

A man in a white cap and green shirt is fishing from a boat on a blue lake. In the foreground, a large, dead, bleached tree trunk stands in the water. The background shows a line of trees under a clear sky.

# 4 SHALLOW-WATER HOTSPOTS

## Yield Jumbo Size Crappie

Story and Photos By John Neparadny Jr.

**T**he searing summer sun and dead-calm air cause sweat to pour out of your body as you search for your favorite panfish. On a day like this, you would expect slab-sized crappie and big sunfish to seek the cooler zone of deep water. However, these fish can be found foraging in the simmering shallows on numerous bodies of water throughout the United States.

So why would jumbo crappie and other panfish prefer the heat of the shallows more than the cooler water of the deep? Truman Lake guide Richard Bowling knows why big crappie can be taken from the shallows of his home waters on a sizzling summer afternoon in Missouri.

“The crappie follow the baitfish up there, and our water is so dirty that they just like getting up there,” says Bowling. “Everything they need is up there — cover, the dark water and food. As for the hot water, I don’t think that bothers them at all.”

If the right water color, cover and forage are available in the shallows of your favorite panfish lake, you can catch slab-sized panfish in steaming

thin water. Here’s a look at four shallow hotspots for catching jumbo panfish in the summertime heat.

### Main-Lake Flats

In July 2002, Bowling and his partner won a Crappiemasters tournament by concentrating on fish 3 to 4 feet deep even though the water temperature at Truman Lake topped the 90-degree mark. They targeted main-lake flats with small ditches or draws running through the area.

“If it is 101 degrees out with no wind, you can put a limit of fish in the boat so quick it is unbelievable,” says Bowling of his shallow-water pattern.

Most of the time he will catch crappie 7 to 12 feet deep along the flats, but he notices the biggest fish tend to move shallower.

“The bigger crappie seem to prefer a hardwood stump,” discloses Bowling. “You might catch better numbers of fish from a hedge tree or a cedar, but the 15-inch fish will be on a hardwood stump.”

Employing a flipping technique similar to bass fishing, Bowling works his tar-

gets quickly but thoroughly with multiple presentations. If he catches a slab-sized fish, he usually moves to the next target because the same piece of cover rarely holds two fish.

Familiarity with the lake allows Bowling to pinpoint certain stumps and other cover when he pulls into a spot, but he recommends that newcomers should fish a whole flat.

“You might fish 100 yards and not get a bite, then get into a stretch and hit 15 stumps and catch a big fish off of each one,” he says.

Bowling’s favorite lure for flipping at Truman is a black-and-chartreuse tube attached to a 1/16-ounce jighead. He usually tips the jig with 3-inch shiners to give the lure a larger profile. After dipping the lure into the cover, Bowling twitches his medium-heavy 10-foot B’n’M pole to impart some action on the jig-and-minnow combo.

“I like a rod with some backbone to it, especially when you can’t get your boat up in the shallows right where the fish are,” says Bowling. “So I need a rod where I can horse that fish into the boat.”

The guide also uses a miniature bait-casting reel filled with 15-pound Cabela's Ripcord Si braided line.

"I like a braided line because I can feel the bite two times better than with monofilament," says Bowling.

## Bayou Chutes

The steamy swamp waters of Louisiana's Atchafalaya River Basin produce a wide variety of jumbo panfish (crappie, bluegill, shellcrackers, pumpkinseeds and goggle-eye) for Al St. Romain during the dog days of summer.

When the former Bassmaster Classic qualifier wants to take home a mess of slab panfish, he weaves his way through the swamp to shallow chutes teeming with weeds. The chutes are usually less than 10 feet deep, and St. Romain catches most of his fish in 3 to 4 feet of water. -

"Deep water in these areas is only about 8 feet deep," claims St. Romain. "So you can catch fish in the shallows

## Hot Summer Action For Bedding Bluegill

Panfish anglers can catch bull bluegills in the heat since these fish spawn monthly during summer.

Louie Mansfield finds big bluegills bedding throughout summer in the sloughs of the Mississippi River and the points and pockets of Reelfoot Lake. The water is usually off-colored, but Mansfield can pinpoint the beds by finding bubbles on the surface. Bluegills blowing on the beds trigger gases from decomposing lily pads, which create the bubbling action. -

When he finds the bubbles, Mansfield flips a 1/80-ounce Grizzly Jig (white, red-and-black or rainbow hues) tipped with Berkley Power Bait Nibbles or wax worms beyond the bubbling spot. He sets the jig below a slip-float and makes the rig easier to flip by adding a No. 5 split shot to the line. -

After the float settles, Mansfield slowly pulls the bobber-and-jig combo about 6 inches toward the bubbles and then lets it sit for a couple of seconds. If this fails to produce a bite, he pulls the rig another 6 inches and lets it sit again. — *John Naporadny Jr.*

just about year round."

