

Kansas Crappie Bonanza

The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism

Photographed, edited and produced by Gene Brehm

Crappie are among the most sought after and caught species of fish in Kansas' lakes and reservoirs. Most anglers would agree that a plate of fried crappie fillets ranks with the very best of wild game foods. It's no secret that lake and reservoir fishing is usually best accomplished from a boat. Yet when surveyed, bank fisherman often list crappie fishing as their favorite pursuit. That's because crappie are shoreline spawners and in Kansas during the months of April and May, crappie migrate to near shore spawning habitats and it is at this time that the persistent bank fisherman can reap a true crappie bonanza. In an effort to specifically improve shoreline fishing, Kansas' fisheries biologists often place habitat attractors along appropriate shorelines to attract spawning crappie. It can be difficult to time the crappie spawn, but when water temperatures approach 60 degrees, its time to start checking some historic hot spots. Some banks warm up quicker than others. Areas protected from high winds and waves are often where crappie spawn first. The ideal spawning bed might be described as a gradually sloping bank of small gravel with some brush on it. But don't rule out steeper banks as fish will spawn in a variety of habitats. As mentioned, it can be difficult to hit the peak of the spawn. In a perfect world, spring weather would be sunny and calm with light winds. The water temperatures would rise steadily and crappie would move into spawn and not retreat until the spawn was complete. The reality is that cold weather fronts and frequent spring rain storms constantly cause unwelcome drops in water temperature. Crappie move shallow as the lake water warms only to be turned off when foul weather suddenly cools down the water temperatures. To catch the spawn crappie, fisherman must be persistent. If you can't check your favorite lake daily, develop a calling tree with other crappie-minded fisherman. Often daily postings can be found on the internet. Staying in touch with the conditions at your favorite lake or reservoir is really the only way to hit peak times during the crappie spawn. While the crappie spawn does not reach full bloom until surface water temperatures rise to 62-65 degrees, male fish can be caught in shallow spawning zones when water temperatures approach 55-60 degrees. As a result, good crappie fishing might occur anytime between mid-April and late May. Let's look at some of the ways bank fisherman can successfully fish for crappie. Some fishermen prefer to sit and wait for fish to come to them. They may pull up a chair or sit on the bank to cast a slip bobber rig baited with a minnow or jig. And obviously this approach works. Rip rap areas of fishing jetties or breakwaters surrounding boats ramps or marinas or bridge causeways are ideal fishing spots. Crappie often move in from deeper water to these shallow rocky areas as nightfall approaches. And fishing is often best as sunset and again at sunrise. Other bank fishermen prefer to hunt for their crappie. They slip into chest waders and slowly stalk thru likely looking habitats. Since they are on the move, these fisherman usually fish with jigs. They stalk into flooded vegetation to lower their jigs vertically in the likely hiding places. These wading fishermen can often fish places that no boat fisherman can reach or cast to without becoming snagged. Often wading fisherman find crappie schooled in

places that have no visual clues as to why the fish are there. These two young fisherman waded past the flooded brush found near the shoreline and accidentally found a bonanza of crappie staging for the spawn. They were persistent and indeed their searching was rewarded. While not technically a bank fisherman, this gentlemen demonstrates yet another way to catch crappie without a boat. Using a float-tube is a great way to fish for hard-to-reach crappie spawning areas. It can even be a way to compete with boat fisherman in a cheap and efficient way. Since a crappie's life span is relatively short, most reservoirs don't have length limits. However a few Kansas reservoirs do have a 10-inch minimum length limit in addition to the 50-fish statewide creel limit on crappie. Some bodies of water have even more restrictive creel limits. So, anglers are advised to check the latest Kansas Fishing Regulations Summary when planning a trip to fish the crappie spawn. Other than setting length limits and creel limits, biologists are limited in ways to manage crappie in their lakes and reservoirs. The hit or miss timing of water level fluctuations in our Kansas lakes and reservoirs is beyond any fisheries biologists' control. Yet one thing is certain, there's nothing like a lake being down for one or more growing seasons and then filling back up quickly. This condition often results in a high crappie spawn success and more importantly the flooded vegetation supplies habitat for those young-of-the-year fish in which to feed and hide from predators. The result can be a huge upswing in a lake's crappie numbers resulting in a spectacular crappie fishing three or four years later. Once the crappie spawn is over, crappie can be very hard to find, however, as summer progresses hard core crappie fishermen say you must give it a try.

