



CRANKBAIT TROLLING

Suspended Slabs' Deadly Enemy

More than 15 years ago, while bass fishing at Lake Shepherd Springs near Fort Smith, Ark., Mitch Looper stumbled onto a deadly trolling method for big crappie. Looper is known locally for his ability to catch trophy bass, but he readily switches from bass to crappie when he has a chance to load his cooler with slabs.

That's what happened that day at

Shepherd Springs. Looper started by fishing creek channel ledges for bass. Though he had been catching 4- to 7-pound largemouth from the creek channel drops, the bass refused to bite. Then he noticed large schools of shad on his LCG. The shad were suspended 8 to 15 feet deep over the middle of the creek channel, which was 25 to 40 feet deep. His LCG also marked larger fish around the shad.

"I figured those bigger marks were

the bass I was looking for," Looper says. "So I started trolling different crankbaits through the shad with my electric motor hoping to catch bass."

Looper got his first bite soon after he tied on a No. 7 Shad Rap. A 1½-pound crappie pounced on the lure the first time he trolled it through a ball of shad. Looper happily put the crappie in his livewell and continued trolling for bass. He believed the crappie was a fluke. He changed



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Cotton Cordell's Grappler Shads are among Mitch Looper's favorite crankbaits when he trolls for suspended crappie.

his mind when another big crappie belted the Shad Rap.

"That's when I realized I might be onto something," Looper says. "I got out another rod and started trolling two Shad Raps. Every time I'd troll over a ball of shad, I'd catch two big crappie."

Looper boated 20 crappie in less than two hours, and there wasn't a little one in the bunch. A serious student of fishing, Looper returned to Lake Shepherd Springs repeatedly that year to refine his crappie-trolling method. He has continued to tweak it ever since and has trolled crankbaits successfully for crappie at 25 different lakes in Arkansas and Oklahoma, where he usually fishes.

Trolling Advantage

Looper always trolls crankbaits from 1.5 to 2 mph for crappie. He estimated his speed before he got a GPS. Now the GPS tells him exactly how fast he is trolling. He starts trolling with his Minn Kota Maxxum electric motor set at 30 percent, and that usually puts him in the right speed range. However, he may have to increase or decrease the motor's power to compensate for the wind.

Trolling at 1.5 to 2 mph lets Looper cover water faster than with other crappie-fishing methods. He puts his crankbaits in front of three to four times as many crappie as he can by spider-rigging, which is typically done at 0.5 mph or less.

The other main advantage to troll-

Landing Crappie

Landing a big crappie while trolling can be touch and go. The fish is usually 100 feet behind the boat when you hook it, and you don't know where the hooks are embedded. If the hook is in the soft mouth tissue, you must be patient.

"I stop the electric motor the moment I hook a crappie," Mitch Looper says. "Then I hold my rod tip high and gently pull him to the surface. He'll usually come up about 80 feet away. Even at that distance, you can tell how he's hooked. If you can

see the whole bait sticking out in front of him, he's barely hooked on the back treble. Hold the rod up high and try to skate him across the surface on his side. But if he gets his head down, you've got to ease off a little."

Looper reminds anglers that crappie aren't called papermouths for nothing.

"When the fish gets near the boat, I net it," he says. "You lose too many trying to swing them in with a crankbait." — Mark Hicks



Looper has found that a trolled crankbait often catches bigger crappie than jigs and minnows.

ing crankbaits is that it catches bigger crappie. Looper compares the Shad Rap to a 9-inch or larger swimbait for bass. The swimbait is too big for average-sized bass, but a truly big bass readily attacks it.

"I've trolled crankbaits on lakes many times when other boats were spider-rigging with jigs," Looper says. "Their livewells would be full of 10- or 11-inch crappie, while I'd have a mess of 14-inch crappie."

Crappie Crankbaits

These days Looper dotes on Cordell's Grappler Shad. It has the shape and action of a balsa Shad Rap, but he claims that this plastic bait is more durable. The Grappler Shad comes in two sizes — the ¼-ounce CD14 and the ⅞-ounce CD15.

Looper usually finds the crappie suspended 8 to 15 feet deep over water that is 20 feet deep or deeper. He trolls the Grappler Shads 100 feet behind his boat on 6- to 12-pound test Silver Thread monofilament. The different line sizes determine how deep

these lures run.

"It is very important that your bait run about 1 foot above the depth of the crappie that you're trying to catch," Looper says. "You don't want it running right down at the same level as the crappie, and you surely don't want it running below them."

Looper's favorite colors include black back chrome, blue back chrome, chartreuse back chrome and white perch. He claims the chartreuse back chrome mimics a brook silverside minnow that is common to the lakes he fishes in Arkansas and Oklahoma. It is known locally as a bar minnow.

"The brook silverside minnow inhabits clear, gravel-bottom streams in Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas," Looper says. "All the lakes impounded on those types of creeks have a good population of these minnows. These baitfish look like they have a chartreuse insert in them. Crappie really key on them."

The Grappler Shads work with enough action to make the tip of Looper's 6½-foot medium-light-action All Star spinning rod dance. But he always holds the rod in his hand so he can give the crankbait added action.

"About every 10 seconds, I let the crankbait drop back a few feet," Looper says. "I keep the line tight, but I allow the bait to stop. Then I pull it forward slowly, hold it for 10 seconds and let it drop back. Almost every time, they hit the bait just as it starts moving forward again."

When he trolls with one rod in each hand, Looper has the rods on opposite sides of the boat. Then he runs his boat in an S-curve to change the speed of his baits. The crankbait on the inside bend of the curve slows down or stops, while the crankbait on the outside of the curve speeds up. This pause-and-burst action often triggers strikes from crappie.

Trolling Conditions

Trolling crankbaits produces for Looper anytime the crappie are not in the shallows spawning. The trolling bite begins in June and

continues to the following April in Looper's home state of Arkansas. However, the lake must be clear with at least 2 feet of visibility.


The shad, and the crappie that feed on them, suspend over creek channels and flats on the main lake and in the large creek arms of big reservoirs. The fish usually relate to the edge or the middle of the creek channel. If they are not in these areas, they are often up on a flat that leads to the creek channel.

When he is fishing a familiar lake, Looper moves about with his electric motor and looks for balls of shad. If he's at a lake that's new to him, he cranks up the outboard and scouts for shad with the boat running at the slowest possible speed.

"The ideal situation is to find three or more different schools of shad within about ¼ mile of each other," Looper says. "Then you make a milk run by trolling from one school to the next."

Wherever he finds shad, Looper always trolls through the fish while going with the wind. He can't explain why, but he doesn't get bites when he trolls against the wind.

Looper once took a writer out and demonstrated this phenomenon to him. They trolled into the wind for ¾ mile while marking schools of shad and larger fish, and never caught a crappie. Then they turned around and trolled over the same fish with the wind.

"We didn't go 75 yards with the wind before we started catching them," Looper recalls. "Then, every time we trolled over a ball of baitfish, it was 'Wham! Wham! Wham!'" 

Manufacturers Mentioned

All Star Rods

1-800-347-3759
www.allstarrods.com

Cotton Cordell/Silver Thread

(479) 782-8971
www.lurenet.com

Minn Kota

1-800-227-6433
www.minnkotamotors.com

Rapala

(952) 933-7060
www.rapala.com