

It's Nearly Crappie Time

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, the crappie fishing outlook for 2020 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.

"Now, the Carlyle Lake crappie population is just incredible," says fisheries biologist Fred Cronin. "Last fall, we collected 19 fish per hour— a bit less than the previous year."

"Although numbers may be down, the size quality remains very impressive," he added.

He says sixty-one percent of the stock sized white crappie were over the minimum length limit of 10 inches and 41-percent of the black crappie were over 10 inches

"This shows a high percentage of quality sized fish present," he explained. "In addition, a fair number of young of the year crappie were collected in the fall survey."

Twelve-inch fish average well over a pound. Fishing for crappie should be crazy good in 2020.

A ten-inch minimum length limit and a 15- fish-per-day creel limit apply at Carlyle Lake.

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

"The crappie population remains in very good condition, and fishing over the past year has been outstanding," says Rend Lake fisheries biologist Mike Hooe.

"However, the size structure of the crappie population has changed significantly in the past year."

“Of the crappie collected during the netting survey, 35-percent were over 10-inches and another 30 percent were between 9-10 inches,” he explained. “And, the crappie collected during the netting survey, 93-percent were white crappie.

He says the fishing prospects for crappie remain excellent for the coming year.

When it comes to crappie fishing at Lake Shelbyville, few lakes can measure up.

The size structure, the number of fish, and body condition of crappie caught by anglers last year were outstanding!” Lake Shelbyville fisheries biologist Mike Mounce said. “Angler catch rates were excellent in winter, spring, and late fall, and some fishermen had good fishing through the summer.”

“The fishing prospects for crappie are expected to be excellent for both the number of fish available and size structure in 2020,” Angler catch rates were excellent in winter, spring, and late fall. Some fishermen had good fishing through the summer. He added, “There is a very strong year-class recruiting into the fishery that has grown very well through summer 2020.”

He said these fish will provide a lot of 9-5to 9.75-inch fish in 2020. Anglers are encouraged to keep their limit of five (5) crappie less than 10 inches, especially the more abundant black crappie.

Thinning the number of smaller crappie, especially those less than 9.5 inches, will help improve growth and recruitment of the remaining crappie to larger sizes.

Anglers at Lake Shelbyville are also encouraged not to keep more than two crappie greater than 12 inches, and/or the largest crappie. Releasing some or all of these larger fish and harvesting their limit of crappie under 10-inches is the best way to improve the quality of this fishery.