



Crappie time is nearly here

by Lee Keck

February 19 2018 10:00 PM



While it might seem a bit early to start the fishing season, many local anglers will soon be enjoying their first taste of fried crappie fillets.

In fact, veteran crappie anglers realize the southern half of our state is loaded with crappie fishing destinations. However, downstate anglers must first decide if they wish to catch big fish or lots of smaller crappies.

It seems, with only a few exceptions, that waters in this part of the state harbor either great quantities of smaller fish or fewer, but larger, crappie.

Fortunately, downstate crappie anglers seeking big fish need not venture far to find a spot to shake the winter doldrums.

Anglers venturing to the southern reaches of the state are blessed with a myriad of crappie angling opportunities including many of the top fishing waters in all of Illinois. And with the warmer days of spring already making an occasional appearance, action will be heating up for this popular species before many anglers dust off their fishing rods.

By late-February, crappie action in many downstate waters often begins to heat up. As water temperatures creep above the 50-degree mark, these hungry crappie begin to feed aggressively on shad and other small baitfish. And once water temperatures soar into the upper fifties, the crappies start seeking out spawning areas.

Coves and nooks offering a retreat from the current and waves are ideal spots to look for pre-spawn crappies. During the latter weeks of February and in early March, areas containing logs, stumps and other types of deeper cover often yield some of the best crappie fishing.

According to veteran Rend Lake fishing guide Bob Johnson, crappie action at this 18,900-acre Corps of Engineer lake typically starts to turn on sometime in mid-February. He traditionally begins the crappie season by concentrating his angling efforts to the deeper structure along northern shorelines.

"The best action for big crappies at Rend Lake begins early, much earlier than most people imagine," he explained. "By the latter part of February, we were already catching good numbers of ten to 12-inch fish."

Fishing exclusively with jigs, Johnson looks for pre-spawn crappie by probing flooded brush and beaver huts in water anywhere from two- to ten-feet deep. He has found a one-

sixteenth-ounce jig works best when fishing depths of less than five feet. Deeper water usually calls for a slightly heavier lure.

"Prior to the spawn, I always seem to find the crappie holding about a foot off the bottom," he said. "This seems to hold true no matter what depth of water I am fishing."

Rend Lake crappie anglers have a 25-fish daily limit that includes no more than ten fish measuring ten inches or longer.

But big waters like Rend are not the only downstate hotspots. Anglers will find plenty of downstate honeyholes capable of yielding a bragging size catch of papermouths.

In fact, action is already underway at Montgomery County's Coffeen Lake. This warm water site offers anglers a cache of crappie fishing opportunities.

Unlike other cooling lakes, Coffeen is split by railroad bridge. This creates two completely different fishing environments. The southern half of the lake feels the warming effects from water released by the power plant. The north end is impacted very little by the warm water.

Recent population samplings revealed some of the best crappie numbers in the northern end of Coffeen Lake. Though fishing in this area is often quite good, it sees relatively light angling pressure.

Coffeen Lake anglers are permitted to keep up to ten crappies, ten inches or longer in length.

Though plenty of smaller fish can be found in these Otter Lake, selective anglers can also find plenty of nine-inch and larger crappies at this 765-acre reservoir.

Minnows and jigs seem to work equally well and anglers seldom have problems catching fish. Though smaller crappie are more common, dedicated crappie anglers regularly land fish in the 3/4 to one-pound category.

The northern half of this lake generally yields the best early season action. By mid-March, however, good crappie fishing can be found in virtually every cove.

Good shoreline fishing can be found along the road that crosses near the mid-point of this lake. Most bank fishermen experience good success near the bridge.

Statewide crappie regulations are in effect at Otter Lake.

On the other side of the coin, quality is more the rule at Beaver Dam State Lake near Plainview. Anglers at this 57-acre lake experienced excellent crappie fishing in 2017. More of the same is expected this spring.

Half-pound and larger fish are regularly caught from the submerged tree tops and fish attractors. Jigs and jigs tipped with minnows often yield the best catches. The south side of the lake usually offers the best crappie fishing.

Only boats powered by electric trolling motors are permitted on Beaver Dam Lake. Crappie anglers are permitted to keep ten crappies, nine inches or longer.

Still, the best news is coming from nearby Carlyle Lake. Crappie fishing here has returned to its former glory. Fisheries Biologist Fred Cronin suspects that the anglers will enjoy another season of excellent fishing during 2018.

"Last fall, we collected enough fish to determine that the crappie population still rates an excellent status," said Newman. "Strong year classes exist in the eight to 12-inch range, and young crappie from the 2017 spawn are very abundant."

Regulations at this site allow crappie anglers a ten-inch/15-fish limit.

And, as one additional bit of good news, the outlook for Lake Shelbyville is every bit as good, as well.