

Flats For Fall Crappie

Anglers often tune out a conversation when the topic of fishing flats is mentioned. It's easy to get excited about a deep-water stakebed or a giant stump in a creek channel bend, but there seems to be little interest in flats.

So why are flats important? It's because these level-bottom areas are good locations to find fish that are suspended, traveling and feeding.

Why A Flat?

Flats can be good year-round structures, depending on their features. Depth is the most critical factor. When a lake has several flats at different depths, you can use a flat pattern almost any time of the year.



Tim Huffman

The time period from September through December will likely find crappie using every depth zone in the lake. For example, a shallow flat void of fish in hot weather may become the hottest spot in the lake when fall temperatures hit. Cooler water temperatures draw the baitfish, and the crappie are quick to follow the food source.

Mid-depth flats are probably the most consistent during fall. Water and weather conditions will play a major role, but the middle depths are most likely to hold fish. Only by checking your locator and test-fishing the area will you know for sure.

When the water is hot, you'll likely find crappie suspended up above the thermocline in open water on deep flats. These are

ideal spots because the flat bottom makes trolling easier. The fish leave when the water starts to cool, but they'll return when it gets cold.

Use your topo map to find flats. These will be areas where the contour lines are far apart. Locate flats at a variety of depths and try to pick ones close to a channel.

Fishing Flats

Several techniques work well for fishing flats. Fast-trolling may be the most effective, but any of the methods described below will catch fish.

One easy technique that seems to be best when using live bait is drifting. Simply let the wind or current push your boat. Put out two to four poles (within legal limits) to give you a better opportunity for a bite. Multiple baits let you test

several depths on each pass until you learn the best strike zone. You can tight-line or use floats. Floats are usually best because they put the baits farther from the boat so fewer fish are spooked.

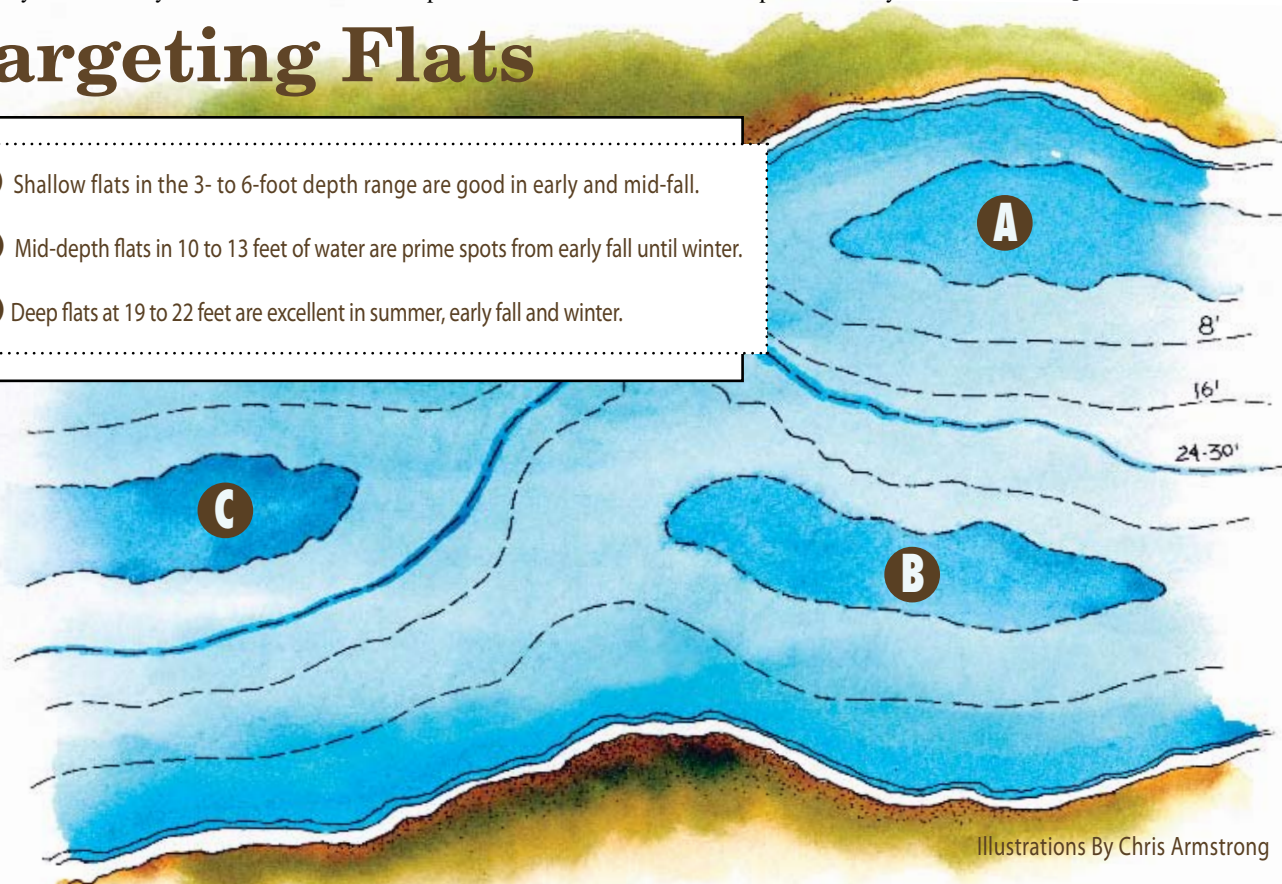
Start drifting by motoring upwind to the beginning of the flat or at a potentially good section. Put your baits out and let the wind move the boat. Once you complete a pass, you can reel in, motor back upwind and repeat another drift cycle.

Side-pulling is a modified version of the drift. For this, you use your boat to drift, but you control your path and adjust your speed. A side-mounted trolling motor is required for this tactic.

