

Early Season Crappie Tactics



Photo by Ron Sinfelt

When water conditions are favorable, springtime fishing for crappie is among the most enjoyable and productive fisheries for anglers. With unpredictable weather conditions typical of spring, crappie anglers often have to be content with less than ideal situations. At the top of the problem list is poor water condition and it can take many forms. The bulk of the conditions can be summed up as water that is very or unusually clear, water that is unusually dingy or turbid, or muddy water.

Under any of these conditions the normally very cooperative springtime crappie dramatically change patterns and require anglers to do the same to be consistently successful. To regularly catch these fish under these varied conditions, crappie fishermen need a proven plan to cope with each scenario

Let's take a look at the specifics of how to deal with very clear, muddy and dingy/turbid water conditions. All of these are distinct possibilities during the spring and each requires a different mindset and approach for consistent success.

Jay Bruce is a veteran professional crappie fisherman who has fished tournaments nationally. He has encountered all of the above situations in practice as well as tournament conditions. Bruce has learned specific strategies for coping with these issues.

“Seldom do fishermen go through a spring with what would be considered completely normal water conditions without encountering one or more of these water problems,” he said. “Often, they will just take a little time off and let the water conditions return to normal. However they are missing valuable crappie catching opportunities when they do. The key is to have a plan to cope with these situations. With a bit of patience and effort, odds are very good they can solve the problem and continue to catch crappie.”

The first issue to deal with is ultra clear water. While some areas flood in the spring, others suffer drought conditions with ultra clear water. Plus, some fishermen simply have to cope with clear water on a regular basis, depending on the specific lake they fish.

“Some outstanding crappie fishing is available on clear water lakes, but fishermen often are not sure how to fish this situation,” Bruce said. “Clear water conditions and clear water lakes can produce some huge crappie. I love to fish them. But when I do, I go ultra light in terms of tackle and technique.”

The key to success in clear water is ultra-light tackle and gear. While many anglers simply do not consider 2-pound-test line as practical, the ultra thin diameter makes it practically invisible to the fish and will significantly increase the catch rate.

“When water conditions are clear, regardless of whether we’re in pre-spawn, spawn or post-spawn mode, I use 2-pound -est line when possible,” Bruce said. “If I’m on a lake where there is an extreme amount of woody cover, then I may resort to 4-pound-test, but that’s the maximum in clear water. There is simply a huge difference in the number of fish you’ll hook.”

In addition the depth being fished has to change considerably. If a lake that is normally dingy is very clear, then you need to fish deeper to be successful.

“I’ve encountered this clear-water scenario in tournaments a few times over the past few years, and a lake where I expected to catch fish in 5 feet of water, was so clear, I had to back off to 10 to 15 feet of water to find fish,” he said. “But that’s a real key to success.

“Even in spawning situations, if the water is ultra clear and you can see the bottom several feet down, expect the fish to spawn 10 to 15 feet or even deeper,” he continued. “I fished a tournament last year where that was exactly what happened. I caught spawning fish in 22 feet of water in a lake that was ultra clear. Fishing deep made the difference in a finishing high in the tournament instead of bombing out, if I had stayed with my pre-trip game plan.”

A final factor to consider in fishing clear water is the spooky nature of crappie. Bruce will generally troll for crappie in clear water and troll his lures much farther behind the boat than normal for this time of the year. He will have the lures at least 75 feet behind the boat because in clear water the boat may spook the fish.

Another tactic is to tight line with 2-pound-test line, but use extra-long 16-foot rods in front of the boat to keep the bait far away from the boat.

Best baits or lures for tight lining are small minnows, or jigs in 1/16- or 1/32-ounce sizes. Colors should be clear to translucent

“One of my favorites for clear water is Kalen’s Triple Threat Jig,” Bruce said “A shad color, crystal or rainbow trout pattern works well in clear water.”

Of all the potentially crappie fishing problems that may be encountered during spring fishing, muddy water has to rate as one of the most difficult. A lot of anglers simply choose to let the water clear up before going fishing, but that can waste valuable fish-catching time. Crappie can be caught in muddy water conditions, but tactics must change to meet the conditions.

First of all, expect the crappie to hold tight, very tight to cover such as stumps, brush, bridge pilings or any form of physical cover where they can orient.

“It’s critical for a crappie to stay oriented to something,” Bruce said. “I use that knowledge in various types of water conditions. When the water is clear, they are often loosely associated with woody or other cover. They will orient to it, but not have to be in almost direct contact with it. In muddy water, they will be in the middle of it or right alongside. Thus for consistent success, my fishing technique has to change to match that change in behavior.”

