



Learn To Interpret Spring Spawning Phases

What's considered by most members of the crappie-fishing fraternity to be the peak of the season is at hand for much of the country — spawning time, when more anglers crappie fish than during any other season.

The phases of the spring ritual are affected by such factors as lake levels and water temperature. In the Northern states, the peak of the "crappie run" occurs a little later than in the Southern states. For example, the peak of the spawn in Tennessee, Alabama or Mississippi usually occurs in early to mid-April, while it may be as long as two weeks to a month later in upper Indiana, New York or Ohio.

As a professional guide, writer and seminar speaker, I've been asked about a million and one times: "When is the best time to hit the peak of the spawn?" It's the most difficult question to answer because of the variables involved.

Spring may bring a cure for cabin fever, but attached to the blooming of the dogwoods and the yellow buttercups is unstable weather that has the ability to deliver a devastating blow to the peak phases of crappie spawning.

Crappie begin the early phases of the spawn by making a transition from deep to shallow water, but it's done in kind of a stair-step manner. As the days get longer and there are more hours of sunlight, the fish's biological clock sends it a message and changes its physiology.

The male crappie incurs hormonal changes, most noticeable by the darkening appearance. Once the spawn is over, he will begin fading back to his true light color.

Spawning generally begins when water temperatures reach 62 degrees, with the most active phases within the 66- to 68-degree range. Stability is important in both the water temperature and the levels of the lake.

Anglers love spring crappie fishing because the fish and the fisherman come close together when searching the shallow waters of lakes. The fish migrate shallow, seeking habitat in which to lay their eggs. They look for roots, logs, stumps, rocks or weedbeds.

The more stained the water color, the more likely crappie are to move shallow. It's their attempt to find that comfort zone where the sunlight can penetrate the water and aid in the hatching of the eggs into tiny fish, referred to as fry. That's why crappie spawn deeper in clear reservoirs than in a murky lake, where stained or muddy water means the likely spots will be visible stickup-type structure. Most crappie anglers prefer shallow, visible structure. After all, it's easier to fish something you can see.

As you test the waters of your favorite crappie lakes this spring, remember that crappie begin staging in the mouths of big bays or creeks during the prespawn period. Study topographic maps and look for the irregular humps or shelves where the crappie can school as they leave the depths in preparation for the movement to spawning grounds.

The crappie follow creek channels and sloughs to the shoreline or shallow habitat to spawn, but any secondary hump or shelf between the deep and shallow water merits your attention. Often the fish stage outside the actual



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spawning area, waiting for the water temperature to warm, or they might be under the influence of a cold front or falling lake level.

While you can't change the weather or water levels, you can capitalize on the habits of the crappie as they go through the various phases of spawning. Learn to interpret your sonar units and topo maps as you follow the fish from the extremes of deep to shallow.

Crappie don't all spawn at the same time. Nor do they leave deep river ledges and head to shoreline cover overnight. Their stair-step migration makes several stops along the way to peak spawning time, so take advantage of it and you'll be rewarded. 🎣

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