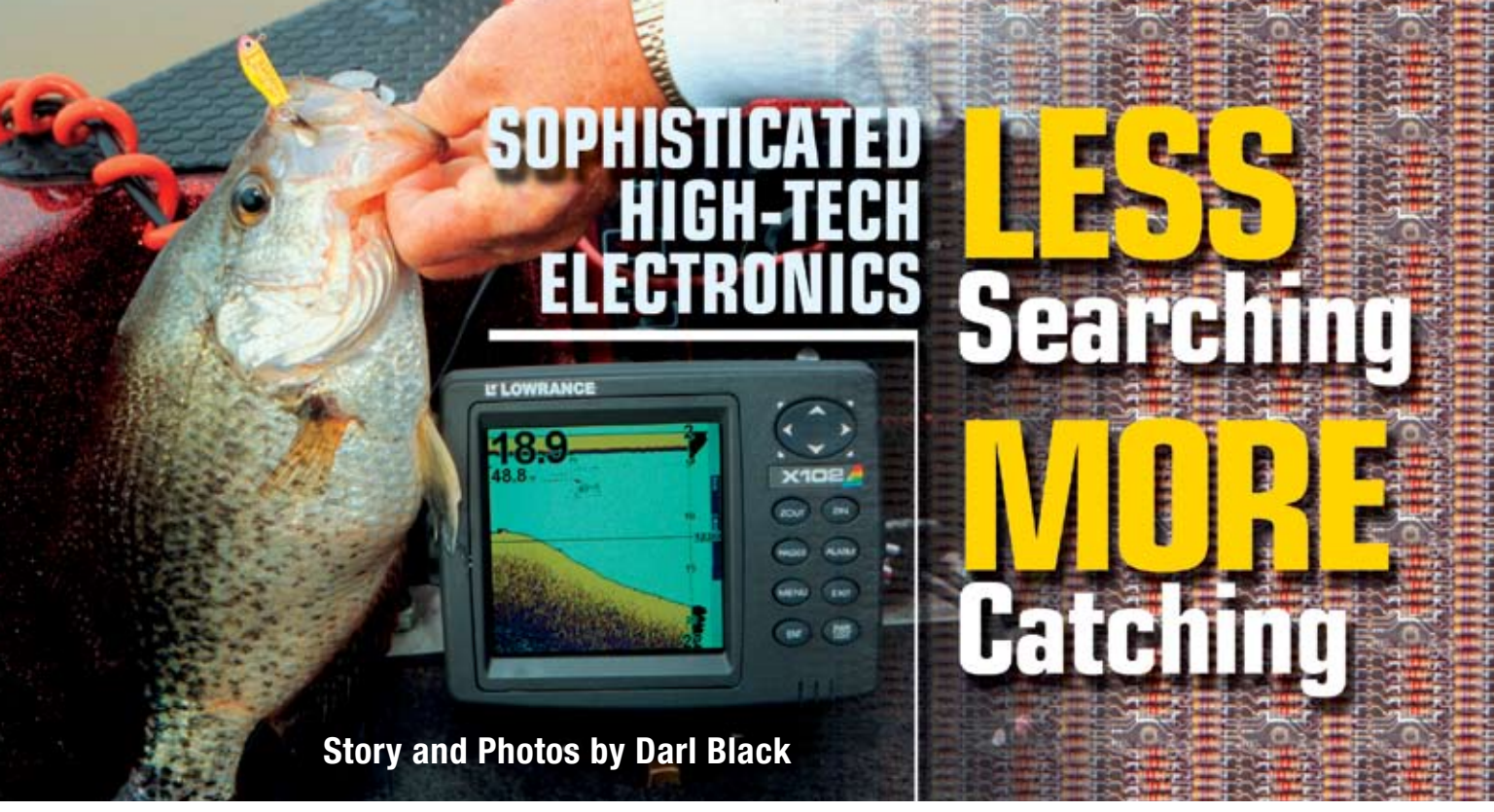



# SOPHISTICATED HIGH-TECH ELECTRONICS

# LESS Searching MORE Catching

Story and Photos by Darl Black

"Those are suspended baitfish pods at 12 feet — no argument there," was my response to my host's question regarding what I saw on the screen.

