

With its sagging walkway and rotten support pilings, the old dock was in a sad state of disrepair. Yet to Tennessee guide

Jim Duckworth, it was a thing of beauty.

“Pitch that tube jig so it lands near the inside corner, right in the shadows,” he instructed.

I did, and as soon as it hit the water, a 2-pound crappie rushed out from beneath the dock and inhaled the lure. I made more pitches, and within minutes a second slab crappie, then a third and a fourth were flopping in the livewell.

I’d never fished boat docks for crappie prior to that outing. But with results like that, you can bet I’ll fish them in

the future.

“Most crappie anglers ignore docks,” Duckworth says. “They associate crappie only with brushpiles and stakebeds, or maybe they’ve watched those pro bass fishermen on TV fish docks and don’t connect these man-made structures with crappie. But docks can deliver some awesome stringers of slabs — if you fish them smart that is.”

Why Target Docks?

According to veteran Kentucky Lake guide Garry Mason, many docks have all the right ingredients to produce big crappie.

“They provide shade, which allows crappie to conceal themselves from their

prey,” Mason says. “Shade is especially important in a clear lake, where cover may be sparse and it’s difficult for crappie to keep a low profile.”

Docks also attract tons of minnows. A slick coating of algae develops on dock pilings, which provides food for baitfish and immature game fish. Insects, too, are abundant around docks.

“Most docks are lighted, and insects swarm around the lights at night in hot weather, setting up a food-chain scenario that includes crappie,” Mason says. “Docks also provide a tremendous ambush point for crappie. They can lurk beneath the dock hidden from view, then rush out into the open to grab a quick meal.”

However, most docks aren’t year-

Why Docks Deliver



Story and Photos
By Don Wirth

round crappie cover. Early in the year, docks on most reservoirs may not have enough water around them to hold crappie, since the lake may be drawn down to winter pool.

“I’ve found that a dock normally needs to be in at least 2 to 3 feet of water to hold crappie, and you may not get that much water around some docks until spring rains fill the lake,” notes veteran guide Tom Moody. “Once the lake fills to summer pool, docks that were virtually high and dry may have 6 to 8 feet of water surrounding them, and crappie will move in big time. They’ll stay there through summer and early fall, then gradually pull away from the shallower docks as the lake level drops.”

In addition, docks are tremendous staging areas for prespawn crappie. “The period before the spawn is a tricky time to fish these structures because you have to ignore the shallow docks and key on the deeper ones, especially those adjacent to creek channels,” Moody adds. “Crappie will migrate from the main lake toward their shallow spawning grounds in bays and tributaries via these channels and will gang up around docks in large numbers to wait for the water temperature to get right before going on the bed.”

Evaluating Docks

Not every dock has potential as good crappie habitat. There are some important factors to look for when evaluating docks. For example, the slope of the bank can make a world of difference.

“Docks situated on sloping banks are by far my favorites for crappie,” says legendary guide Harold Morgan. “They’ll hold fish most of the year, whereas docks on flat banks tend to be more seasonal in attracting fish. A dock on a 45-degree bank may be in 7 or 8 feet of water close to shore but 15 feet or more at the end, so there’s no reason for crappie to ever leave it. On the other hand, most docks on flatter banks hold crappie only in late spring through early fall.”

Subtle structure or any structural element that might enhance a particular dock should always be examined.

“A prime example is a ditch or trench,” Mason says. “These are commonly dug around shallow docks to make it easier for their owners to get their boats in and out. Often the ditch is only a foot or two deeper

than the surrounding water, but that's usually all it takes to draw crappie. Always scope out the area around shallow docks with a graph to locate these depressions."

Anglers should also consider the dock's construction. Docks can be made of wood, metal and even plastic, and they may rest either on pilings or on top of some sort of flotation device. Floating docks are prevalent on lakes that undergo major fluctuations in water level. Most anglers prefer wood docks with wood pilings. With these docks, it seems the older, the better.

"The submerged parts of an old wood dock are usually thoroughly slimed with algae, and the vertical pilings provide increased cover for suspending crappie and therefore more vantage points from which to ambush prey," Duckworth says.