Water flow is the key to finding the right chute in the maze of waterways on the Atchafalaya Basin.

"If you've got moving water, you can catch fish in these shallows because the fish seem to feed more in the moving water," says St. Romain.

The panfish expert relies on a pink-and-chartreuse triple tail plastic grub or a blue-and-white tube attached to a 1/32-ounce jighead for his shallow-water tactics. He fan-casts the lure from one side to the other in the narrow chute and lets the grub fall to the bottom. If a fish fails to hit the lure on the fall, St. Romain pops it off the bottom with a quick snap of his rod. His tackle includes a home-made light-action 5-foot rod and an Abu Garcia Everlast T500F spinning reel filled with 6-pound monofilament.

While artificial

lures work best for St. Romain, he believes crickets, nightcrawlers and other live baits could produce big fish as well for inexperienced anglers wanting to fish the chutes.

"Kids could have a ball fishing in these ditches," says St. Romain.

## Lily Pads

Missouri lure maker Louie Mansfield finds big crappie and bull bluegill in shallow lily pads at Reelfoot Lake during the middle of summer.

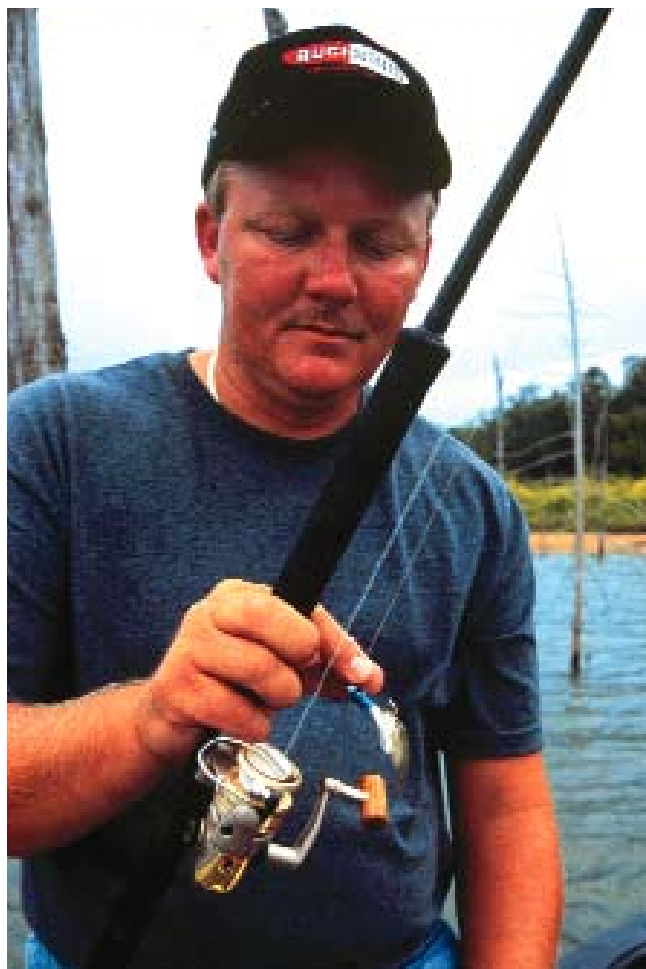
Vegetation abounds in Reelfoot Lake, so Mansfield targets certain lily pads to pinpoint the fish.

"The key pads are the ones that lie flat on the water," he advises. "If there are two or three of them clumped up where it makes a bigger shaded area, that is even better."

Mansfield prefers fishing isolated clusters of pads. If he has to fish a long stretch of pads, he looks for open spots leading to the bank.

"Those heavy pads are like a forest under there, so if you are cruising along looking for a potential bream bed or some crappie, try to find a place where it is kind of cleared out to go back into the bank," says Mansfield.

When he's fishing strictly for crappie, Mansfield selects a 1/32-ounce Grizzly Jig in black-and-chartreuse or green-and-chartreuse hues. Most of the time Mansfield pitches the jig to the pads in less than 3 feet of water and lets it fall slowly along the weeds.



A jig-and-minnow combination is ideal for flipping into shallow stumps during summer.



**Small chutes and sloughs of river systems are perfect places to find panfish in the shallows during the summertime.**

“If I find a big pad, I’ll flip the jig out by the pad,” he says. “Before I let it slow fall, I hold the lure 6 inches below the water until it comes by the pad, because sometimes the fish are right up under those pads.”

Mansfield’s tackle for catching shallow panfish in the lily pads includes a 9-foot-6-inch or 10-foot-6-inch Grizzly Rod and a Martin No. 8 Automatic fly reel spooled with 4-pound test line.