"Look closer for arched lines within the fringe of the pod, not at those marks near the bottom, but those within the baitfish school," instructed Marc Danque, sonar expert and owner of The Crappie Hole Tackle Shop in South Carolina. "I suspect those are big crappie."

Tossing a 1/16-ounce tube-tail jig over the side, Danque counted it down to the depth of the bait indicated on the Lowrance X102C screen, engaged the reel and gently shook the rod tip to make the bait dance. Then he stopped and held the jig in place. The rod tip bounced once. He set the hook and reeled.

"I told you," he said, lifting a slab over the gunwale. "How is that for spotting crappie feeding right among the baitfish? Most anglers would have passed right over that bait school because they could not see any fish marks immediately below the shad. This new color unit is truly amazing. I can tell you right now that it's going to help me catch more fish than my old monochrome unit."

## Electronic Evolution

Nearly five decades ago, my very first depthfinder was a canoe paddle. I used it to test the depths of ponds and backwaters when paddling around for bass and crappie. When I went with my dad in his wooden Lyman boat to the big reservoir, we used a chalk cord with a window-sash weight to probe for drop-offs.

I was satisfied with a paddle and weighted chalk cord until I heard about the "little green box." However, as a high-school student, I could not afford one. Then, as a present to myself with money from graduation, I purchased my first electronic depthfinder. It was slightly used, and I paid about $25 for it at a local tackle shop. It had a suction-cup transducer, ran off a 9-volt radio battery and was referred to as a "depth-o-meter" because it featured a needle indicating depths of up to 50 feet on a semicircle dial.

It didn't take long to discover why it had been on sale. The chalk cord and sinker were more accurate. A few years later, I purchased my first full-fledged rotating red-light unit and became an ardent flasher user. In the decades since my first flasher, I've watched the evolution of electronics from simple depth locators to actual fish locators.

Like many other anglers of my generation, I had faith in the flasher. I was satisfied those thin and thick red lines were telling the truth when it came to identifying weeds, brush, stumps and ledges. But "seeing" fish either in open water or around cover? Well, that involved some creative imagination.

Paper graphs then took the guesswork out of identifying fish. However, those units were high maintenance. The early LCD promised relief from the trials and tribulations of paper graphs, but as is often the case with newly released technology, it wasn't perfected when it hit the market.

First, it was difficult to accept the building-block appearance of bottom contours. Second, when run side by side with flasher or paper graphs, those early LCD fish symbols appeared where nothing tangible was present. As a result, I resisted the move to LCD until flashers could no longer be found.

Fortunately, LCD technology improved over time. The transformation has been amazing. Revolutionary advances in recent years have created practical and affordable color units.

"The newest sonar products and GPS plotters have remarkable improvements, including higher resolution with detailed display capability that was not possible even three or

four years ago," says Mark McQuown, vice president of sales for Lowrance Electronics.

With the new daylight-viewable color screens, anglers can see different signal strengths in different colors. This goes a long way to make it easier to separate fish from baitfish and even to identify different species of game fish. As good as the black-and-white screen technology had become in recent years, it is not even close to being as visible as color screens are today.

McQuown says that Lowrance units are put through extensive testing to ensure they can stand up to heat, sunlight, moisture and vibration.

"Today's fishermen reap advantages of higher resolution and more sensitive receivers, thereby presenting better information, better endurance in harsh environments and all of this at a price that practically any angler can afford," he adds.

### Developing Confidence In Your Depthfinder

Certainly manufacturers have faith in their units. Otherwise, they would not be successful in selling the product. But do average anglers believe in what they see on the screen?

"At the crappie-fishing seminars that I conduct, one of the most frequent comments is 'I don't have confidence in my depthfinder,'" Danque says. "I think what they really are saying is they are afraid to use the unit. The first thing I tell them is to read the owner's manual. The second thing is to play around with the unit on the boat, adjusting the various controls until you are comfortable with it. If you screw it up to the point that you have lost track of the changes you've made, simply go back to the factory default program and start over. Once you have a working knowledge of the unit, you are ready for practical lessons."

