

# A look at how to catch crappie in fluctuating water conditions

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FOR THE JOURNAL

Typical fall fishing across the country means learning to deal with changing water conditions. At this time of year, many reservoirs are scheduling winter-level drawdowns, so you can expect those shallow-water areas that held fish earlier in the year to be up on the bank of the lake.

At other times, Mother Nature doesn't care what the rule curve says, and she decides she's going to raise water levels with little or no notice. This is often a draw-down — a sudden spike in water level that sends both fishermen and fish scurrying back into shallow water, or at least back into creek channels that access the shallows.

If you're traveling to an area you may not be familiar with, it's best to do some homework before hitting the water to give yourself a leg up on finding crappie in fluctuating water conditions.

Spend time pouring over lake maps. Go to the map and look for deeper channels and try to spot deeper structure. Once you're on the water, you can spend time in this deeper structure trying to locate specific areas that hold crappie. Trial and error really comes in to play where low water is concerned. Don't overlook any small areas that could concentrate fish.

Fall patterns, especially when the water levels are dropping off — either due to planned drawdowns, drought conditions or both — are harder to figure out than during other



When water levels subside, either due to drought or draw-down, a little patience and planning can help you find fall crappie.

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times of the year, but that doesn't mean they don't exist.

An often-overlooked factor during low-water conditions is a crappie's habit of holding on even the slightest of break lines. Normal conditions may require a 5-foot or greater drop to be utilized by crappie as a travel route and staging area. Less water overhead makes up to a 2-foot drop just as appealing. The best approach is to start deep on a travel route that you had marked on your topo map.

To sneak up on these often spooky, shallow-water fish, try an old-school tactic by using a single jig pole outfitted with a 1/16-ounce jig in one hand and a sculling oar or paddle in the other. Using either a bow-mounted trolling motor, sculling oar or push pole, work your way along the break from the deep end, presenting the bait vertically on each piece of structure within reach as you work

your way to the shallows.

Remember, in low water, what used to be a deep brush pile is now a piece of isolated standing structure and should be worked in the same fashion. Start on the deep-water side of the structure and methodically work your way to the shallow side.

Another falling-water strategy is to head out to the edge of the main channel to intercept crappie on the retreat from the shallows.

Generally speaking, crappie will start to move out into deeper water once the water temperatures get below 70. By then, any thermoclines are going away, and there is better oxygenated water through the whole depth range. That's also about the same time most water authorities will start dropping the water levels.

For anglers who may not have the patience to use one pole all day, long-line trolling is a

great fall tactic that often gets overlooked as a good search tool.

Setting out as many as six to eight rods around the boat, use a variable speed trolling motor to move from 0.7 to 1 mph along those break lines you've already identified. It's often beneficial to have different weight jigs out with this strategy.

Use heavier jigs (1/8- to 3/16-ounce) on shorter rods directly behind the boat and gradually lighten up to 1/16-ounce baits along the side, and a 1/32-ounce or even 1/64-ounce on the longest rods out to the side of the boat. Sooner or later, the fish will tell you which depth and jig color and style they prefer or not.

If the action is slow, that will be your cue to relocate to a different part of the lake.

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