

Winter Time Monster Crappie

By Steve Welch

I have expanded my guide service to fishing on Kentucky Lake during the winter months and my first year was a success but not without a hiccup or two.

For many years my vacation spot has been The Big Sandy on the south end of Kentucky Lake. My regulars from Lake Shelbyville all know this and bug me to death about going down there and doing some guiding so they can get in on those big crappie they keep hearing about.

It is the winter months that you get the wall hangers over two-pounds on up to over three. You have to have proper gear to fish in the winter. Down there it will get cold down in the teens but it never lasts. You will fish in thirty degree temps one day then fifty the next. I went down there and filmed a DVD on January 2nd a few years back and it was sixty and I just hammered them. Each winter is different though last winter was brutally cold. We have a heater in the boat to take the chill off your hands and if you have warm boots and insulated coveralls you will be OK.

This year I fished down there the whole month of March and first part of April then went back and fished almost three weeks in October and November. What did I learn from this. Once you hit mid-March spring is arriving and with it comes southerly winds that can blow you off the lake. Down there six-foot waves aren't out of the ordinary. I learned that 14mph was my limit on trying to hover out on the river channel drops. Even then you are in solid two-footers. We fought this by driving to other boat ramps and fishing in areas that the wind could not get to.

It is the Big Sandy that I want to fish simply because I have over two thousand waypoints to run and gun to each one. I figured out this year that 58 degrees surface temp was the magic number. Colder than that and the fish are bunched up on the channel drops. This is how I get those big white crappie. Warmer than that we concentrate on the black crappie. They like to be shallower up on the top of the ledges hiding in brush and stakebeds.

We fish for white and black crappie very different down there due to the depths you are fishing. The white crappie that we catch when water temps are below 58 we use my Deep Ledge 1/4oz. jigs and a Lake Fork or Gulp plastic. We concentrate on water anywhere from 20-26 feet deep right on bottom. The ledge starts out at about 15 feet and drops to 30 so we are about half way down it. We stay at these depths and go very slowly between brush piles dragging the jigs just off bottom. Kind of like walleye fishing. Once we get to a brush pile we hover over it for a few minutes until we don't get bit any more then slowly move to the next one.

You say what is a ledge. I use my Navionics mapping card to locate the old river channels before the lake was flooded. The Big Sandy snakes itself all over the place for miles and we just pick a channel drop and go right along it looking for brush. It is intimidating for most since you might be a mile from shore with no visible cover. Down there you better be good with your electronics because you will never see any cover above water.

This is why I tell folks to get a guide when you go down there or your trip will most likely be a bust. The lake is just too large to learn quickly. If you don't have the electronic set up that I do you will never find that magic brush pile again. You can run a hundred miles on this lake if you like.

I am running four Lowrance HDS units on my boat all are networked to each other and I have side imaging and downscan on both the front and rear of the boat. I have two HDS ten-inch screens and two HDS eight-inch screens so we can really see the fish and your jig on the screen which makes it easy to get your depth correct.

Once the surface temps get above 58 we then get out the long rods to attack the stakebeds. One thing I learned this year is that stakebeds are not dense enough to allow you to get right over these fish. You slide into them and the fish spread right out to the side like parting the sea. We fight this by using 16-foot rods and spread them out across the front of the boat. We fish anywhere from 8 to 10 rods all in individual rod holders. We use much lighter jigs since we are only in about 12-feet. We use my 3/32oz. jigs and a shad looking plastic. Color depends on water clarity. We use darker colored on dark days and lighter shad colored on sunny days. It takes all three of us to run so many rods but this is deadly on shallow fish. I would rather be holding the rod to feel the thump but you won't catch near the fish as you will spider rigging.

The locals all like fishing stakebeds over brush and like I said they will not tolerate a boat right in the middle of them or trolling motor prop wash. So another lesson learned this year. If you go up on top the drops there isn't any brush just stakes so you better learn how to fish them. You can't stay on the deep drops simply because the fish are gone so you better adapt.

You slowly pull up over a stakebed with ten sixteen-foot rods spread out you got that baby covered and watch out because they might all go off at the same time. I have a net with an eighteen-foot handle on it. We get the fish in it then pull the fish on the surface back to you, looks funny but effective.

However I got to get them is what I do and get them we do. I have caught a dozen over two-pounds in a single day but more important than that we will average nice fish in the thirteen to fourteen range all day long. Down there your limit is thirty per person and with three of us a ninety fish stringer is the biggest bunch of big crappie you will ever see. A tourney stringer of seven fish will go anywhere from 12 to 16 pounds. I have a stringer mount of four crappie that came from down there on a trip with my son and all are right at three pounds apiece. Our biggest fish in the boat was caught by a friend of mine that I took down there and it was 18 ¼ inches long. It was caught in January too. This is why I go there. Yes you can get bigger fish in Mississippi but they draw those lakes down some thirty feet in the winter making it very difficult to even get a boat on the water. At Kentucky Lake they only drop it four-feet. Besides it is a five hour drive for me not an eight.

This year we are going to try and hit January and then back again in late February and try and be there before any signs of spring so we can fish in no or little wind. Plus the big fish are bunched up more in winter over spring. My website has all the open dates that are left if you want to give this a try. The cost is the same as a guide trip on Shelbyville and as for lodging we all stay at the Fishtale Lodge and you are responsible for your room and your fishing license which you can get right across the street.

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