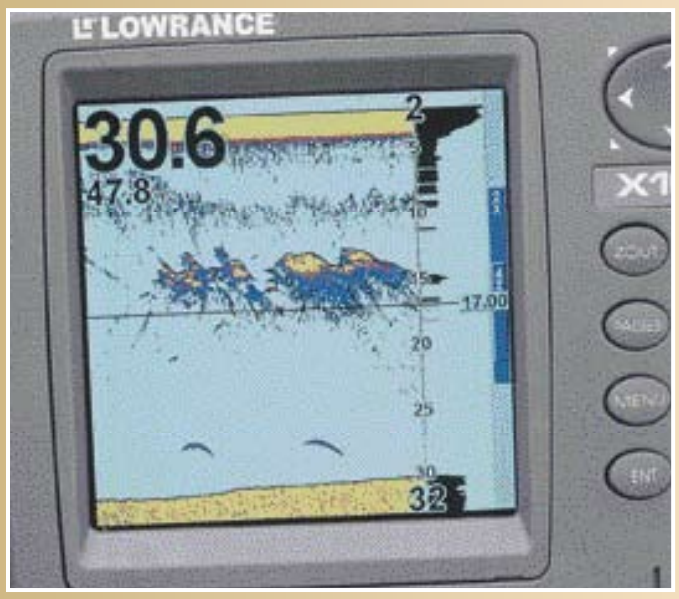
Danque's lessons start with an explanation that no two depthfinders are exactly alike in the representations of what they project on the screen.

"Fish marks don't always come out as perfect arches," he notes. "You need to tweak the machine while comparing it to a known benchmark, or something you know is true. For me, that's my Eagle March 1 or my Lowrance X-16. I know that when a fish mark appears on these machines that it is a fish. I tinker with an LCD unit's controls until I can see a fish target on the new machine that is as close as possible to the paper graph."

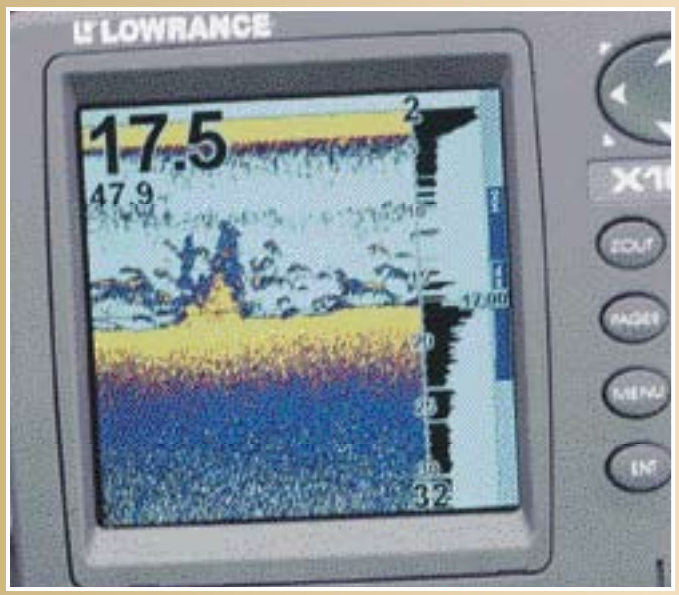
Of course, not all anglers have the opportunity to compare their new fish finder to a paper graph. Danque has another method that's every bit as foolproof.

"The best way to tell what a fish looks like on your depthfinder is to place a real fish in the cone of the transducer," he says. "Take a decent-sized crappie, put it on a drop-shot rig with a heavy sinker 18 inches below the fish and lower it straight down in the cone angle of the transducer. I drop it down 15 feet because most of the crappie I locate and catch on Southeastern waters will be in the 8- to 15-foot range. Now you can see exactly what to look for when searching for fish and know that it is a crappie."

