During the winter and into early spring, anglers typically catch the biggest crappie all year before the highly prolific fish spawn.

Many crappie enthusiasts suspend live minnows under floats around visible structure. Others troll or use spider rigs to work small jigs, sometimes tipped with live minnows. Spider rigging involves hanging several poles from holders in a formation that resembles a spider web. Anglers can vertically fish multiple baits in different colors or bait combinations at various depths simultaneously.

For decades, these proven techniques produced outstanding catches, but crappie enthusiasts can find many ways to catch the delicious fish. Crappie frequently hit small lures, but such light temptations make casting difficult. Suspend a tiny fly or hair jig below a small clear plastic float. The float adds weight for better casting, but doesn’t spook the fish. Set the depth so the bait suspends just above the bottom or other submerged cover.

Almost like a miniature version of fishing popping corks, let the float sit for several seconds. Then, jerk the rod to make some surface commotion. The bait should fly up and then sink again. During the winter, fish might want more subtle action. Let the float sit longer so the hairs on the fly twitch with the slightest water movements. People could also add a scented pellet for more enticement.

Most people fish this temptation with an ultralight spinning rod. However, anglers can also fish bobber-fly rigs with poles as long as they can comfortably handle. With the long pole, use very short line, usually only two to five feet. Softly place the rig into tight sweet spots, like a shady pocket between two limbs on a fallen tree or an opening in a grass mat.

Anglers can also use long single poles and tiny flies to deploy baits without floats. Approach cover as quietly as possible. At extreme range, drop a tiny fly, hair jig or jig tipped with a soft-plastic trailer as close as possible to any vertical structure such as a dock piling, standing timber or stump. Use no additional weight.

“We single-pole jig around thick cover because we can get a bait all the way down better,” explained Gerald Overstreet, Jr., a professional crappie angler and guide (251-589-3225) from Gainestown. “We can work a single bait through really thick stuff and pull hooked fish out easier.”

Let the bait sink naturally without adding action. In the winter, anglers might not even detect a light bite so many people use brightly-colored line to watch for any subtle movements that might indicate a strike. Crappie usually bite immediately as the bait sinks or not at all. If the bait hits bottom, jig it back up toward the surface and move it just a few inches to repeat.

Whenever possible, fish completely around an object or hit the cover from multiple directions. Fish might hold on one side or another. Perhaps some unseen underwater object creates the perfect ambush spot. On a cool morning, fish might prefer the sunny side. As the sun climbs higher, fish might move to the shady side. Whatever the reason, hit as many angles as possible around each object to determine patterns.

During the winter, crappie often plunge into deep waters to find more comfortable temperatures. With electronics, look for deep brush piles, sunken logs, drop-offs or other bottom cover that might hold fish. With high-tech electronics, anglers can almost drop a bait on a fish’s head or dangle it in front of the crappie to watch it strike the lure.

For deep dropping, vertically fish a 1/8- to 1/4-ounce chrome jigging spoon next to humps, drop-off edges or other cover. Small, heavy and compact, a spoon quickly sinks to the bottom even in the deepest waters. As it flutters down reflecting light, the spoon mimics a dying shad.

Let a spoon flutter all the way to the bottom, but crappie don’t always hang near the bottom. They commonly suspend over deep cover. If nothing hits as it falls, jig the spoon up and down a few times off the bottom. If nothing bites there, turn the reel handle two or three cranks to fish a different depth. Keep testing depths to find the best level where fish want to suspend.

Don’t give up any proven methods that put so many fish into boats over the years, but occasionally try something different. Who knows? You might just find your new favorite technique!