

Having crappie holidays on local lakes

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
FOR THE JOURNAL

For wintertime crappie anglers, the period from Thanksgiving to Christmas is a special time. The weather is cold, but not too cold. It's that good-feeling time where you reestablish the bond with your heavy jacket, but you don't have to rely on it to survive like you do in February.

Upstate anglers, particularly those who live to chase papermouths, yearn for this time of year because crappie in our Upstate impoundments stay on some of their most consistent patterns of the year.

For veteran crappie angler Jay Bruce, December is his favorite time to be on the water. This is the time of year that Bruce will be fishing the ledges of river runs and large tributaries on these lakes, concentrating on the bends in the river channel to collect big schools of fish.

"During late November and into December, these fish are solidly in their winter pattern," Bruce said. "Nothing is really going to move them off this pattern. If the weather is stable, they'll rise up off the bottom a little, and if a cold front pushes through, they'll drop down to the bottom.



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The holiday season is a great time to be crappie fishing if you understand the seasonal habits of the fish.

Basically, that means they'll move about 2 feet, depending on the weather."

Bruce likes to fish the main channel ledges because he finds crappie will orient to the bends in the river channel, depending on the amount of current being pulled through the dam. He scans the bottom using his sonar electronics to locate any logjams or debris trapped in the bend that will hold fish. He also claims fewer people fish the river channels out in open water this time of year because of the wind and cold.

Bruce targets crappie by virtue of slow-trolling or spider-rigging from the front of his boat. He employs a Kentucky rig with a half-ounce weight

on the bottom and two hooks in the rig. The bottom hook is a No. 2 drop-shot hook on a dropper loop set 10 inches off the weight. The upper hook is a No. 4 drop shot that is tied on a loop 12 to 14 inches above the bottom hook.

During December, Bruce will be fishing straight live bait — mostly store-bought minnows. He uses four poles per person on either side from the front of the boat and is especially fond of using super long graphite jig poles for his technique. He admits that wrangling 12- to 16-foot-long rods takes some getting used to, but he definitely sees a difference in the number of fish he catches when he's not directly over the

top of them, especially on sunny days.

"With a lively minnow, I can see the rod tip wiggle," Bruce said. "The way to tell when you have a bite is the rod tip stops moving. To say the bite is light is an understatement."

Bruce prefers the Kentucky rig because it lets him bump the bottom without hanging up. It also puts his bait right on top of winter crappie, which show a particular fondness for laying in the mud on the bottom, especially during a passing cold front.

Bruce said it took him a while to figure out — and it happened almost by accident — fishing an area he knew should hold crappie.

He said his boat drifted over a high spot, and he got a bite and caught the fish but never saw it on the screen. Based on the muddy fins and tail, the only thing that made sense was the fish was laying on the bottom in the mud, like a catfish.

"Since then, I've caught lots of muddy bottom crappie," Bruce said. "Must be warmer on the bottom."

PHILLIP GENTRY is a freelance outdoor writer who has been writing a wide variety of outdoor articles across the Southeast since 2004.