THE LURE OF CRAWFISH FISHING
The action is nonstop once you tie into these fighting game fish

by Andrew Schafermeyer

There are many differences between hunting and fishing, yet the personalities of those who undertake them are quite similar. This dynamic has become clear to me, as I share an office with an old hunter and, over time, I have become an old fisherman.

Each morning, we sip our coffee and discuss our pursuits with the healthy back-and-forth style of such old men. I listen to passionate stories of tracking and scrape marks, while he listens to me talk about fly patterns and migrating fish.

The principle difference between our conversations is that, although we are both gifted storytellers, lately mine seem to be more diverse. One day I may be remarking on the horned pout I caught with my kids, and the next could be filled with observations on backwoods brook trout. I’ve also recognized a temporal difference, as there is really no slow season for the New Hampshire angler. All four seasons are filled with opportunity and unique approach.

One November morning, we sat as a gentle snow fell outside our office window. Bird hunting had been good and opening day for rifle season was right around the corner. If the snow kept up, it could be a good one. During a break in the conversation, I mentioned that I was headed to the Lakes Region to do some crappie fishing before the lakes froze. My co-worker was confused. The suggestion of taking a boat out in weather such as this was hard to understand. Black crappie do not have much of a local history, and my pursuit of them required a lengthy explanation.

Having grown up in the Ozarks of Missouri and Arkansas, I became familiar with black crappie at an early age. There was not a better target for a young boy learning to fish. I could find them within walking or biking distance of home, and gear could be limited to whatever I could carry or strap down. I could always find bait, which usually consisted of grasshoppers, crickets, worms, or small portions of each. What started with a cane pole and bobber progressed to a fly rod. As an adult, I have expanded even more, using fish finders in late fall and ultra-light jigging rods in the winter. Now that these schooling game fish can be found in New Hampshire waters, they make a worthy target for the ambitious angler, much like my office mate’s quest for the perfect turkey or deer.
Black crappie often move in schools, providing the exciting opportunity to catch several in succession.

Use great care when releasing crappie. They have delicate mouth parts that are prone to tearing. Smaller hooks are better suited to this fish.

Underwater structures, such as tree branches, logs and rocky outcrops, are favorite hiding places for the black crappie.
Identified scientifically as *Pomoxis nigromaculatus*, this non-native fish has been gaining popularity among New Hampshire anglers for the last decade. There are now over 100 waterbodies where they can be caught in the Granite State. The first official documentation came in 1938, and distribution slowly increased by means of both legal and illegal introductions. As a testament to their popularity, crappie have been moved around so much that their historic range is hard to determine. Most lakes, ponds and slow sections of rivers are suitable habitat, and the prolific reproduction of these fish can quickly lead to established populations.

With the possible exception of rock bass, not many fish can be confused with the black crappie, which can usually be identified with a quick glance. This flat, deep-bodied fish has an extended mouth and big eyes. The marking on each side is most unique and may be responsible for the nickname calico bass. Prominent, dark black spots cover an otherwise yellow/olive body with a pattern that extends to the large dorsal and anal fins.

The life cycle of the crappie begins in the spring, when water temperatures reach the high 50's and spawning commences. During this time, they look for water less than eight feet in depth, with little to no current. Typical of other members of the sunfish family, the males prepare the nest and remain to guard the eggs until young start to disperse and feed. Young grow quickly and, with the right water temperatures, may reach three inches by the time ice covers their world and they begin to nibble on the jigs that I drop to them. Considering their small size, the females lay a lot of eggs - anywhere from twenty to sixty thousand.

When the spawning period concludes, black crappie move to deeper water and take advantage of increased feeding opportunities. They are often found in schools, amid ample cover such as fallen trees, brush or boulders. They travel in suspended groups, and the accomplished crappie angler knows when, where, and how to find them (learn more at www.fishnh.com/fishing/profiles/black-crappie.html). Once the bite is on, it is not uncommon to catch several fish in succession. This type of exciting fishing action helps explain the growing popularity of these fish in New England.

Most fishing reports cover lures or baits in great detail. Many books - heck, volumes of books - have been written on trout flies, and I sometimes spend an entire day changing them trying to figure out what the fish want to eat. It can be either rewarding or maddening. Crappie make it a little easier on the angler - when you find them, crappie will eat almost anything. Using sonar (fish finders) is an excellent way to locate these fish and pinpoint their depth. Without this aid, one must adjust the depth of the presentation; the best way to do that is with a slip bobber.
A slip bobber allows fishing line to move freely through it, stopping at a pre-determined depth. Imagine a wooden float with a small straw-like tube in the middle of it. A system must be employed to stop the bobber at some point; I use a stop-knot made of ice fishing line. Once tied on the line above the bobber, it prevents my bait from going deeper than I’d like. The advantage of this system is that it can be adjusted easily and quickly. As mentioned, the terminal tackle is less important once you find the fish and might be a jig, live bait, or something else completely.

Because of the sliding motion of this rig, the bobber and bait are close to one another during your cast, making it easier. Once the bobber hits the water, everything stretches out until the desired depth has been reached.

**ULTRALIGHT GEAR**

As one might expect, ultra-light gear is essential for effectively fishing and detecting strikes. A strike may be delicate and the fight is admirable, so a six-foot rod and four-pound test make a perfect outfit. That’s because crappie are not exceptionally large fish. The New Hampshire state record weighed in at 2 lbs., 15.84 oz. and was 17 inches long; it was caught in Great East Lake in 2016.

I catch almost all of my crappie on jigs. Anywhere from 1/32 to 1/8 ounce are the most popular sizes. When buying jigs, anything an ounce and under must be made of non-lead material to be in compliance with the laws now in place to protect New Hampshire’s loons and other fish-eating birds.

There are times when black crappie are spread out and the successful angler has to cover more water. At these times, I stop my vertical approach and cast ultralight spinning lures such as Kastmaster or Phoebe. Remember to downsize, as the mouths of these fish are delicate and tear easily. A small hook is all that is necessary to catch them. The light lures can be fished slowly and cover a lot of water.

A fisherman can take the sport as seriously as he or she would like. A $20 investment may be all that is necessary to catch crappie during any season. As interest grows, a greater diversity of tactics and gear can be employed.

Some fishing generalities can be successfully applied to crappie and should not be overlooked. Summer months and warmer water will initiate an increased metabolism in any fish. At these times, predators are more aggressive and will move to chase a food source. Live bait suspended over some structure may entice a fish to strike. Calm, clear days may be more difficult, as fish are warier and spook easily. In contrast, wind creates choppy water surfaces, which create perceived cover for fish, and they may be more easily approached.

Lastly, it’s worth mentioning that these fish are very good eating. I rarely eat any of the fish I catch, as I release most of them, but crappie are a significant exception. They are easy to catch, easy to filet, and the tender filets are a real treat in the deep fryer.

Crappie have always been there for me. They provide a lot of fun, and I chase them down whenever I get a chance. Give it a try!

Andrew Schafermeyer is a Fisheries Biologist in Fish and Game’s Region 1 Office in Lancaster. His writing appears often in the Journal and the New Hampshire Fishing Report.

Crappie can be enticed with almost any bait or lure. Jigs seem to be the most successful, but don’t overlook small spinnerbaits, as well as live baits.
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