

Bank Fishing At Its Best

Just because an angler doesn't own a boat doesn't mean he can't enjoy outstanding crappie fishing. Here's a practical look at the shoreline approach to catching slabs.

Story and Photos By Jeff Samsel

From the time you park your truck, it takes less than five minutes for you to actually put a line in the water. You grab your stuff (two rods, a shoulder bag filled with gear and a bait bucket), walk 50 feet to a nice spot beside a laydown, string a minnow on a bobber-rigged outfit and make your first cast. If the crappie are where you expect them to be, the cork will dart under before boating anglers who reached the access area at the same time even have their boats backed into the water.

Shoreline fishing allows anglers to spend less time fiddling and more time fishing. It's the ideal approach for after-work outings and for those times when you know the fish will be close to a certain shoreline-accessible stretch of bank. You can walk straight to the fish and put your offerings right where you want them without the variable of holding the boat in position or the risk of spooking shallow fish. Of course, for those of us who don't own boats, bank-fishing is often the only option.

One great thing about crappie is that their holding areas usually are within casting distance of the banks, and fall is one of the best times of the year for doing well with the shoreline approach. The fish move shallow this time of year, putting them within easy casting distance for shoreline anglers in many cases. Plus, popular bank-fishing areas tend to be far less crowded during fall than in spring.

Another unique aspect of this time of year is that many flood-control reservoirs get drawn down during fall to make room for the waters that will come with late winter and early spring storms. Where lakeshores are heavily wooded, severely limiting access even to public lands at most times, anglers

can walk the edge of a dry lake bed if the ground is fairly solid and enjoy far better access to that area. Since the lake bed often is considered public land, an angler sometimes can begin at a park or other public-access area and walk as far as he wants within a lake's basin.

The Best Banks

Bank access is quite abundant around many lakes and reservoirs. State and county parks typically offer large areas of shoreline that are open to fishing. Some are roadside and cleared for anglers, while others are back in the woods and require extra effort. Additional types of areas that commonly offer good shoreline access include boating-access areas, which are often run by state wildlife agencies or lake-owning companies or agencies, and rights-of-way for causeways and bridges.

Bridges generally rank among the best areas for shoreline crappie fishing for a number of reasons,



not the least of which being that they tend to attract crappie. Around bridges, anglers normally can fish riprap, pilings, flats, tops and bottoms of channel ledges, current breaks and more, all by walking short distances.

Shoreline anglers too commonly select fishing areas based purely on convenience, either due to locations of access areas relative to their homes or major highways or nearness of spots along the bank to parking areas. While you certainly ought to include the convenience factor in your decision process, it should not be the main

deciding point. Instead, it's important to study a lake map — preferably a topographical map — and consider where the fish ought to be.

A good lake map shows which shoreline-access areas border the main lake and which border creeks, which are located on the bank that's closest to the creek or river channel, which offer bridge access, how large individual areas are and much more.

It can be helpful to look at a lake map in conjunction with a few recent fishing reports, whether from a newspaper, the Internet or another source. Even bass anglers' reports can be beneficial, especially in lakes that have a threadfin shad forage base. Shad move up creek arms in reservoirs during fall, and crappie and bass alike follow the baitfish. Therefore, the areas in creeks where the bass fishermen are enjoying good success provide a decent gauge of where crappie numbers are likely to be high.

