



Hot times ahead for crappie anglers

by Lee Keck

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There appears to be a new trend among crappie anglers from our state. For years, Illinois crappie enthusiasts have traveled to Missouri, Kentucky and other surrounding states in search of the nation's finest crappie fishing.

More recently, however, increasing numbers of Illinois crappie anglers are staying in our own state and finding excellent crappie fishing. In fact, a trip to nearby Carlyle Lake during the top crappie fishing months may now likely reveal more parked vehicles with Missouri license plates than those from Illinois.

Let's face it, the word is out that Illinois' crappie fishing is back and better than ever.

Actually, this really good fishing began a couple of years ago and has steadily improved each consecutive year. Last year, anglers were catching excellent numbers of quality crappie from each of Illinois' three large Corps of Engineer reservoirs.

But even more exciting, Carlyle Lake's crappie fishing outlook for 2018 is even better. In fact, Illinois is likely to rate among the nation's top crappie fishing destinations this year.

As little as a decade ago, crappie fishing at Carlyle Lake was almost non-existent. Then came a few perfectly timed high-water years. These floodwaters brought ideal spawning conditions, and reproduction success dramatically improved.

"This year, 62 percent of the stocked-sized white crappie were over the legal size limit of 10 inches and 38 percent of the black crappie were over 10 inches," says fisheries biologist Fred Cronin. "This shows an improvement in quality size fish from recent years."

He says these crappie should provide an abundance of quality fishing opportunities for legal size fish.

A ten-inch minimum length limit and a 15- fish-per-day creel limit applies at Carlyle Lake. More good news comes from Lake Shelbyville where recent years of heavy rain and prolonged floods have boosted both the growth rate and recruitment of crappie.

According to Lake Shelbyville fisheries biologist Mike Mounce, the improved numbers and improved recruitment to larger sizes, coupled with warm recent winters have resulted in unprecedented catch rates of crappie from the lake.

"Angler catch rates and size structure remained good throughout the summer and fall," Mounce explained. "The catch rates of both white crappie and black crappie were much improved."

Best of all, the size structure of the white crappie collected was good. While a smaller percentage of the black crappie collected were ten inches or longer, this is an improvement.

If there is any problem associated with the Rend Lake crappie population, it would be there might be too many fish.

"The crappie population remains in very good condition, and fishing over the past year has been outstanding," says Rend Lake fisheries biologist Shawn Hirst. "However, the size structure of the crappie population has changed significantly in recent years."

Unfortunately, he says the number of crappie over 12-inches in length remains low. However, crappie slightly smaller remain abundant and should provide good fishing.