Morgan favors docks resting on Styrofoam blocks instead of pilings. "Ever see a big piece of Styrofoam on the bank and notice how green it looks?" he asks. "That's from algae clinging to it, and algae attracts minnows."

However, more and more docks are being built with metal pilings or with aluminum flotation pontoons beneath them, because metal doesn't rot like wood or bust up like Styrofoam.

"Metal docks provide just as much shade as wood docks, but not as much algae coverage, so you usually won't find as many minnows around them," Mason notes.

Plastic flotation is used to support some docks. Moody has caught plenty of nice slabs around this synthetic material. "These docks don't look as fishy as those



An underhand pitching presentation is useful for delivering your lure to hard-to-reach corners of docks.

old wood docks, but algae adheres well to the plastic, which attracts plenty of minnows," he says.

Since a covered dock or boathouse provides nearly 100-percent shade, many anglers like to fish these on a hot summer day. However, open docks are a lot easier to fish because you can make lure or bait presentations without having that roof impeding your casts.

When it comes to wood cover, keep in mind that many dock owners sink brush or tree limbs, or construct stakebeds around their docks for crappie cover.

"You can usually tell the docks with

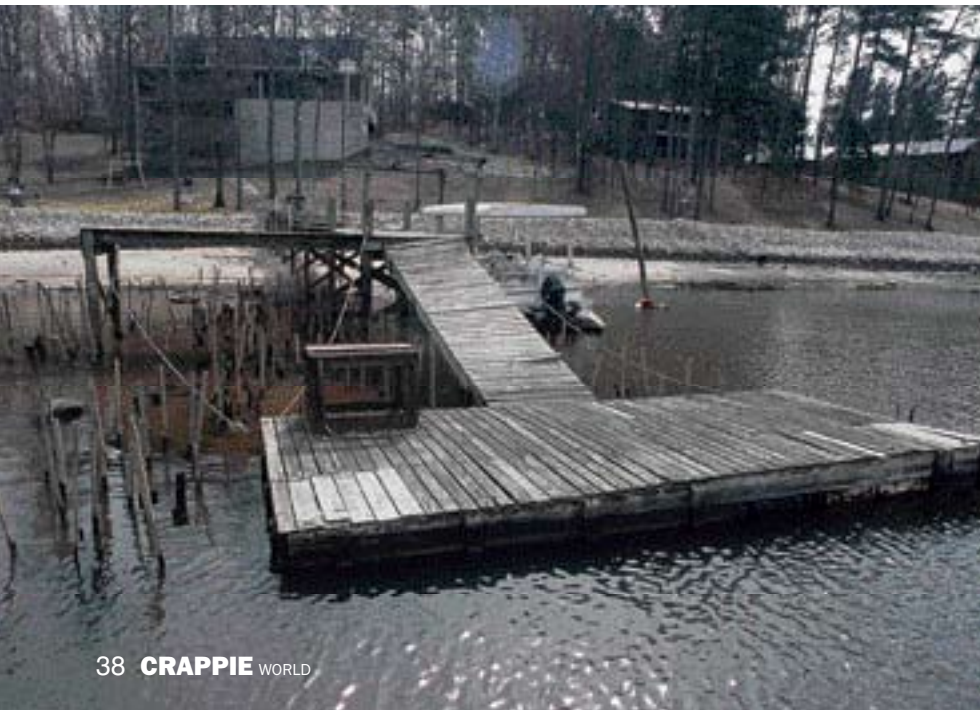
submerged cover around them simply by noting which ones have fishing poles stacked up on them or rod holders attached to them," Morgan adds. "Likewise, a dock used to tie up a fishing boat is more likely to have cover around it than a dock with a jet ski or a runabout. Use your graph to reveal the exact location of the cover."

Morgan quickly bypasses docks utilizing Christmas trees for cover because he claims that as Christmas trees decompose, they give off an odor that repels crappie.

Junk weeds like milfoil and hydrilla attract tons of crappie, but these grasses may grow so thick that they hamper boat traffic. Dock owners or the lake's homeowners association often sprays them.

"Many dock owners like the natural look of emergent grasses, such as cattails and maidencane, and these plants will attract insects that crappie feed upon," Duckworth says.