A map also gives a big-picture view to help you plan a

Try Long Rods And Jigs For Riprap Banks

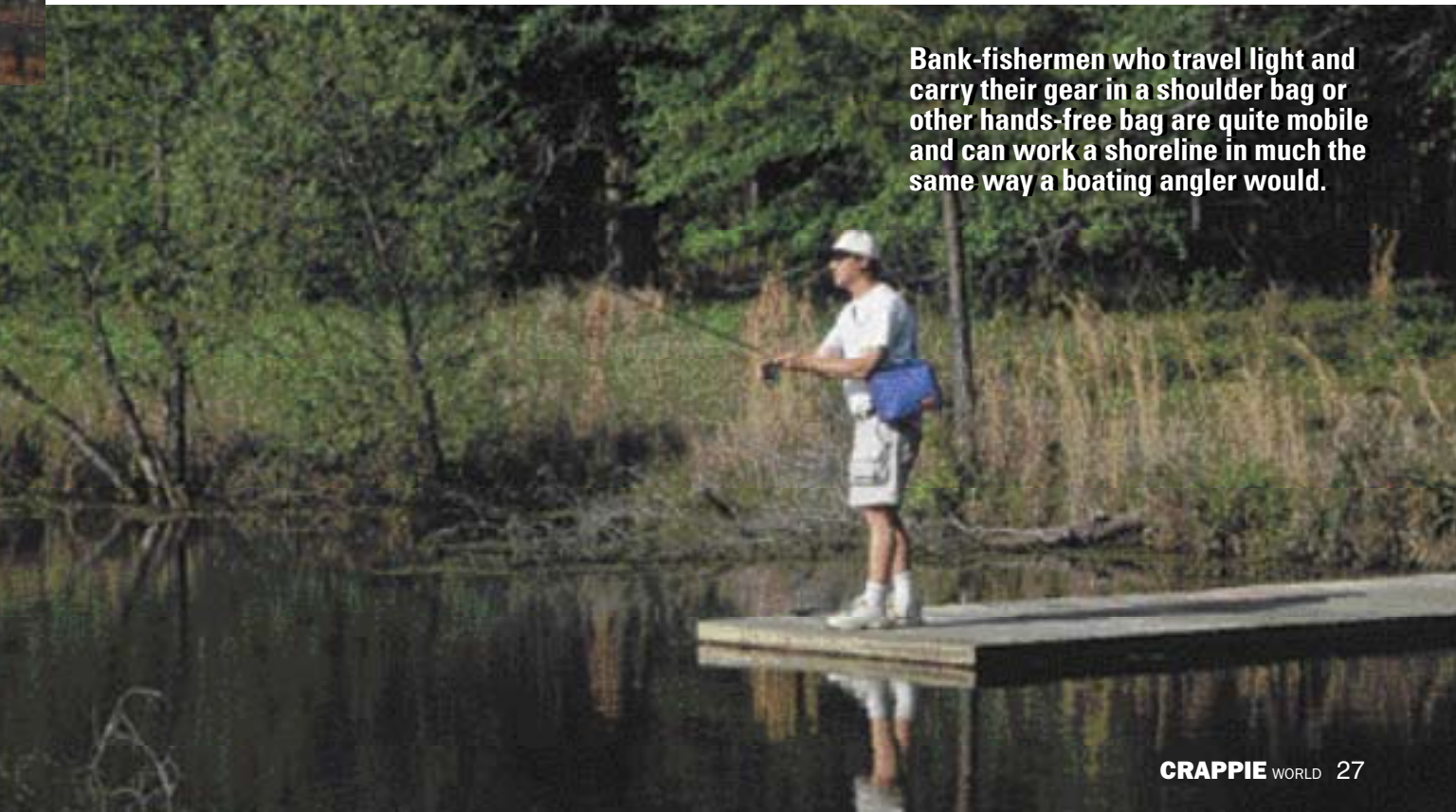
For ultimate simplicity, mobility and efficiency, an outstanding shoreline tactic is to fish a jig on a short line with a long crappie rod. Using a 9- or 10-foot crappie pole, an angler can walk along a bank and place a jig right in the cover. The depth is controlled by the amount of line out, and the bait can be kept right beside dock pilings, boulders, stumps, laydown branches or other specific pieces of cover.

This technique is outstanding for fishing riprap banks because you can simply walk up and down the bank, either dragging the bait steadily or stopping and jiggling it, and can keep the bait in the strike zone all the time. Likewise, an angler can walk down any bank that borders shallow cover-studded water, placing the offering into every likely fish-holding area. All the tackle needed (jigheads and a variety of jig bodies) fits easily in a shoulder bag or even in a couple of large shirt pockets. — *Jeff Samsel*

series of possible stops that would provide you access to a variety of locations. A bank-fisherman who plans well and travels light can begin on a main-lake bank-fishing area, move to the mouth of the creek, fish a deeper bank in the same general area and then move farther up the creek in order to home in on the fish.

Finally, a good topographic map enables you to look more closely at individual areas. At a glance, a half mile of shoreline might look like it varies little, but a map may show a key area where the channel cuts close to that bank or may reveal that the general slope becomes more gradual along the entire bank, making it worthwhile to hit several spots. Studying the map might also show that most of the bank access at a park is on a major creek, but that a bank at the other end of the same park actually borders a pocket off the creek that clearly warrants separate attention.

