

Fall Crappies

By Bob Jensen

Almost wherever you live crappies are willing biters as water cools in fall.

Not a giant, but a nice fit for the dinner plate. Crappies are abundant all over North America.

In some lakes crappies gather in the deeper basins and behave much like a wall-eye would as the days shorten and the first frost forms. They'll hug the bottom in large schools. They might be near a point or some other underwater structure, but often they'll be far from any structure. Depths of 25 to 35 feet are not unusual in clear, deep lakes. So a good depthfinder is an essential part of finding crappies in fall and early winter.

You can see schools of crappies on a big-screen sonar, but more often you'll first see the schools of shad or minnows they're hanging close to-their cold-weather food source. Study any schools of bait you see carefully and look for the inverted "C" marks that indicate larger fish-if there are lots of them, you're probably seeing crappies. Sometimes the fish will be suspended, but most of the time they'll be closer to bottom. When you see them, hover directly overhead via the trolling motor at the lowest speed it will keep you in position and drop a jig/plastic or jig/minnow on them. You will almost always get bit. It doesn't take a lot of action to get a crappie to bite; just lower the lure to their depth and twitch it very lightly-when you feel a "tap", set the hook-but not too hard; they have very soft mouths.

Crappies make a great target for kids in fall--quick to bite, easy to land and great on the table.

Even if you don't have a high-dollar sonar, you can often locate crappies by putting out a spread of minnows and/or tiny jigs and trolling them a few feet off bottom with the trolling motor turning over at its lowest speed. Use 4 to 6 pound mono and soft rods for this work-the lighter line definitely draws more strikes.

Another good location to find crappies is a short distance off the edge of a deep weedline. Crappies sometimes suspend just under the surface 20 yards or so off the edge of the deep weedline in search of food in early fall before the insects are frozen out. In this case the best way to find them is to watch for small dimples on the surface of the water. You need calm wind conditions for this pattern, as you can't see the dimples created as Mr. PaperMouth sucks a bug off the surface when it's windy. Late afternoon and early evening are when this pattern is most productive. Again, a jig with plastic or a minnow is good, either slowly retrieved

just a couple of feet under the surface or fished under a slip-bobber.

Crappies readily hit an assortment of jigs, tiny lures, flies and live minnows.

In reservoirs that have flooded timber, crappies often suspend in the timber, sometimes in the tree-tops, other times farther down. If the tree-tops are down only a few feet you'll need to cast out, let your jig sink a few feet, then retrieve it slowly. If the tree-tops are 10 feet or deeper and there's some color in the water, you can fish vertically with your jig-easier because you can see the fish on your sonar and put the lure at their exact depth. Let the fish show you what presentation they want.

Many small jigs work well for crappies, but it's tough to beat a Fire-fly or Gypsi jig in fall. The sixteenth ounce size will be best for most situations. A two-inch minnow on the back of the jig will catch fish, but also try an Impulse Swim'n Grub in the two-inch size.



Sadie Dirden of Andrews shows off her very first catch! The Big Mouth Bass was taken at Oak Creek Lake.

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