



Winter is top time for Corps Lake crappie

by Lee Keck

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While many local sportsmen are occupying their time by sitting in duck blinds or deer stands, a handful of diehard crappie anglers are busy enjoying some of the best fishing action of the year. And, most of the better action is coming from our larger reservoirs.

Many winters, crappie fishing becomes a year-round affair at Illinois' big three Corps of Engineer reservoirs. In fact, anglers can be found on these waters most every day filling their stringers with these tasty panfish.

This doesn't surprise veteran Wisconsin and Southern Illinois fishing guide Todd Gessner. He rates Rend Lake as one of the finest crappie waters in the state.

"I'm sure you can catch crappie from Rend Lake twelve months of the year," he said. "In fact, there have been plenty of fishermen out in recent weeks and they caught quite a few fish."

However, most of the early winter fishing action is enjoyed by shoreline anglers. They use long poles with 1/16-ounce crappie jigs and fish some of the deeper areas along the shoreline.

"The sailboat harbor is a favorite spot among the shoreline fishermen," said Gessner.

"The Corps of Engineers has placed brush piles in some of the deeper water along this shoreline, and these attract and hold crappie."

Some of the rip-rap areas are also good spots to try. These can be found near most boat ramps and along Route 154 that crosses the center of the lake. Gessner says the real secret is to locate some fairly deep water and chances are you'll find crappie.

According to the long-time guide, jigs are the favorite early winter lure among the Rend Lake crappie fishermen. However, there are times when the crappie become a little more finicky and it is necessary to fish with minnows.

"Ice is about the only thing that keeps the crappie fishermen home," he said. "And, I bet you could still catch fish if you could figure out how to get to them."

The Rend Lake crappie population has not experienced the ups and downs like those in other Corps of Engineer impoundments. Gessner feels water levels can't be fluctuated at this lake making for much better spawning conditions.

"Our spillway system maintains a steady lake level during the critical spawning period ensuring a successful spawn during most years," he added. "I'm sure that this is the main reason our crappie population continues to thrive."

Anyone interested in learning more about Gessner's guide service can contact him through his website at www.toddgessneroutdoors.com. Gessner did experience a bad boating accident in recent years, so he may be recommending other guides.

According to fisheries biologists, this winter also brings good crappie fishing at Illinois' other two large Corps of Engineer reservoirs.

While it is debatable as to which of these waters will produce the best early winter crappie fishing, Lake Shelbyville would definitely be a strong contender for the title. Fall fishing has been absolutely superb at Lake Shelbyville.

This past spring, anglers reported catching good numbers of crappie measuring up to 12 inches in length. And, similar reports have been coming in this fall.

The Carlyle Lake report is also quite promising this year. Anglers here have been finding fairly good numbers of keeper-size crappie.

Many anglers cashed in on the good crappie fishing found at Carlyle this spring and summer. Biologists expect winter fishermen to find more of the same.

In addition to the crappie, good early winter fishing for white bass can also be found at each of the three big reservoirs. If the crappie action is slow, one can generally count on some action from these hard-fighting fish.

And, perhaps the best thing about the winter fishing is that angling pressure is generally much lighter than during the spring. In fact, there are some days during the week when few anglers fish the waters of these big lakes.

Anglers can keep track of the winter-fishing and lake conditions by checking the recorded lake reports offered by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. These reports are updated regularly and can be reached by phoning the following numbers; Carlyle Lake (618) 594-4637, Lake Shelbyville (217) 774-2020 and Rend Lake (618) 629-1828.