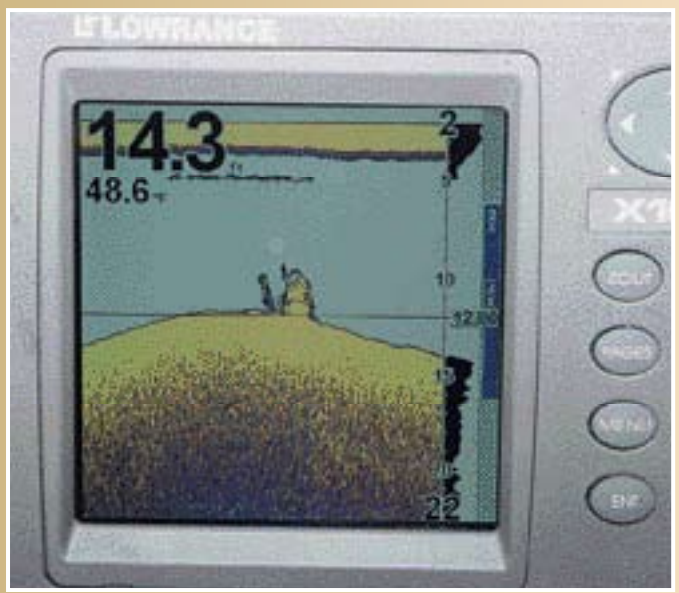

**To make better use of your electronics, take the unit off auto mode and adjust the settings manually.**




**This screen shows large pods of baitfish suspended at approximately 15 feet over 30 feet of water with feeding crappie intermixed.**




**Here, a large brush structure is indicated at 17 feet with lots of baitfish and larger fish activity.**




**Near the edge of a drop, a stump is shown on this screen at 12 feet with at least one crappie sitting above it.**

Danque suggests bumping the trolling motor on and off to advance the boat so the crappie moves in and out of the cone. This allows you to see how the representation of the fish mark will change.

Danque recommends that anglers never run their unit on auto mode. Instead, he advises them to adjust the settings manually. He sets the bottom range for 25 feet because he rarely fishes for crappie deeper than that.

"I adjust the sensitivity for the best reading at 25 feet," Danque says. "I keep the surface clarity feature on low. The surface clutter does not bother me, and the lower setting gives me more detail deeper in the water. I also keep the noise rejection feature as low as possible. The higher you set it (to eliminate electronic spikes on the screen from other units), the less fish you will see. I frequently use the zoom feature to zero in on individual brushpiles to look for fish. Never turn on the fish symbol feature with a Lowrance unit because the arch or partial arch signal is more accurate in identifying fish. Sometimes the fish symbol feature will read a limb as a fish."

Once in a while, Danque will use the depth cursor feature for a quick check of where suspended fish are in relation to his trolled baits. But the depth of visible fish can be misleading. Often, it appears that a fish mark is moving upward to intercept a lure, when in reality the fish is simply moving on the same horizontal plane as the bait. The mark appears at a different depth because it is in the outside edge of the cone — a farther distance from the transducer than the lure, but at the same depth. Some anglers might say that is an instance of a depthfinder lying. But you only need to study the manual to understand the interpretation of a three-dimensional field being displayed as a two-dimensional view.

### Seasons Of Sonar

Crappie guide and tournament pro Todd Huckabee has been at the sonar game long enough to understand both the potential and the limitations of depthfinders.

"There is no way I could survive four seasons of crappie fishing without my electronics," explains Huckabee.

"Yes, I could catch some crappie without them, but I could never have the success that I enjoy with them."

During early spring, Huckabee says it is important to know the water temperature so you can include or exclude certain areas. It is also necessary to have sonar in order to find ledges and drops that crappie use as they move toward the shallows.

"Sure, you can find a potential spawning flat simply by looking at a map, but there is no way you will locate the small ditches that crappie use to move through a flat," Huckabee says. "If a cold front passes through, you need to find the slightly offshore cover crappie will drop back to. These are jobs for your depthfinder, and you had better have confidence in what it is telling you."

During the post-spawn on Oklahoma lakes, Huckabee uses his depthfinder to search for crappie suspended several feet down along pole trees over 20 feet of water. In summer, a quality depthfinder will show the thermocline and the associated structure crappie hold onto.