### **Creek Trash**

The back ends of feeder creeks in major reservoirs usually have shallow

laydowns, logjams and other wood debris strewn for miles. Todd Huckabee, a tournament competitor and guide on Oklahoma’s Eufaula Lake, catches slab crappie from these areas in the 2- to 3-foot range, but sometimes finds the bigger fish in 1 foot to 18 inches of water. A major summer rainstorm can wipe out his pattern, since the creek turns high and muddy. However, the fishing can be as hot as the weather if conditions are stable.

“When it’s over 100 degrees and not a stitch of wind blowing, that’s when you will really jack them right in the middle

of the day,” says Huckabee.

The creek pattern frequently produces heavyweight crappie for Huckabee and his clients throughout the hottest part of summer.

“Every fish we catch is over 12 inches long,” claims Huckabee. “I catch a lot of 1½- to 3-pound fish.”

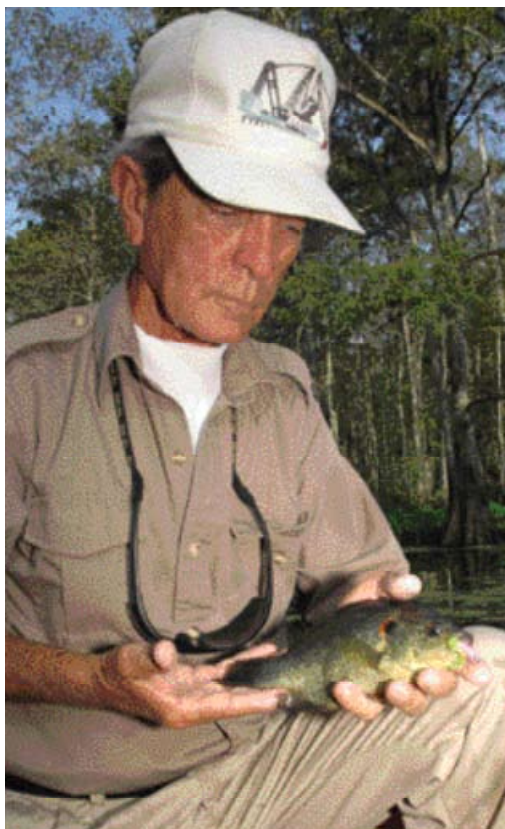
Hotspots in the creek tend to change throughout summer, as current and wind move the wood debris. --

“Normally, from week to week, you are never fishing the same thing,” says Huckabee.

While the trash provides some shelter from the scorching sun, Huckabee thinks the shade factor is irrelevant because some days he catches big crappie on the sunny side of the cover.

Lure size and presentation are important to Huckabee’s pattern. He relies on the “big fish, big bait” theory by choosing a 3/16- or 1/4-ounce jighead tipped with a black-and-pink Yum Woolly Beavertail plastic grub.

The Oklahoma angler dips his lure next to a target and sweeps his rod along the cover to make his jig swim off the bottom.



**If conditions are right, big panfish can be taken as shallow as 1 foot on steamy summer days.**

“A lot of times I will drop it down away from the wood and swim it up into the cover,” describes Huckabee.

Hauling giant crappie out of the wood trash requires some heavy equipment, so Huckabee depends on an 8- or 10-foot Zebco Slabseeker rod combined with either a Zebco Slabseeker spinning or spincast reel. Since the creeks usually have stained to murky water, Huckabee can use heavier line, so he opts for 10- to 12-pound Silver Thread AN40 copolymer line.

Some of the feeder creeks Huckabee fishes on Eufaula run for 15 miles, giving him plenty of cover to fish in a day. If the guide catches a big fish from a particular spot, he usually returns to that cover later in the day to see if another slab crappie has moved into the trash.

If the day is a real scorcher this summer, slap on lots of sunscreen, drink plenty of water and

head for the shallows of your favorite panfish lake. You’ll soon discover that you can catch slabs from shallow water warm enough for your bathtub. 🎣

*Editor’s note: Since being interviewed for this article, Al St. Romain died from surgery complications. He will be greatly missed in the fishing community.*

#### **Manufacturers Mentioned**

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**Abu Garcia/Berkley**

1-800-237-5539  
[www.purefishing.com](http://www.purefishing.com)

**B’n’M Pole Company**

1-800-647-6363  
[www.bnmpoles.com](http://www.bnmpoles.com)

**Cabela’s**

1-800-237-4444  
[www.cabelas.com](http://www.cabelas.com)

**Grizzly Jigs**

1-800-305-9866  
[www.grizzlyjig.com](http://www.grizzlyjig.com)

**Martin Fly Reels**

1-800-588-9030  
[www.martinfishing.com](http://www.martinfishing.com)

**Silver Thread/Yum**

(479) 782-8971  
[www.lurenet.com](http://www.lurenet.com)

**Zebco**

1-800-588-9030  
[www.zebcocom](http://www.zebcocom)