



COOL CRAPPIES

Don't wait for spring slab spawning to take advantage of great fishing action. Autumn is a wonderful time to pursue crappies, especially in Piedmont lakes and ponds.

A formation of cormorants skimmed Jordan Lake as an overcast sky illuminated the shadowless surface. Freddie Sinclair of Clayton didn't notice, as he was intently watching the array of 12 long black fishing rods in rod holders mounted on the front of his boat. Cars whizzed over the Farrington Road bridge as Sinclair plucked a rod from its holder and brought a crappie to his net.

To the experienced angler it was obvious Sinclair was crappie fishing, but the trees surrounding Jordan were tinged with orange; mostly leaves, but deeper in the woods the blaze orange of deer hunters. It was November, and Sinclair, like most of the other fishermen bobbing around in the lake, was fishing for crappies.

For many sportsmen, autumn is the time for hunting, football and surf fishing. Crappie fishing, for most, is a spring pursuit, when the fish move into shallow waters to spawn. With the fish on the banks or in the backs of coves, anglers in all grades of craft, from center consoles to kayaks, descend on lakes and ponds to take advantage of the spring largesse.

But slabs are available year-round, and the fall and winter can provide steady action to anglers who know what they're doing, and that means the fish can be anywhere from deep on the bottom to sniffing shad in the shallows. Deep is relative in North Carolina reservoirs, but for crappies 20 to 30 feet down is deep. Shallow is 3 to 5 feet.

Finding Fish

Sinclair studied his fish finder as he eased his 19-foot Stratos walleye boat around. The fish finder showed balls of shad suspended under the boat. "The fish are usually under the bait or behind it," said Sinclair. "These big fish come out of the deep and follow the bait to the backs of coves," Sinclair said as he unhooked a nice pound-and-a-halfer and deposited it in his live well. "They're using this 20-foot[-deep] channel as a highway."

written by Mike Zlotnicki



MIKE ZLOTNICKI

Tournament crappie angler Freddie Sinclair tends to his spider-rigged setup, watching for crappies and baitfish on the depth finder and keeping the trolling motor at a constant slow speed. Anglers should fish near channel edges because crappies like to hang out behind or underneath bait in cooler weather.



MIKE ZLOTNICKI



MIKE ZLOTNICKI

He should know. Sinclair spends about 100 days a year in search of crappies, and guides as well as fishes tournaments. In fact, his trolling technique (known as fast or slow trolling, depending upon the angler) is a downsized version of the popular slow-trolling with menhaden that he used in his king mackerel fishing days.

Jay Garrard of Durham is another year-round crappie expert who doesn't eschew slabs during deer season. (But you will find him in a tree on occasion.) He's also a guide and competitive angler, though lately bass tournaments have caught his fancy.

"I like to find deeper ledges, and flats off those ledges," said Garrard. "I really like the ledges when it's colder. Basically, you try to find the channel ledge and look for bait or fish."

Into November and December, Garrard will typically look for crappies in 12 to 15 feet of water, down to 20 feet in the dead of winter. Garrard said that as the water cools, some of the crappies may follow the shad to the creeks, but then they return, often holding tighter to cover if the sun is shining bright. Marker buoys can be indispensable in deep-water crappie fishing, allowing an angler to mark channel locations and other crappie-attracting structure.

"The last thing you want to do is put out 20 feet of line in 13 feet of water," said Sinclair. "The buoys give you a visual reference."

A common visual reference for anglers in some lakes is standing timber. If there's a creek or river channel nearby, Garrard said, that would be a good place to search for fish. On reservoirs, bridges often span old river channels, so that would be a good place to start looking as well.

Catching Fish

Rigging up for serious crappie fishing can be just as specialized as for any other type of fishing. As usual, the devil is in the details.

Serious crappie anglers use one of two methods: spider rigging (tight-lining) or "fast" trolling. (Fast is relative; 1 mile per hour is a rough average.) Most spider rigging is done from bow-mounted rod holders with vertical jig presentations. Trolling is done from gunwale and aft-mounted rod holders. Those wishing to employ rod holders on a seasonal basis can purchase clamp-on holders. While on Jordan one windy day, Sinclair was "tight-lining" jigs from his stern rod holders in order to keep the jigs from



Rigging up for serious crappie fishing can be just as specialized as for any other type of fishing. As usual, the devil is in the details.

F. EUGENE HESTER



MIKE ZLOTNICKI



MIKE ZLOTNICKI



MIKE ZLOTNICKI

A tackle box filled with a colorful variety of curly-tail grubs and lead head jigs is necessary for successful crappie fishing. Hooks are often tipped with a small live minnow.

FURTHER READING

Crappie anglers seeking a graduate degree in the subject should check out "The Crappie Book: Basics and Beyond," by noted outdoor writer Keith Sutton (Stoeger Publishing Company, 2006). It pretty much covers everything you'd ever want to know about crappie fishing, including meal preparation at the end. Get your grease hot!

bouncing too much, which would happen if they were in bow holders.