"One of the most important uses of a depthfinder is to locate suspended baitfish in summer and early fall because crappie will be shadowing them," Huckabee says. "During winter, I'm interested in the warmest water I can locate, as well as creek channel drop-offs. There simply is no way I can be successful without my sonar."

Huckabee booked 20 trips this season for clients who simply wanted to learn how to read and interpret sonar. He believes the main reason anglers don't understand their units is because they don't pay enough attention to the screen. They simply use the sonar as a depthfinder rather than a crappie, baitfish, structure and cover locator.

"I learned interpretation by constantly watching my depthfinder screen or at least glancing at it every 15 or 20 seconds when I'm running," he says. "When I saw something I could not identify, I stopped to check it out more closely by fishing over the spot. The result is I can now immediately recognize brush, stumps, grass, moss, stakebeds and shad schools, as well as accurately guess the species of fish. There is so much a quality unit can tell you about crappie, preyfish and cover."

According to Huckabee, the single biggest mistake anglers make is purchasing a low-end sonar unit and expecting it to perform the same way as a high-quality unit. The near-perfect representation of what is underwater will be found in the mid-priced units and up.

### Another Electronic Boost

Huckabee also believes the majority of crappie anglers are not taking full advantage of electronics.

"Not only are the majority of crappie fishermen playing catch up in terms of sonar compared to bass anglers, but even fewer are using GPS," he says. "I incorporate the GPS plotter built into my Pinpoint TR320 for multiple purposes, just as bass fishermen have been doing. I can follow a safe path when running unfamiliar waters that have dangerous hazards. On the practical fishing side, I mark submerged brush and stumps that I find so I can return to the spot easily."

Huckabee fishes large flats on Oklahoma's Lake Eufaula that have only a few pieces of submerged wood cover. This wood is a magnet for crappie but time-consuming to locate by visual triangulation. With GPS, each one is recorded as a waypoint, allowing him to move effortlessly from one isolated piece of cover to the next.

"In clear-water lakes, crappie on moderate-depth brushpiles will spook when a motor boat passes overhead," Huckabee says. "It may be 30 minutes before they feed again. But once I've located one of these spots and mark it on my GPS, I can shut down the big motor before running in too close. Then it's a matter of casting a slip-cork over the deep cover and hauling in fish."

Huckabee and Danque are quick to point out that anglers face an increasingly electronic fishing world. You can choose to react as an ostrich by sticking your head in the sand and hoping it will go away, or you can follow the path of technology to improved fishing success. Just be sure that you learn how to use technology properly so you control it rather than fear it.

## SmartCast Wireless Technology

"There is nothing like this in the world of sonar — a truly portable and practical sonar for bank-fishermen," says Jim Duckworth, one of Tennessee's most recognized crappie guides and fishing educators. "Humminbird's SmartCast Wireless fish finders are the best things ever for shore anglers. Now you can locate the crappie-holding brushpiles and drop-offs that are within casting distance of the bank, even though you don't have a boat."

The floating transducer is attached to a line on an extra rod, cast out and slowly retrieved. A rod-mount or wrist-mount unit receives the information and shows it on a small LCD screen. Duckworth prefers the one that is mounted on the rod, rather than the wrist. It allows him to constantly monitor any change without glancing at his wrist. Besides bank-fishing, the unit is perfect for wading, float-tube fishing or for use in a rented boat.

"I even carry a wireless unit in my boat," Duckworth says. "With an optional program installed in my Matrix 67 bow-mounted depthfinder, I can receive information and display it side by side with the information off my bow transducer. For example, I'll trail the float behind the boat when spider-rigging to see what I might have missed."

However, Duckworth's most effective use of the floating transducer is when he's vertical spoon-fishing over baitfish schools in cold water. Should preyfish shift location a little bit, he can fan-cast the float around the boat to determine which direction to move the boat to get back on fish. — *Darl Black*

### Manufacturers Mentioned

**Eagle**
1-800-324-1354
www.eaglegps.com

**Humminbird**
1-800-633-1468
www.humminbird.com

**Lowrance**
1-800-324-1356
www.lowrance.com

**Pinpoint**
(920) 929-5040
www.motorguide.com