

Spring Crappies at Shabbona Lake

by Dennis R. Sands

May means "Crappie Time" at Shabbona Lake.

Warm April showers, rising temperatures & longer sunlight hours triggers fresh-water fish to begin their spawning rituals. Crappies spawn when the water temperature is between 64-68 degrees, which is just after the bass, at 62-65 degrees. Male Crappies will move into the shallower water about two weeks sooner than female Crappies.

During this pre-spawn period, between 55-64 degrees water temperature, crappies will be actively feeding and are easy to catch. Once a feeding area is located, one can catch a lot of Crappies. Shabbona Lake has Crappies that average 10-11 inches in length. The biggest two Crappies, that I have caught at Shabbona Lake, were two 15 1/2 inch White Crappies.

Crappie fishing is fun ! Crappie is one of the easiest fish to catch at Shabbona Lake in the Spring. Just locate some submerged brush in less than 10 feet of water and fish directly in it. Crappies will congregate around Shabbona Lake's fish cribs & brushpiles. They will actively be feeding on minnows that have sought that submerged brush as cover. During early Spring, the minnows use the submerged brush as cover. The weeds that they normally use in warmer water have not grown up enough to provide the adequate cover that minnows seek for security, so they seek the next best available cover.

One basic fishing rule is "Where the bait--fish (minnows) are, there will be the predator (crappie)."

By brush, I mean thick cover, not just a single tree trunk. Look for tree tops that emerge just out of the water, fish cribs or brushpiles . Find the thickest cover that will provide shelter for the minnows to use and you will probably find crappies there, if the water temperature is between 55-64 degrees.

The depth at which you will find the crappies will vary, depending on a variety of factors. With a warming trend, they will be closer to the surface and with a cold front they will be deeper. They will vary in depth with the time of day and the cloud cover. Wind or lack of wind drastically affects Shabbona Lake. When there is little or no wind, that is the best condition . This No Wind Factor holds true all year long, not just in the Spring.

You must be flexible in your presentation and vary your depth until you find a productive level. Crappie like to school inside of the brush and they show a definite tendency for brush along the creek bed, that is closest to shore. There are several areas like this in the no motor zone area of the lake, as well as along the east shore. Other holding areas are the trees in front of the handicap pier, the three major brush piles in the lake and the 47 fish attractors placed strategically in Shabbona Lake. (Fish maps pinpointing the exact

structure can be purchased at Shabbona's Lakeside Bait, Tackle & Boat Rental, located on the shores of Shabbona Lake.) See Advertisement.

The best crappie presentation on Shabbona Lake, with all of its underwater structure, is a #8 thin bronze wire hook tied directly to 6 lb. test line (no swivels). Add a single BB split shot on the line about 6 inches up from the hook. Then add a stick crappie bobber about 2 to 3 feet up the line. I hook the minnow through the eyes for a number of reasons. First, crappies are notorious for "sucking the eyes out of minnows", especially when they are not particularly in a feeding mood.

Therefore, I want that hook in the part of the minnow the Crappie will grab first. Second, by hooking the minnow through the eyes, it blinds the minnow and it causes him to swim in an erratic motion which triggers the predator to strike the wounded baitfish. As we all know we try to make most lures appear to be wounded bait, so why not make live bait look like a wounded bait.

The stick bobber is very important. It allows you to detect even the slightest strike. If you are not using them, I can flatly tell you that you are missing a lot of fish, especially the larger ones which do not strike as hard. I tend not to use jigs or lures when crappie fishing. The areas that I fish are definitely snag country and the hooks on jigs do not bend free, like the wire hooks that I use. I not only would lose a lot of jigs, but I would also disrupt the fishing area trying to retrieve a stuck jig. The thin wire hook will come free as it bends and causes very little disruption of the fishing area.

Always position your boat upwind from the crib or brushpile you are fishing. You will find the males, which tend to be smaller, in the shallower water. The larger females generally hold deeper, often near the bottom of the structure. You may have to occasionally vertically jig for the females by "light-lining" your bait down to them.

"Light-lining" is a technique by which you remove your bobber and cast the minnow, along side of or directly into, the structure. To avoid some of the resulting hang-ups, I go to the #8 thin wire aberdeen hooks. This allows for less hook exposure and less hang-ups. This technique can be extremely effective, once perfected. But it can also be very frustrating, if done incorrectly. You must be a line watcher, because many times all that you will notice is that your line is going sideways & not directly back to the boat. This is a strike ! Set the hook !

There is a possession limit of 10 Crappies, per day, per fisherman. They are very tasty. There will be days that you and your fishing buddies can catch & release over 100 Crappie per day using these techniques and keying in on the areas that I have described. Remember, we owe it to future generations to help protect our limited resources. Practice good catch & release tactics !

Good Fishing ! Call 815-824-2581, Shabbona's Lakeside Bait, Tackle & Boat Rental for current fishing conditions ! See You Out On The Water !