To be sure, crappies are caught with all manner of rods ranging from graphite to cane, but serious slab hunters use specially designed crappie rods that range from 8 to 16 feet and resemble fly rod blanks. The most popular manufacturer is B'n'M Fishing. The limber rods with sensitive tips aid greatly in detecting a gentle bite and keep the hook from ripping the tissue in a crappie (hence the moniker "papermouth"). Spinning reels with 6-pound test are typical.

Although both trolling and spider rigging can be employed at any time, Sinclair prefers to troll in the shallows in the spring with the baits 30 to 40 feet behind his boat, and troll or spider rig in open water in the fall. It's easier to pinpoint depths and structure with vertical presentations, and in the fall and winter the crappies will often "stack up" in schools of like-sized fish. It certainly makes sense to troll an area to find fish, toss out a marker buoy and then zero in with a straight-line strategy.

The old adage "size matters" certainly applies to crappie fishing where jigs are concerned. Only, smaller can be better. Although

some folks troll small crankbaits and others use a two-hook rig with the weight on the bottom (sometimes referred to as a Kentucky rig) for spider rigging, small jigs are the overwhelmingly favorite bait, usually tipped with a small minnow.

For trolling Sinclair will use 1/64- to 1/16-ounce jigs. When spider rigging he'll use 1/4- to 1/2-ounce weights about 18 inches above his jigs, with small split shot holding them in place. He'll also use No. 2 gold and red hooks with just minnows on them. "I like to fish the lightest weight I can, but that's dependent upon the wind conditions," said Sinclair.

Most of his jigs are dressed with tube bodies in various colors. For trolling Sinclair uses a loop knot; for straight lining he uses a clinch knot. "There are times the color can be very important, when crappies will hit only one color," said Sinclair. "When the barometric pressure is high, I like to use something with red in it." Garrard usually employs a bare 1/8-ounce jig head tipped with a small minnow and tied to his 6-pound-test Izor line. "If they're real finicky, I'll use a 1/16 or a 1/32," he said. "I'll use a split shot above it when I'm fishing deep."

For both trolling and spider rigging, rod tips are at least horizontal to the water, and preferably angled down, the better to keep the wind out of the line.

One thing to note for trolling is that the type of jig body will influence the depth where the jig rides. A fliptail body will create more drag and thus cause the jig to ride higher in the water column than a tube body. A jig with no body has the least amount of drag. Spinner blades attached to jigs, such as the popular Roadrunner brand, will also create drag and cause the jig to ride higher. It's all a trade-off, and often a crapshoot, but by fishing different weight, color and jig body combinations, you will let the crappies eventually tell you what they want.

Crappies have long been thought of as a spring thing by anglers eager to cash in on easy fishing. But after those spring filets are memory, Tivo the game, case the deer rifle and kennel the duck dog. Dress warmly and start with the river or creek channel. There are slabs to be had, if you know where to look. ♦

Mike Zlotnicki is the former outdoors editor for The (Raleigh) News & Observer. He lives in Garner with his wife, three daughters and a German shorthaired pointer.



F. EUGENE HESTER

PIEDMONT PAPERMOUTHS

To get the lowdown on local crappies, I contacted Brian McRae, Piedmont fisheries research coordinator for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. "Spawning season for crappies in North Carolina typically lasts from March through May; black crappie begin to spawn when water temperatures reach 60–68 degrees, and the white crappie spawn when water temperatures reach 58–64 degrees," said McRae. "As for frequency, the spring is their one spawning time; however, females will spawn with multiple males during their spawning event. Black crappie females produce between 11,000 and 188,000 eggs; white crappie females produce between 2,900 and 91,700 eggs."

McRae said that biologists typically have their greatest catch rates in trap nets in the fall at sites on or near points. He theorized that the crappies follow shad into coves, where the shad are seeking zooplankton in warmer, shallower water.

McRae said that crappies are one of the most popular species in our waters. "In terms of popularity, it really depends on the reservoir and what other sport fishes are available," he said. "For example, it was found to be the third most popular fishery

at Lake Norman, behind largemouth bass and striped bass; however, it was pretty well tied for the second most popular fishery at Lake Gaston, behind largemouth bass, with little differences in angling effort toward crappie, striped bass and catfish. However, it is definitely one of the most popular harvest fisheries regardless of the reservoir."

There are two types of crappie: black and white. Black crappie usually have dark blotches on their sides, whereas white crappie usually have dark vertical bars on their sides, McRae said. "Black crappie have seven or eight dorsal fin spines, but white crappie have only five or six. Because hybridization sometimes occurs between black and white crappies, and water quality often affects fish coloration, counting dorsal fin spines is the best method for distinguishing between the two species."

The state record black crappie weighed 4 pounds, 15 ounces and was caught in Asheboro City Lake No. 4 in 1980 by Dean Dixon. The state record white crappie weighed 3 pounds, 12 ounces and was caught in the Tar River Reservoir in April of this year by Ray Patterson. Both fish fell to a live minnow.