

By Don Miller, John Viar
and
Adam Wood

Have a **CRAPPIE** Time

ICE FISHING

Never mind the slow days of ice-fishing. Black crappies will keep you racing for flags all day. A few fisheries biologists – crappie enthusiasts themselves – tell you how to ice-fish for them.

Historically, ice-fishing in New Hampshire conjures images of wool-clad anglers chasing flags for perch and pickerel on small marsh ponds, and “shanty-towns” on the big lakes, where anglers huddle in bobhouses around a wood stove, bobbing for shad and lake trout. This winter scene is quiet and peaceful, shared by anglers using time-honored methods that have been passed down through the generations.

Well, the new millennium has arrived, and ice-anglers have a whole new bag of tricks and gadgets to fool the fish that lie under the hard water. As techniques and gadgetry have changed, likewise we find that the fisheries in our state bear little resemblance to those encountered by our forefathers. Sure, old *namaycush* (lake trout), perch and pickerel are still there, sometimes even more plentiful than the past.

But now there are new options, such as black crappie and rainbow trout, two species that have developed a strong following of anglers in the last decade.

Let’s examine this “new” sunfish, the black crappie, and discover why Midwest and Southern anglers rank this species so high on their list.

WHO ADDED ANOTHER SUNFISH TO THE MIX?

The black crappie is a member of the sunfish family and is found in a growing

number of New Hampshire’s water bodies. The black crappie is not native to our state; its existence here is largely the result of past illegal fish transfers. Fish and Game Department transfers to suitable water bodies, as well as continued illegal transfers, have drastically expanded the crappie’s range.

Because fish introductions can have serious ecological impacts, transferring fish from one water body to another is illegal by private individuals. The No. 1 concern is the spread of disease, which can wreak havoc on fisheries. Another concern about illegal fish transfers is that the introduced species can out-compete the native fish in a water body. An example is Lake Sunapee, where illegal introductions of rock bass have had a widespread impact on fisheries.

SO, WHAT IS A BLACK CRAPPIE?

Crappies are easily distinguishable from other sunfish; their bodies are markedly compressed from the sides, hence the nickname “slab.” Their up-turned snout, large eyes, and black-green blotches on a silver background also readily identify them. Their coloration helps to camouflage them in their weedy habitat — vegetated areas of lakes, ponds and slow moving rivers.

Black crappies spawn in the spring when water temperatures reach 58 to 64 degrees. A nest site is selected in 3 to 8 feet

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of water and is usually situated in the roots of aquatic vegetation on a sand or mud bottom. The male guards the eggs and young fry from predators until they're large enough to be on their own.

Black crappies feed primarily on insects, zooplankton, and smaller fish.

Most adult black crappies are between 5 and 12 inches long and generally weigh less than 1 pound. The state record was caught ice-fishing by Tom Noyes on the Bellamy Reservoir in Madbury during the winter of 2000. It measured 17 1/4 inches long and weighed 2 pounds, 12.8 ounces.

WHY CRAPPIES?

Since they remain more active in winter than other members of the sunfish family, and are a schooling fish, the black crappie offers an excellent opportunity for fast and exciting ice-fishing action. This

species is perfectly suited for young, inexperienced, and experienced ice-anglers alike – and its flaky white fillets are second to none in the frying pan.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

At the very least, you'll need basic ice-fishing equipment, such as a hand or power auger to bore through the ice, a ladle to clean your hole, and a line to reach the fish. Tip-ups, which come in many different styles, allow you to present bait to the fish without constantly tending your line. A flag pops up when a fish takes the bait, and the angler pulls the fish in with a hand-over-hand motion.

Standard tip-up rigging consists of a main body of squid or other relatively thick line (for ease of handling in the cold), connected to a 3-to 10-foot piece of 4-to 10-pound test monofilament leader. A ball-bearing swivel between the two helps prevent

line twist.

A live 1 1/2 to 3-inch shiner hooked through the lips or parallel to the back on a #8 or #6 bait holder hook will do nicely. Use a small split-shot sinker (non-lead, of course) 6 to 14 inches above the bait to help get it down.

JIGGING AND GADGETS

Although tip-ups are infinitely patient, jigging is far more effective and just plain fun. Jigging lets you get to, attract, and play fish much more efficiently. The term "jigging" comes from the motion of the fishing rod as the angler imparts action to the lure; subtle movements are usually more effective for crappies. Numerous short ultra-light rods manufactured specifically for ice-fishing are currently available.

Spool a high-quality ultra-light spinning reel, with good drag and back-reel systems, with 4-or 2-pound

BLACK CRAPPIE

(Pomoxis nigromaculatus)

N.H. STATE RECORD

Length: 17 1/4 inches

Weight: 2 lbs., 12.8 oz.