Chat Martin: Guide and Tournament Fisherman

Chat Martin of Lawrence has spent countless hours fishing in tournaments or guiding clients to crappie. He's well known among avid crappie anglers and loves fishing for crappie most anytime of the year. Chat shared his knowledge with Pomona Reservoir's fisheries biologist Don George.

"As we've all read in magazine article after magazine article and even in some of the better known books on crappie fishing they would tell you after the spawn all the crappie go deep. That is not so and all you got to do is go out there and fish some of these shallow spots to find that. It takes some patience but believe me the rewards are going to be worth it. Today on the main lake it's windy and very hard to stay on a brush pile that's why we're in here. The wind regardless of the direction, regardless of the speed, you can come in here and fish. And believe me going shallow is the first place to go and then if I can't catch them there I steadily work out deeper. But I'm always going to be fishing this cover. Always start shallow its going to prove to me that their not there.

"One of the important things to do is you must have that cover. Standing timber is really good. Lay-downs are good but there are going to be fish shallow all year except winter time. But summertime, from the springtime on 'till late fall I will catch shallow fish. As shallow as you would if they were spawning."

Summer is mostly a time for boat fisherman or the adventurous float tube fisherman. A nine- or ten-foot long jigging pole is ideal for dipping trees according to Martin.

Anything longer makes it hard to work around trees and you have to get your boat too close with anything shorter. He uses 10-pound test Power Pro hi-visibility yellow line on a spinning reel. Being able to see his line is critical to his technique.

“Look at that. Look at that. This is a high visibility line. I don’t think there’s crappie in a lake that is line shy. To me it’s just not possible. Whenever you can stick a black and chartreuse jig down there and there’s nothing swimming in the lake that even closely resembles that and you can catch a lot of crappie. Yellows, oranges, chartreuse, oh my gosh if somebody asked me what color that you’d want for crappie chartreuse would be it but there’s nothing swimming in the lake that even closely resembles that color. So it’s hard for me to believe that a crappie would come up see something that is not swimming in the lake at all and hit it or not hit because there’s a yellow line hooked to it. Now, something about line is I like to use the thinnest diameter line I can use. Why is that? Because this dictates on how fast your jig falls. I want something that’s going to fall fairly fast but also, too I’m the one that’s controlling that fall. As opposed to throwing it out there and letting it drop. I am controlling how fast it falls down and how far it goes down. So as far as the line size goes I want the thinnest one I can so it will drop faster or it will drop as fast as I can on light jigs. If you had this jig on there with a 20-pound line you might take twice the amount of time for it to get down. Now is that bad? Well, no it’s not bad but then again you’re letting the line control your fall rather than you control it. As I want to do I want everything to be under my control so I can duplicate it. So therefore I use the thinnest line I can get away with and of course the line strength means a whole lot because you will snag up. So therefore I have thin line with high breaking strength. You just missed one. Regardless of what anyone says live bait works really really well in the summer time. Can you catch fish on jigs? Yes. But your success ratio is going to be tremendously better using live bait. So take care of your live bait. Keep them aerated and as lively as possibly. You’ll notice I have a Styrofoam bucket here. I have a bait one as well. I only put about 5-6 minnows in this at a time. I change the water out regularly. So keep your bait lively and fishing shallow in the summertime will increase your catches immensely.”

When fishing with minnows he lowers the bait down slow and raises it up slow next to the tree. As soon as he feels a tick or sees the line move he doesn’t set the hook he waits until he sees the fish move off with it then he sets the hook. Fishing with a jig is different; you must set the hook instantly if you feel or visually detect a bite.

Winter is a time when relatively few boaters hit the water. Yet many hardcore crappie fishermen insist it’s the very best time to load your freezer with crappie filets. Craig Johnson is a fisheries biologist with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism.

