

Capitalize on Early Spring Crappie

by Steve Welch

I am a big believer on having the boat on the water by March first and try and hit the ice-out period. The crappie at Lake Shelbyville will go on a feeding binge right after the ice comes off mostly do to the top layer of water warming with Mother Nature's first taste of spring.

March still can be brutal weather wise so I try not to book many trips and instead I get out and mark any structure I can find. Look for bait and areas that will hold crappie once I do start guiding later in the month.

Lake Shelbyville is an Army Corp of Engineer Lake that drops its level each winter almost six-feet. This draw down period is the best time to find new structure and it is also a time to use extreme caution. I tell my clients just to look at the shore the lake is a mirror image of the shore. Slow tapering banks you must give a lot of room and all points swing very wide as they have huge stumps on them.

Once we get through the ice-out period then I look for huge schools of bait and concentrate on river channel ledges on the north end of the lake. The extreme north end up around Wilborn creek has a ton of standing wood out on the channel and the fish will suspend along side them. When we have a couple of days of full sun you can catch these fish down only a couple of feet in fifteen to twenty- feet of water. We use slip bobbers and very small jigs and stay back and throw to these targets. This is one of my favorite patterns.

Out on the main lake we fish differently. The deep ledges have no standing wood and the cover will be on bottom. We hover over the brush and fish long rods vertically right down in them.

This is the time of the year when I scale everything down. Fall and early winter I use the biggest baits I have but early spring and I mean early, water temps in the mid thirties to low forties we use small baits. I like to even go down in hook size to a number six. I use mostly Midsouth tubes and even some Bob Folder tensile jigs and Slater's tensile jigs. I also use small hair jigs this time of year and saturate them with Gary Mason's White Lightning or tip them with Crappie Nibbles. Slow is the key hold the bait still and work it slow.

Most years I take my clients to Clinton Lake for three weeks to get in on opening day of the hot water section of the lake. Last year I was a little soured on that though. The new power company that bought it off IP had the heat cranked up so high that it was 91 degrees in the mouth of the hot ditch and top this off with fisherman just about everywhere bank and boat. The fish just weren't there, too warm.

This year instead of walleye fishing for the first three weeks of April I am going to stay on the crappie all spring. They are changing the regulations on size and creel at Shelbyville and this goes into effect on April first.

Our fisheries biologist Mike Mounce through extensive testing has come to the conclusion that we have a food problem for all the crappie in the lake so we are going to try and thin them a little. The current limit is ten fish ten inches and over. The new limit will allow you to keep an additional five fish under ten inches.

April has always been a month that we routinely catch a lot of crappie but most are just short of ten inches and the days end bag in the live well doesn't always look as impressive as the bags we get in May once the big fish move shallow. With the creel limit changing these early trips will now look a lot better so I am going to cash in on the new limits and not have to fight the crowds at Clinton.

I still have a ton of good trips left if anyone is interested and my summer white bass trips are a real ball. We average 150 fish a day and then we put on the jigging spoons and catch huge

buffalo, most over twenty and some close to forty. Bring out a kid to these trips they will never forget it.