When: Feb. 9, 2000

Where: Bellamy Reservoir,
Madbury

Angler: Tom
Noyes

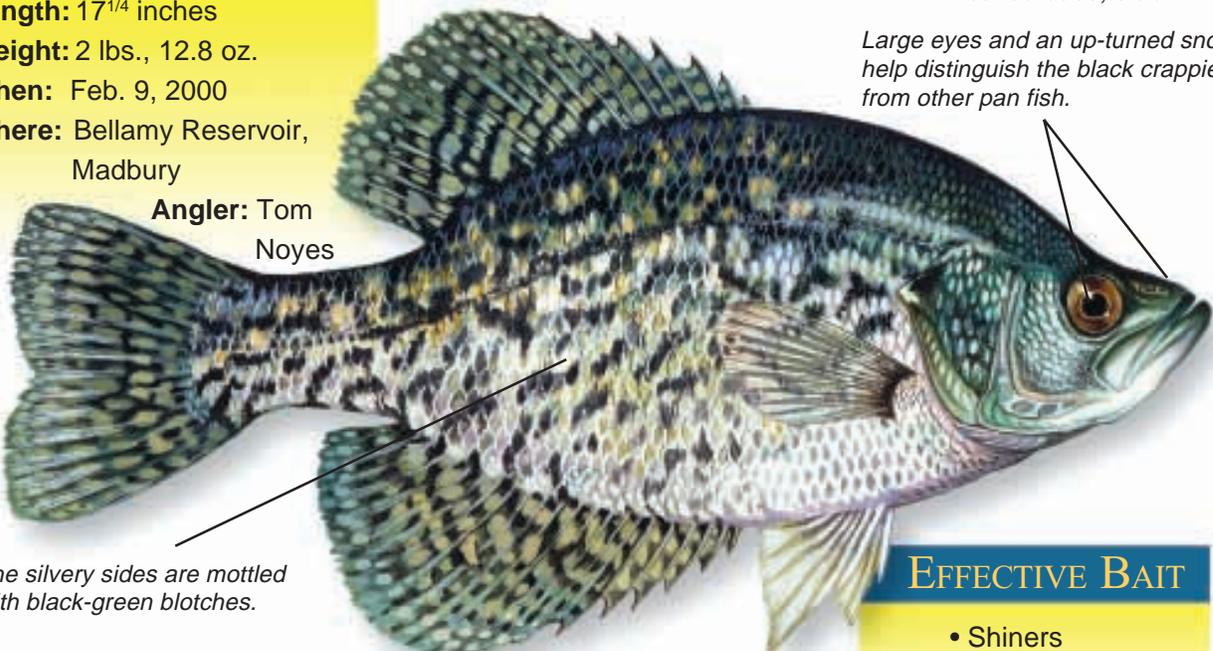
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The silvery sides are mottled with black-green blotches.

A.K.A.

calico bass, slab

Large eyes and an up-turned snout help distinguish the black crappie from other pan fish.



EFFECTIVE BAIT

- Shiners
- Maggots
- Worms



A small jig rigged with a shiner head or tail will produce great results. Remember to use non-lead jigs only.



test line and you're in for a real treat when battling feisty crappies.

Match your lure or lure/bait combination to the activity level of the crappies. A good start is a small Swedish pimple or Kastmaster rigged with a shiner head or tail on a single hook. When crappies get finicky, a small glow-in-the-dark teardrop jig tipped with a wax worm, maggot, or worm can save the day.

As in all fishing, experiment until you find what pattern is working.

A gadget that will literally triple your ice-fishing success is a good portable sonar unit, or "fish-finder." Sonar allows you to monitor fish position in the water column, determine fish activity levels, know the precise depth and bottom composition, find weedbeds or other structure, and simply see if the fish are under your hole!

Newer liquid crystal display (LCD) or flasher types work equally well. The key is to not skimp on your battery system. A 12-volt 10- or 12-amp motorcycle battery will keep you fishing throughout the coldest days.

WHEN AND WHERE DO I LOOK FOR WINTERTIME CRAPPIES?

As with many species, early and late in the ice-fishing season are the best times to catch crappies, although they can still be caught in good numbers during mid-winter. With their large eyes, crappies are well suited to feeding during low-light conditions when they ambush prey. They are especially active at dusk and into the evening. Dawn can also be good, and they will bite throughout the day in some water bodies, especially under ice cover.

When choosing a spot to start ice-fishing, look for relatively deep basin water (20 feet or more, depending on the particular water body), surrounded

by good summer habitat, such as old weedbeds, drop-offs, and sunken timber.

Crappies are notorious for suspending at different depths as they hold in their deep water winter "refuge" areas, so make sure to check all depths – a sonar unit will tell you immediately where to start fishing. Crappies may hold closer to the structure listed above early and late in the season.

Above all, always stay mobile – keep drilling holes and checking different areas until you find the fish!

WHAT WATER BODIES CURRENTLY HAVE FISHABLE CRAPPIE POPULATIONS?

The middle to northern end of Moultonborough Bay of Lake Winnepesaukee boasts an excellent crappie population. Other water bodies with fishable populations include Balch Pond in Wakefield; Pemigewasset Lake in New Hampton; Monomonac Lake in Rindge; Surry Mountain Pond in Surry; Crystal Lake in Manchester; Horseshoe Pond in Merrimack; Baboosic Lake in Amherst; and Lake Joe Sylvia/Clement Pond in Hopkinton.

Many other water bodies also have good populations. Please refer

to Fish and Game's "Freshwater Fishing Guide" for a complete listing of water bodies containing black crappies. This handy pocket-sized book is available at Concord headquarters and regional offices.

MORE QUESTIONS?

Feel free to call (603) 744-5470 or e-mail Don Miller donmiller@starband.net or John Viar jviar@starband.net at Fish and Game's Region 2 office in New Hampton if you have any questions or want more details regarding crappies or other fishing opportunities in the Lakes Region. ■

Don Miller is Fish and Game's large lakes fisheries biologist; John Viar is a fisheries biological technician; Adam Wood is a seasonal fisheries biological aide. All are avid crappie anglers.



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If you set up in the right place (you may have to drill a few holes to do this) you can have a productive day chasing tip ups and catching black crappies. John Viar, above, uses a fish finder and a jigging rod.

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