Bruce said that muddy water ranks as his toughest challenge, but it can be overcome and produce outstanding crappie catching action. The key is to use the knowledge that crappie will hold tight to, and actually in cover, to your advantage.

“Generally, I’ll tight line minnows in muddy water so I can slow the presentation down and really bump the bait, whether I’m using minnows or jigs, literally into the cover,” he said. “At times I’ll even drop the rig vertically into a brush pile to get in the middle of the cover, or I will cast to specific brush, fallen trees or stump row along a ledge and slowly work the lure through the cover. You need to envision that the lure must almost hit the crappie in the nose for the fish to see it and bite. I have found that crappie will readily bite in muddy water. Your presentation just has to be much more precise.”

Bruce noted that one tactic that is useful on many lakes is to fish the cross pilings of bridge abutments during muddy water.

“Almost every lake I’ve fished has bridges in the creeks or even in the main lake,” he said. “These concrete abutments have a cross member, that essentially forms an “H” underwater. During muddy water conditions, the fish often stack up in big numbers in relation to those abutments and cross member.

“In this case I will back off, cast a jig past the cross member under the bridge and count down to where I am retrieving the jig right at or within a foot above the cross member. This technique has worked phenomenally well many times in muddy water conditions.”

Another tactic used by professional crappie anglers is the use of scent, especially in muddy water. As described, having your bait noticed by the fish is the key in muddy water. Enhancing the bait or lure with a scent can make a big difference.

“There are scents on the market for crappie as well as other species,” Bruce said. “I certainly use it and so do many other serious crappie tournament fishermen. When fishing difficult situations, use every edge you can get.”

Also the jig colors will be important and high visibility colors will usually perform better than bland colors in muddy water. Don’t just use a pink jig, for example. Bruce uses hot pink. Also other colors that produce well are orange, chartreuse, or a combination of the two.

Dingy water conditions are a common occurrence during the spring crappie fishing season and there are specific tactics to help improve catch rates in these conditions as well.

“First of all, the situation is usually not as dramatic as either the clear or muddy water situations and success can be enjoyed by trolling, tight lining or casting live bait or jigs. However, one of the keys to success will be the extent of the turbidity of the water.

“When turbid water conditions exist, I like to troll, but I only troll about 40 feet behind the boat and in most cases I’ll use a 1/32-ounce jig,” Bruce said. “The key here is speed control. If the water is above that magical 50-degree mark, when crappie seem to move and bite better, I’ll usually troll at about 0.7 to 0.9 miles per hour. If the water temperature is 50 degrees or below, I slow my presentation down to 1/2 miles per hour. The combination of the two will be the key to catching crappie.

“In situations like this, I prefer to fish along creek or channel ledges with scattered stumps and brush,” he continued. “However, I change to meet the conditions. If I’m fishing a deep lake, I may focus my efforts more on points with stumps, if the inundated channels are extremely deep. I adjust based on the type of lake.”

Bruce said he will also use a tight line rig and will up his line test to 4- to 6-pound test in turbid or dingy water.

NIGHT FISHING

On any given spring evening, regardless of water color or conditions, a corps of crappie fishermen you might call “night stalkers” begin to prowl. They gather their gear, sharpen their hooks and prepare for the evening onslaught. Rigged and ready at their carefully calculated ambush sites, they anchor on a point or ledge, sit back and wait for their victims.

We’re talking about night fishing and the serious crappie anglers who enjoy nocturnal action under the lights. According to the best night stalkers, the spring crappie season is prime time for slab action.

One specific night stalker who is very successful is Robert “Rango” Plemmons. Plemmons has fished after dark on many different lakes at all times of the year.

Plemmons relies on Shakespeare Ugly Sticks for his fishing with a 4-foot, 8-inch SPL1100 rod as his favored, but he uses a soft tip ultra-light 9-foot crappie action rod at other times.

“The actual rig is comprised of a No. 2 splitshot about 8 to 12 inches above a No. 2 Eagle Claw gold wire hook,” Plemmons said. “I also strongly recommend no larger than 6-pound-test line.”

Plemmons said that different anglers use different types of lights. Some prefer the green glow lights, such as the Hydro Glows lights, but others employ bright white lights. Some still go old school and use traditional gas lanterns.

“The key to night fishing success for crappie is to experiment with different depth patterns,” Plemmons said. “It’s basically a simple process.

“Use live minnows at various depths and when you lock into a pattern, put all the rods in that depth. As the night progresses, the productive depth may vary and if the fish move to a different depth, start experimenting and lock onto the new pattern.”

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