Of course, the size of a dock must also be considered. Big docks provide more of everything — shade, ambush opportunity and forage. However, a dock's size is less important than its proximity to deep water and cover. The biggest docks are usually those associated with marinas. Often the fishing is poor around these because there's



Cover can greatly enhance a dock's crappie potential. This floating dock (with the lake at winter pool) is lined on one side by stakebeds.

Tips For Fishing Boat Docks

- 1. If you own a dock**, sinking cover around it can attract crappie, but don't overdo it. Docks with a small to moderate amount of cover usually attract more crappie than those with large amounts of cover. Avoid sinking Christmas trees, which many experts believe repel crappie.
- 2. Lighted docks** are great places to fish on summer nights. The lights attract swarms of insects, which in turn sets up a food chain that can trigger a crappie feeding frenzy.
- 3. Public docks and fishing piers** can provide good crappie action for the non-boating angler. State-owned fishing docks often have fish-attracting cover around them, creating a haven for crappie within easy casting range.
- 4. Crappie aren't the only fish** that live around docks. Depending on where you're fishing, you might hook into a big shellcracker, bass, pike or muskie. So keep your drag loose.
- 5. Remember that docks** are private property. If you see people fishing or relaxing on them, respect their space and don't fish this spot. Never trespass on docks. Also, stay in your boat. — *Don Wirth*

little cover around them.

Finally, anglers should look at the proximity of a dock to other docks. "Here, the concept of isolated cover comes into play," says Moody. "Often you'll see a whole row of docks along a shoreline or in the back of a cove. The one dock that's farthest from the rest will sometimes hold the most or the biggest crappie."



Dock Presentations

Veteran crappie anglers fish docks with a variety of artificial lures and live-bait presentations. Easily the most unorthodox of these is known as "dock shooting," which is a version of the classic bow-and-arrow cast.

"I use B'n'M's new Sharpshooter rods for this application," Duckworth says. "These are extra-light spinning rods in 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ -, 5- and 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ -foot lengths designed specifically for this application. Using a small lure like a tube jig or Charlie Brewer's Slider Grub, hold the rod parallel to the water with the tip pointed directly at your target. Then flip the reel bail and pinch the line above the reel between the thumb and forefinger of your left hand. Carefully pinch the lure between the thumb and forefinger of your right hand, then pull it back toward you until the rod is completely loaded up. Finally, release both the line and the lure at the same time, and the jig will shoot where you point it."

This technique is very handy for reaching spots inside, under

When fishing docks, you must get your lure or bait in the shadows or close to pilings where crappie lurk.

and around docks that are impossible to hit with an overhand cast. For safety's sake, Duckworth recommends practicing this presentation with a lure that has the hook snipped off.

"Once you've got it down, you should be able to shoot a jig through a knothole," he says.

A less extreme, but still highly effective dock presentation is pitching. "Since docks provide such great overhead cover, you can usually get close to them without spooking crappie lurking beneath them," explains Mason. "An underhand pitch cast will let you swing your lure beneath the overhang so it drops way back in the shadows where the fish are most likely to be. Since most fish suspend beneath docks, I like to use the lightest jighead I can get away with, so the lure drops nice and slow."

According to Moody, a dock is the perfect place for a minnow-and-bobber rig. "Unlike a lure, you can let this rig sit around a dock indefinitely until a fish decides to eat the bait," he says. "This is my No. 1 presentation in cold-front conditions, when you have to really tempt crappie into biting."

Morgan fishes deeper docks with his old favorite, the Kentucky rig. A heavy sinker is on the bottom, and two short leader lines baited with minnows are stacked a foot apart above the sinker.

"This rig is ideal for thick cover around docks since it's fished vertically and won't hang up as bad as a horizontal presentation," Morgan says. "Position your boat directly over the cover, lower the sinker all the way to the bottom, then just reel it up slowly. Often, two fish will load onto the rig at once."

Swimming a grub is another great presentation when crappie are actively feeding around docks. "Shoot or pitch the lure as far under the dock as possible, then reel it steadily at a medium clip back to you," Mason advises. "Use your rod to steer the lure close to pilings and shadows where crappie are likely to be holding." 🎣

MANUFACTURERS MENTIONED

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