seasonal weather with calm winds and full sun in the winter and that doesn't mean a warming trend because that brings wind. The fish will position them selves on top of the brush or out on the ends of standing trees. During cold fronts they bury down in the brush or bunch up next to the trunks of standing timber. We then have to work harder at getting them to bite by down sizing and going lighter on line and jig weight.

I have done very well in January on Kentucky Lake in daytime temps in the thirties and forties as long as the wind doesn't cut right through you. Down there you are out in the middle of the lake no place to hide. That is why I like Shelbyville with it's high banks that drop off into deep water you can tuck under one of them and never know the wind is blowing.

I will be at several instate fishing shows this winter starting with the Collinsville Show and the Bloomington Show so stop by and see me and check out my seminars.