Of course, on site, you can see even more, and it's worthwhile to survey an area before getting settled. Little things



Bank-fishermen who travel light and carry their gear in a shoulder bag or other hands-free bag are quite mobile and can work a shoreline in much the same way a boating angler would.



Fall offers a great time to fish from the bank because the crappie tend to move shallow and the banks are usually less crowded.

that don't show up on maps and aren't obvious at a glance — subtle breaks in shoreline slopes, slight points or cuts, mud lines from wind or wave action, and creek drains or culverts — can set certain spots apart from surrounding banks.

Shoreline Techniques

Paramount to a bank-fisherman's arsenal of tactics is that they can be accomplished with a modest amount of gear. The more mobile an angler is, the easier he or she can cover a significant section of a bank when necessary to find the best concentration of crappie and even move from one access area to another.

The most basic of all approaches (and among the most effective) is to fish minnows on simple float rigs. Suspended under floats, minnows easily can be cast around cover or out from banks. It's also practical for a shoreline fisherman to put out and watch several lines, where regulations allow doing so. Depths can be changed easily and even staggered to find the fish.

A few variations of basic bobber-fishing can increase an angler's odds of success at times. Where crappie are widespread on flats or spread along horizontal cover, you can put offerings in front of more fish by keeping one rod in hand, casting your offering out and reeling it back. The retrieve generally consists of nothing more than an occasional turn of the handle for the purpose of covering a broader area.

A second variation that can be very effective at times is to rig jigs instead of minnows on float rigs. If there's a bit of chop on the water or possibly a bit of current, you may not have to add any action to a jig/float rig. In calm conditions with no current, it may be necessary to work the rig either with a stop-and-go reeling retrieve or with alternating jiggles and pauses.

A third variation is to use a slip-bobber instead of a conventional bobber. With a slip-bobber, you can suspend a minnow 12 feet deep to fish a treetop along a steep bank or fish the channel side of a break beneath a bridge but still

be able to cast the offering. With a permanently pegged cork, it's difficult to cast a rig that is set any deeper than the length of the rod, especially from the bank, where you are apt to have obstructions of every sort behind you.

An alternative tactic, which can be very effective for finding fish or working baits over or beside cover, is to cast a jig or minnow on a split-shot rig, letting the bait fall through the water column and then reeling it back slowly and steadily. By counting as the bait falls and varying the counts, you can easily work a variety of depths until you home in on the strike zone.

Bank-Fishing Gear

Bank-fishermen generally use the same rods, reels, jigs, hooks, floats and weights as do boating anglers, but they are limited to smaller selections of each. Fanny packs, shoulder bags or day packs loaded with small, stowable tackle boxes allow anglers to keep gear at hand while keeping their hands free. Longer rods will work better than very short rods. For virtually all bank-fishing techniques, a rod that's at least 6 feet long provides better casting from the bank than a very short ultralight rod.

Double-bucket design bait buckets work best for shoreline anglers who want to use minnows, because they can be toted to the lake with water in them and then hung in the lake to keep the water fresh. Plano's 5-liter bait bucket actually comes in a big, sturdy outside bucket that can be flipped and used as a fishing seat.

Some anglers prefer to stay fully mobile and walk the banks when they fish. Others like to settle in spots, moving only occasionally, and bring a stool or chair. Today's array of collapsible chairs provide plenty of options, including lightweight chairs that fold down small and even have carrying straps.

One fabulous innovation for modern bank-fishermen is Humminbird's SmartCast system, which is a completely mobile wireless graph. The Sonar Sensor, which looks like a big green bobber, is tied to a fishing line and can be cast to a spot to look at the bottom beneath that spot.

Crappie fishermen can use these systems to watch for breaks where channels run close to the bank, examine uncertain depths and even look for brush or fish. SmartCast systems come with a wrist-mount screen that looks like a watch, a rod-mount screen that goes on the rod used to cast out the sensor or a mobile station, which is a separate unit that has a larger screen than the other two. 📶



The portable Humminbird SmartCast system is a remote depthfinder that provides an excellent tool for shore-bound anglers.

MANUFACTURERS MENTIONED

Humminbird

1-800-633-1468; www.humminbird.com

Plano

1-800-226-9868; www.planomolding.com