“Wintertime crappie will concentrate up real hard. They are a schooling fish, especially in the winter. They will get around creek channels, lot of breaks. They like brush especially that’s where a lot of anglers will target. So if you get out in the water and find good brush piles during the wintertime. A lot of times those fish will be there for an extended period so you just don’t have one hot day you’ll be able to go out but you’ll

have several weeks of good fishing in basically the same area. So once you find that area they're pretty easy to keep up on."

Shane Eustice of El Dorado is a tournament fisherman and a fishing guide. Shane discusses the critical aspects of wintertime fishing.

"Winter crappie fishing for those people that have a boat you have an advantage because the crappie like to go into deeper water. They go to the creek channels and river channels. You just don't find too many creek channels that run 5 foot up along the bank lines. So having your boat and being able to get out on the water and fish in structure like we're doing today. It's a benefit for the fisherman that has the boat and has done his homework and found the piles or structures for the crappie fishing."

Wearing a life vest or personal floatation device and never going alone are just a few rules that apply to cold weather fishing.

"Wintertime fishing, I don't care who you are, don't go by yourself. Just do not attempt to go out. You fall in these cold waters, even though, you might have your life preserver on, which you should have on. But the chances of getting back to the boat. The wind might blow your boat away from you. With no one out there with you. If you are going out alone call someone and tell them you are going out. Let them know when you get back off the water. Just can't emphasize that any more. You just have to let them know that you are out there."

"That way if something does happen, if you have motor problems or if you do happen to fall in the water, at least someone knows where you're at and where they should start looking for you."

While having a boat is most critical for winter time crappie fishing. Your boat must also be equipped with electronics. Without electronics it is unlikely that you will find fish.

"We were able to find these brush piles here using the HDS structure scan. We just troll along this break line here and mark the brush piles as we came down thru here. Turned back around and started fishing them. Set on top of them vertical fishing with the 520C up front on the bow, able to separate the brush from the fish, and actually caught a few. There's a nice one! Lift him right up to you sir. That's what they look like. We're fishing this break here. Coming out of 7 foot we have a brush pile right off the 7-foot mark going down to about 12 foot. Like we been seeing all morning we notice that the fish are actually higher in the column because the water looks like it's staying up a bit. So I decided to come up on the higher side, while Craig fished the deeper part. You got a good 13" crappie there. I'll give you some slack and you can tell he stuck his hand down there quite a ways in that fishes mouth. When they decided they want them they take 'em. Nice looking crappie! We'll throw him in the live well so he doesn't tell all the other ones we're up here."

In some years the winters cold can offer another opportunity for the boat less angler to fish for crappie. Ice fishing can be great fun. You'll need an ice ogger, ice strainer, a

bucket to sit on and to store your catch and maybe a sled to haul your equipment to and from your fishing location. Most anglers find it best to use shorter rods when ice fishing. However, whatever you have will work. Jigs are commonly the lure of choice when ice fishing for crappie but small spoons work well too. If you are new to ice fishing, what you wear to ensure your comfort is critically important. You should dress in multiple layers. Start with one or more layers of thermal underwear. Over that you can place loose fitting pants, shirts, sweaters and sweatshirts. Over these layers you can use your choice of insulated overalls or coveralls. You should cover your head. A heavy stocking cap or a Balaclava will work well. It's also best to bring two pairs of gloves in case one pair gets wet. You can always take layers off if you get too warm but you can't add layers if you don't have them with you. With a little experience you will quickly learn how to dress quite warmly and you will be amazed at how comfortable you can be even in extreme conditions. Choose a calm day for your first attempt at ice fishing. A brisk wind, combined with cold temperatures can challenge the most experienced ice fisherman. As with any wintertime activity on the water do not go ice fishing alone. Four inches of hard, clear ice can support a human's weight. Six inches can support the weight of an ATV. If you're not totally convinced that the ice is safe, cancel your outing.

So whether you fish from a boat, near the shore or on the ice you can be a successful crappie fisherman during much of the year. If you're a novice and wondering what the big deal is about crappie fishing, you should try it. Fry up your first batch of crappie filets and then you'll know.