

Winter Crappie Fishing By Steve Welch

Through the years you develop fishing styles and areas where your strong points are. For me long after I am gone I hope folks say that Welch was a very good deep-water fisherman. This I feel is my strong point and I developed this on Kentucky Lake and took it home to the lake I guide on Lake Shelbyville. A lake folks refer to as a small Lake of the Ozarks why I don't know since we have no homes on the lake and no rock cliffs. They just fish similar is their response.

Crappies are really quite active during the winter and a few days of full sun really crank up the crappie even more. They can feel the surface temps warm even one degree and therefore they leave the bottom of the lake and start to suspend on top of structure.

On Lake Shelbyville that will mean suspending in both down trees that lie in deep water and standing trees they left out in the river channels that have branches just a few feet under the surface. These fish that are suspended high on these trees are active feeders and these are the fish we target.

During cloudy, cold days the crappie just drop back down into the security of these same trees and you can still catch them you just have to get a bait into that very small strike zone they have during cold fronts.

This is why my boat is set up the way it is during the winter when we are fishing deep and all three of us need to be precise. My boat and my partner Alan Corzine are the only guide boats that have our boats set up this way. On Kentucky Lake you see this set up quite often but on Shelbyville most crappie guys don't fish for suspended fish but rather fish much shallower and stay close to the bottom. So the boat owner gets to see the brush on his electronics with the transducer under the trolling motor but the other fishermen in the boat are fishing blind.

On our boats we have a special three person seating system that puts me in the middle and my two clients on my shoulders. I fish with a nine-foot rod and they have eleven and all three are very stiff to feel the 1/4oz. jig we use to probe these deep branches. We form a straight line in front of the trolling motor and that way we can see our jigs on the big Lowrance HDS 10 I have on the nose. This takes the advantage away from the boat owner and all three of us can catch crappie. This I like partly because if a client is fishing a mere six-inches to shallow on cover I can see his jig and help him adjust it.

We will target trees that are on the main river channels that they live on all winter and on these trees I want branches suspended down anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five feet down in deeper water. We use my 1/4oz. Deep Ledge Jigs to purposely run into branches by swimming them back and forth at the precise depth you see fish. We do this because we can see the Deep Ledge Jig very easily with it's squared of top on the electronics. By hitting a branch you knock off some of the slime on the branch. This is the same thing that will happen when a baitfish scurries away when spooked by a potentially hungry crappie. Once your jig gets on the backside of that branch a hungry crappie will nail it.

Now you say to yourself how do you purposely run a jig into a branch and not get hung up. The answer is simple we have a small number four light wire hook on the jig and the jig is heavy enough that if you get hung just bounce it around and it will fall off the snag. If not just straighten the hook. This is why the rest of the set up is as critical as the jig. The rods we use are very stiff, I just purchased two pulling rods from Todd Huckabee for my clients that I believe will give them the feel I have enjoyed for years with my Norm's custom rods. The second thing you need is braided line and we use Fireline Crystal 8/3 and tie it directly to the jig, no leader.

I believe our Deep Ledge Jig is the best-balanced jig on the market and team it up with the small hook and you have a win, win jig. We hand make these jigs in my home and paint them ourselves

and even put a hi-vis eye on them in a sunken cavity so it won't come off. After four coats of poly-sil paint that has a catalyst hardener you mix in with the paint. We then add another coat of clear to make this one of the best jigs anywhere on the market. My clients love them and we sell about 100,000 a year so lots of anglers love them.

This fishing pattern is difficult for most and this is what sets us apart from other guides on the lake in my opinion. This is partly why I don't see any of them until we get closer to spawn when it is easy for everyone. We run about 230 plus trips a year in Illinois where you really only have a ten month season at most so we have a very good repeat business.

I am currently in the middle of my fishing shows and this month we will be at Tinley Park on February 9-10 and then back home to Arthur February 22-23. My seminars will be posted on my website. www.LakeShelbyvilleGuide.Com. While you are there feel free to join our new fishing forum called Illinois Fish Talk.