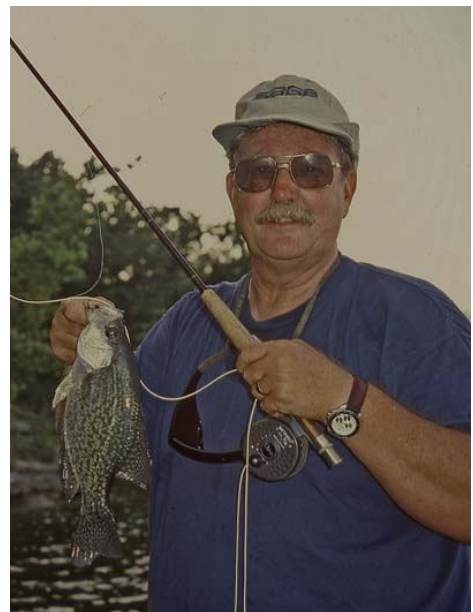


CRAPPIES: THE SIMPLE FLY APPROACH

As the warm, pleasant weather of spring gradually spreads northward a double migration unfolds. An army of anglers, too long restrained by cabin fever, converge on lakes and large ponds; crappies with ravenous appetites move into shallow water. Many anglers are discovering that the limber fly rod is a pragmatic choice for those intent on joining the action. The fly rod's gentle delivery and its shock-absorbing springiness during the fight are distinct advantages. Anglers use a wide assortment of tactics and lures to entice crappies, and while each method is capable of bringing this popular panfish to hand it is the fly rod and an assortment of very simple flies that delivers the most fun and often the most fish.

Why should attention be focused on simple flies? There are several answers. First, crappie tend to be a schooling fish that hangs out, travels, feeds, and reproduces in pods of their own year class. Feeding is highly competitive. Those that react without aggression don't eat and consequently don't survive. Schooling feeders aren't very selective so flies don't need to be intricate replications of their menu. The bottom line is that simple flies work just as well as more complicated patterns. Second, well over 50 per cent of the crappie's diet is small fish. The percentage is higher among white crappie and much higher among those in excess of 9 inches in length. The shape, size, color, and action of these "minnows," whether young-of-the-year crappies, gizzard shad, or any other, is easily replicated at the tying vise. This means that tying a crappie pattern need not be time-consuming and flies bought over the counter need not be expensive. Another factor which recommends simple flies is that crappies tend to be brush-oriented. They may suspend above or nearby the fly-catching branches, but too often they are right down in the thickest part. Practically speaking, flies will be lost in the catching process. If the angler is reluctant to cast into these crappie magnets for fear of losing an expensive or complicated fly there will be few fish caught. When structure is hooked it's best to break the fly off and tie on another as opposed to disturbing the entire colony of fish by attempting to extricate it.

Crappies are suspended most of the time. One exception occurs during the spawn when they become active nesters. Fishing for them in these two situations is very different. During early pre-spawn sexually mature crappies move toward the shallows but stop first at a staging area where they will feed actively and await conditions (water temperature, length of daylight) that signal them to go to shallow flats to begin nest building. These staging areas can be the deep end of docks, a brush pile on a point, or standing timber near the spawning flats. On large impoundments in the mid-South secondary points, those which are located within major coves, are often pre-spawn crappie magnets. Potential staging hot spots can be checked out by working backwards. Look first for suitable spawning



grounds in the shallow back ends of coves, and then look for points within the coves. A locator is useful in determining which of the points has the cover necessary to hold staging crappies. If brush, deadfalls, or even a decayed weedline is present fish it thoroughly. Although fish may also appear on the locator the crappies may be widely scattered or related very tightly to the structure. This may give the angler the false impression that there are no fish present. On ponds crappies may use submerged brush piles as staging areas, but if little brush is present they may suspend near a deep weedline. This can make locating the fish difficult. Once again work backward from potential spawning grounds to find weedlines to explore. When fishing for suspended crappies our best success has come while using a slow sinking fly that has independent action as the fly falls vertically through the water column.

Although many fly patterns can fill this need, our favorite is one of our own creations called Crappie Bully. It sinks hook-bend first, has lots of flash, and rubber legs that help slow its descent. (See the sidebar for the simple tying instructions.) Flies that employ a small spinner or a twister tail attached to the hook bend also fish well on the vertical drop.



Locate a brush pile, deadfall, weed bed, or other prospective structure, cast a vertical drop fly over the structure, then count as the fly descends to assist in determining the crappies' depth. If slack line is cast at the target the fly will free-fall toward the intended structure, but if the line is pinned to the rod upon splashdown tension will pull the fly back toward the rod a bit. Either is a good presentation as long as the fly caster knows the location of the fly in the water. Line watching is essential. Any twitch or hesitation in the fly line should be answered with a quick but gentle lifting of the rod tip. Remember crappies' mouths are rather delicate, so don't be too forceful in attempting to land the fish. If no strike occurs begin fly action just before it encounters the brush by using the line hand to impart a short slow strip, allow a brief interval, and strip again. A countdown will enable your fly to return to the same depth either in anticipation of fish contact or to prevent an unwanted snag.

Another successful method of fishing for suspended crappies involves using a large strike indicator rigged as a slip bobber. This setup requires that the leader, which may be lengthened as necessary, be threaded thru a small hole in the indicator. Place a small stick-on strike indicator on the leader to serve as an adjustable stop for the slipping indicator. The indicator rests against the weighted fly during the cast but stays on the surface while the weighted fly is allowed to sink to the depth you've set after splashdown.

Actively nesting crappies can be very aggressive in shallow water. Their territorial instinct causes them to attack any competitor or nest robber. Depending on weather, the nesting process can last several weeks. These chasers are much more vulnerable to a minnow pattern that is stripped through their territory and any appropriately sized streamer pattern will take some fish. Those that incorporate a bit of silver flash, a lot of white, and a touch of red have the advantage. Since these patterns will be fished shallow; weighting should be judicious. Our first selection is a pattern we call Wilson's Mini-Minnie. (See second side bar for this very simple recipe.) Other effective stripping patterns include Clousers (all white or chartreuse over white), white woolly buggers, and micro-jigs. Cast these streamers into the back ends of shallow coves or into shore line weeds and brush and strip back to the rod. Start with short, slow strips followed by pauses, then repeat the strip. Increase the length and speed of the strip if the slower retrieve is ignored. When conditions are bright on clear waters, the spawners may withdraw to deeper water; but they won't have gone far. Look for crappie cover along the first breakline, the area where the flat begins to drop away into deeper water. These fish may be widely scattered and in a neutral feeding mood, but they can be caught if the streamer passes closely to their positions. Until locating these "backed off" spawners, trolling may be the best method of presentation as more water can be covered quickly.



If a cold front moves through and cooler temperatures linger the crappies may withdraw to their staging area. Previously discussed presentations for suspended crappies will need to be applied until the water begins to warm again.

Simple and inexpensive minnow-imitating flies that can be fished on the vertical drop or stripped through the shallows are the key to unlocking early season crappie fishing. Remember to fish a variety of local waters to determine which harbor populations of big crappies this season.

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