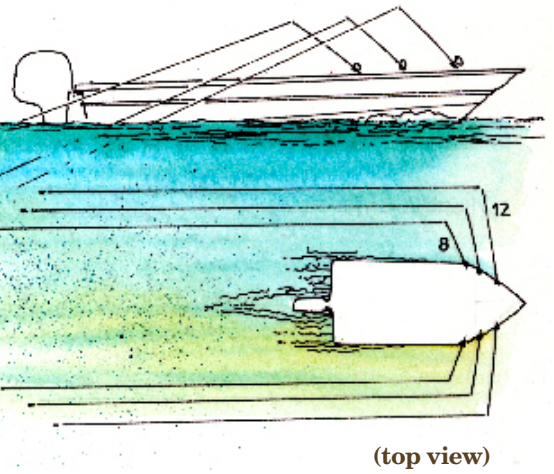
Side-pulling is good for dragging jigs on bottom but can sometimes be effective for suspended fish, too. Use

Targeting Flats

- A) Shallow flats in the 3- to 6-foot depth range are good in early and mid-fall.
- B) Mid-depth flats in 10 to 13 feet of water are prime spots from early fall until winter.
- C) Deep flats at 19 to 22 feet are excellent in summer, early fall and winter.



Fast-Trolling Tactics



(top view)

Setup

- 3 poles off each side of the boat
- 6-pound test line
- 40 feet of line from pole tips
- 1/32- and 1/16-ounce jigs
- moderate trolling speed

To increase jig depth, reduce line diameter, lengthen the length of line, increase jig weight or decrease boat speed.

minimum pole length should be 6 or 7 feet. Typical lengths of a two-man

setup include 10- and 12-footers in front with 7- and 8-foot poles in back. With only one angler in the boat, 12-, 10- and 8-foot poles are common in states where pole limits are liberal.

Flats are ideal for fast-trolling, especially when stumps or other cover is present. Cover provides holding areas for fish, while fast-trolling allows you to adjust the jig depth with boat speed to keep the baits just over the cover. For example, when you see a stump with its top at 6 feet but your jigs are at 9 feet, all you have to do is increase your trolling motor speed to make your jigs rise up over the stump.

The basic setup with poles out the side and/or back includes setting each pole's line length to a constant, such as 30 or 40 feet. Your jig weights

should vary from 1/64- to 1/16-ounce to allow you to adjust to a general depth zone based upon fish depth.

With the line length and jig weight set, you can now use your boat speed to control the depth of the jig throughout its zone. For example, with 30 feet of line out while using 1/32-ounce jigs, you may run baits at 6 feet with a trolling motor speed of 3. Slow down to a speed of 1 and your jigs may drop to 9 feet. Speed up to 5 on the trolling motor and your jigs might jump up to 4 feet.

To fast-troll a flat, get your baits into the water and start trolling. Don't randomly troll around. Use a pattern of trolling runs that will cover most of the flat. This may consist of three runs that only take 10 minutes, or it may be an area of several football fields that takes you an hour or two of trolling. You can use a GPS unit, buoys or landmarks to mark your spot if you catch several fish at one location. Make repeated runs through the area

until you quit catching fish.

Pulling crankbaits can also be very effective in fall. Pull them in the same places that you would drift, side-pull or fast-troll. The simplest form of the technique is for each angler to hold one pole.

Use a small outboard on idle or a powerful trolling motor on high. Let out 50 to 200 feet of line based upon the water depth and crappie depth. Use a 300 Bandit, Bagley or a Bomber Model 6A attached to a small snap swivel. These are proven baits for catching crappie.


Factors

Sunlight — Light penetration always changes what colors fish can see. It can also change their position in the water and whether they relate closely to cover.

Current — A little current is fine for drifting or trolling, but too much current will put fish tight to the backside of cover, making other methods better.

Wind — Wind usually helps the bite because it

oxygenates the water and can make fish less spooky.

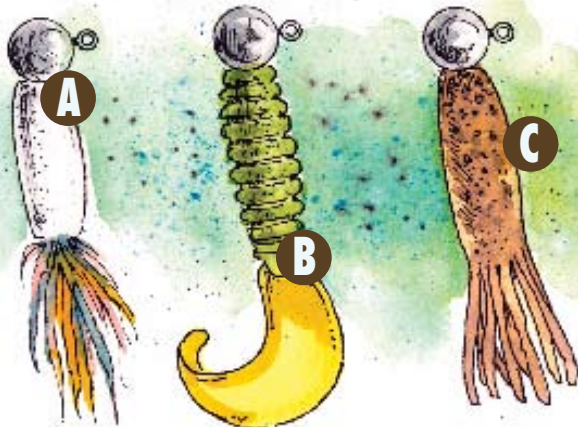
Fishing Pressure — Pleasure boat traffic can be a problem and cause fish to quit biting and/or go deep. Heavy fishing pressure probably won't hurt, except for having to weave in and out of other boats. 

heavy 1/8- or 1/4-ounce jigs to give you better control of your depth and to feel when you are bumping bottom. This technique requires your boat to be set up properly and takes some practice. However, it is something a weekend fisherman can successfully perform.

Fast-trolling may be the most popular flat technique among aggressive crappie anglers. This method involves using the front trolling motor to control the speed and route trolled. Poles in front are off to the side of the boat and placed in holders. Anglers in the back can have poles off to the side, out the back or both.

Different setups can be employed, but a typical one starts with the longest pole in front with rods decreasing in length toward the back of the boat. The

Fast-Trolling Baits



A) A plastic/feather jig presents a small profile with little or no action.

B) A 2- to 3-inch curly-tailed grub can entice fish with its fast action tail.

C) A basic 1 1/2- to 2-inch tube bait offers a good profile with little or no action.