

Streaming into spring

Spawn season presents challenges but also rewards

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Nothing gets dedicated Alabama crappie anglers more excited than seeing green buds and blooming flowers marking the coming of spring, which means fat female slabs moving shallow to spawn.

Crappie start gathering along creek channels when water temperatures approach 60 degrees. Males move shallow first, looking for a place to spawn. Crappie typically spawn in about two to four feet of water. Unlike bass, male crappie don't really make beds and defend them. Instead, they clear a place near a stump, fallen tree or weedbed to wait for the females to arrive. When females show up, males repeatedly bump them to release their precious cargoes.

"On major river systems like the Alabama or Tombigbee, crappie usually spawn in feeder creeks off the main channels because they don't like current and these creeks warm faster," advised Dan Dannenmueller, a professional crappie angler from Wetumpka. "In prespawn, I look for warming flats near a channel. I also look for hard bottoms and cover such as timber or stumps. In rivers, spawning fish normally get in the mouths of creeks or in flats off the main channel with little current."

Before spawning, bigger crappie frequently gather just off the drop-offs, but move into the shallows to feed. To catch these fish, anglers need to find them. Anglers who find them can usually land a bunch quickly. In early spring, many anglers run spider rigs through deeper channels looking for staging fish.

"Before the spawn, we might put our rods down as deep as 16 to 18 feet," Dannenmueller explained. "We use Bobby Garland and Road Runner heads tipped with plastic. We also use minnows as an extra enticement on a two-bait rig. We put a live minnow on a Tru-Turn hook on the top of the rig to attract fish. On the bottom, we put a jighead with a Bobby Garland Swim-R or a Minnow Mind-R in a color we like."

To avoid direct currents, crappie frequently head to the oxbows and



Photo by John N. Felsher

Dan Dannenmueller, a professional crappie angler from Wetumpka, Ala., shows off a crappie he caught by vertically jigging a metal spoon while fishing in a backwater off the Alabama River.

backwaters off main river channels. In many backwaters, anglers might find a line of cypress trees or stumps right at the drop. Crappie usually hide behind those trees, old stumps, fallen logs or other obstructions to escape the current and ambush bait. Sometimes, anglers almost need to tickle their noses to make them bite in cold water. When fishing a spider rig, put some baits at the edge of the drop, some at mid-depths and some just off the bottom.

Anglers can also catch crappie by casting or dropping tiny temptations into pockets around structure along the shorelines. Because of the sunshine, tidal flow or whatever reason, crappie might hold on one side of a snag and not the other. Work every likely hiding spot from all sides to determine patterns. Also, probe each

pocket between the branches on a fallen tree or openings in weedbeds. Let a diminutive bait like a hair jig or similar temptation sink naturally without any added action. In cold water, don't vigorously jig a bait up and down. Just let it sink or hang there naturally.

To fish sloping shorelines and channel edges, many anglers cast slip-cork rigs baited with jigs, minnows or a combination. With this rig, anglers can fish varied depths vertically. Throw it as shallow as possible and work it out over the drop. Periodically, twitch and pause it.

After the stressful spawning process ends, females must regain their strength so they feed ravenously. During the post-spawn, planer boards provide an excellent search technique. Anglers can run various

baits on boards rigged as far apart as they want any distance from the boat to cover territory. Anglers could even set boards to run parallel to drops on either side of a channel.

"When crappie go to feed in the post-spawn, that's when we start pulling crankbaits with boards along channel edges," Dannenmueller recommended. "Besides crankbaits, people can also pull many different baits like jigs, jerkbaits, blade baits, spoons or spinnerbaits. We often pull Thin Fishers and 1/8-ounce Rat-L-Traps."

Whether casting minnows to shorelines, spider-rigging jigs in a channel or pulling crankbaits, anglers might load a boat if they remain flexible and willing to try different places and techniques this spring.