

Predicting the crappie spawn on our local lakes

If you're a fisherman, you watch the weather on days like we had this past week and yearn to get on the water. If you're a crappie fisherman, you look for signs such as the flowers blooming or turkeys gobbling or a dozen other indicators to signal the beginning of "crappie season."

"Crappie season" is the time many anglers look forward to when male crappie can be found in abundance along the banks and around visible structure in shallow water and attack anything that comes near their bedding sites. Unfortunately, cooler temperatures and frequent cold fronts are keeping many anglers off the water. Those that do may miss out.

On any given day from late February through August, anglers are likely to encounter some type of spawning activity from a variety of species. In many cases, spawning activity may overlap, but the following species and water temperatures tend to dictate the line of procession, and reproduction, in these areas.

Black crappie, 60-70 degrees, February to May; largemouth bass, 65-75 degrees, April to June; redear sunfish (shell-cracker), 70-75 degrees, April to June; bream (bluegill), 75 degrees, May to August.

To understand springtime crappie fishing requires a little understanding of how crappie spawn as well as the conditions under which they are presented during spawning season.

When water temperatures reach the lower 60s, male crappie move to suitable spawning sites and begin preparing sites for females to come in and lay

eggs. These sites are typically shallow waters, which afford some type of structure, such as rocks, stumps, logs or other woody cover the females to her eggs on.

The males are easy to distinguish during the spawn because they will take on a darker hue, particularly around the head area. Many anglers mistake these crappie as the black crappie species and indicate that the larger paler fish they catch nearby are the white crappie species.

In truth, 99 percent of the crappie species found in upstate South Carolina waters are black crappie, which prefer clearer

water than the white crappie that are more frequent in low-land reservoirs and waters in the central US. The "white crappie" are actually female black crappie which do not exhibit "spawning colors" during the spring.

The key to catching both males and females when weather won't cooperate and bigger crappie under the best of conditions is to back off of traditional spring time bedding locations and fish the first major drop-off adjacent to these areas.

When looking at lakes such as Hartwell and Keowee, this means moving from 6-8 feet of water back into 10-12 feet of

water. These drop-offs are areas that crappie use to "stage" while waiting for water temperatures to level out in order to provide the best spawning success for hatchlings.

Larger females also stay in these staging areas until the nests are ready when they move in long enough to lay eggs and retreat to back to the staging area. In years when low water levels such as is being experienced on Lake Hartwell, crappie have been known to spawn in deeper water where they could find suitable spawning structure.

Most springtime crappie forays bring to mind warm sunny days and clear skies. In reality

these conditions only account for about 40 percent of the days in March.

If you've planned your trip in advance or can only fish certain days, there's no guarantee you'll always have storybook weather. The other side of March can mean high winds, cold fronts, and heavy rains. So what do you do, turn around and go home?

"Heavy rains will muddy the water quick, especially in major tributaries," said professional crappie angler Kent Driscoll.

"In that situation, I move to a cove that doesn't have much water flow coming into the back of it, and I'm especially looking for something with a lot of grass

warming days have many anglers looking forward to crappie fishing. But what do you do when the weather is less than ideal?

and weeds in the shallows because that vegetation will help filter the water and keep it clear enough to fish."

"Cold fronts will definitely lock them down," he said, "and the crappie will move out, but they won't go as far as people may think. During a cold front it's time to back off from the spawning flats."

When this situation occurs, Driscoll abandons his typical single pole approach and goes back to his multi-rod tightline trolling setup he was using when crappie were still in pre-spawn. This time however, he's going to shallow up, lighten up and slow way down.

"I like to fan rods across the front of my boat and put a small cork — just enough to float a 1/16-ounce jig — about 2 feet up the line and push them along with just a slight bow in the line. The bite will get real soft after a cold front, and a lot of times they'll take the bait under a cork because they feel less resistance with a cork compared to a tight lined jig where the fish has to pull the rod tip down before you see the bite."

