

When To Fish Lily Pads? *RIGHT NOW!*

Bluegills aren't the only small fish that use pads for their homes. Crappie also like the advantages offered by the green canopy. Seasonal strategies with proper techniques can put you on some good lily-pad crappie.



Tim Huffman

tions are right. The types and amounts of vegetation are often directly proportional to the depth of the water. For example, shallow areas of a clear lake will allow sunshine to penetrate, causing the growth of plants. Other times, vegetation gets started during years of drought due to shallow water and a lack of current.

Why do fish like the pads? There are two primary reasons — cover and shade. Cover gives crappie safety from predators and a place to find small baitfish and insects in large numbers. Just shake a handful of pads, and you'll see the tiny organisms falling into the water. This is the food

chain at its best, because the smallest things draw baitfish, and the baitfish draw predators.

Shade is another important factor. The canopy formed on top of the water provides cooler water underneath, giving the fish a comfort zone. Water depths are also a factor in the seasonal movements of fish in and around the pads.

Tactics

Many fishermen hate all forms of vegetation because it makes fishing more difficult. Fortunately, pads may be the least intimidating of the fish-holding greens that anglers often see.

Techniques may change as the seasons change. For example, late winter/early spring is a time when crappie start moving from deep water into shallower areas. When this happens, look for fish to be in the deeper-water portions of the old pads. We'll call this the old-growth stubble because it is the stems still remaining after last year's leaves have rotted away.

Pad stubble is good. It provides cover similar to brush, but it isn't difficult to fish. Use a vertical presentation along the deepest edges of the stubble. Here is where fish will move first on their journey to shallower water. The first crappie you catch will probably be males.

Your equipment should include poles that are 10 to 12 feet long and line that is 4- or 6-pound test. Single-

hook rigs are always best around the pads.

Pads start developing in spring, and the fishing action develops, too. Crappie are on the move and looking for spawning spots. Most pads will be scattered with small patches growing within the old stubble. Keep looking on the outside edges of the stubble patches and move in to fish around the new pads. Daily fish movements will force you to move and test different spots.

Spawning time calls for you to find shallower water. Look for areas that have the hardest bottom. Heavy vegetation will cause soft bottoms over time, so look for the hardest spots you can find. Crappie may lay eggs on stumps or other features when a hard bottom cannot be found.

Two methods are excellent during the spawn through early summer. One is vertical jigging with long poles of 12 to 20 feet in length. The 12-foot poles are much easier to use, but when the water is clear and shallow, it can cause the crappie to become too spooky for anything but a very long pole.

While vertical jigging is effective, you may prefer to use a tiny float. A float will maintain the right depth and give you a good strike indicator without having to watch and feel the pole. Make it easy for the crappie to pull the float down so they will hold on longer.

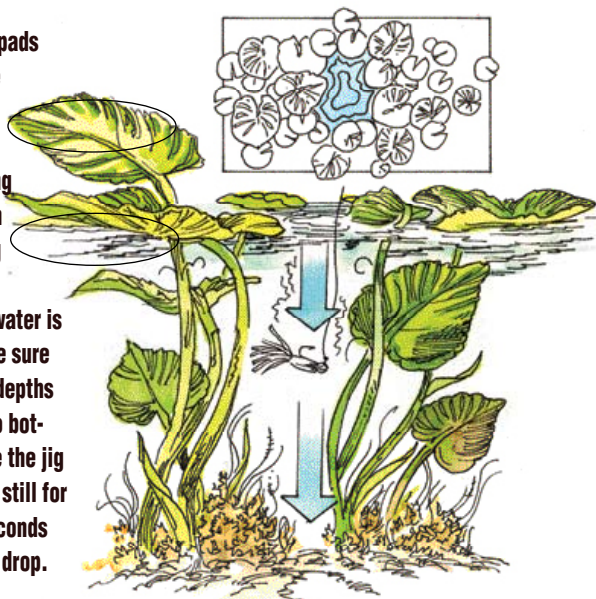
Pitching is another way to catch fish in the pads. The

Why Lily Pads?

Pads are one of the many vegetation species found in lakes, rivers and ponds across the country. The pads go through growth and decay, creating different water-condition situations. Clarity, pH and temperature all play a part with test-fishing spots, which is often the best way to tell when condi-

Targeting Lily Pads

Jigging in pads is a simple technique. Drop into any opening big enough to get a jig into. Even when the water is shallow, be sure to fish all depths from top to bottom. Leave the jig absolutely still for several seconds after each drop.



Illustrations By Chris Armstrong

pitch is actually a modified version because the depths are usually very shallow, especially when pursuing spawning crappie.

Start by pitching the jig to an opening and allow it to fall back in a pendulum motion. Remember to hit openings because the swing back will catch pad stems if they are present. However, in areas where you can use this tactic, it offers a big advantage over the straight up-and-down presentation of vertical jigging.

Your bait selection should include minnows and jigs. Minnows must be fished under a float. Also, try giving the minnows time to entice fish before moving the bait to the next spot.

Jigs are the best lures for pads. They are easier to use because you won't get hung up on the pad stems. Jigs make the process easier and are extremely effective in the vegetation. The most effective colors vary depending on the angler you ask, but clear/sparkle, chartreuse/white, lime and junebug are all good picks. Your local lake may have other colors

that work for you.

Pad Tips

Since horizontal movements of your baits will quickly find pad stems, don't cast. Unlike stumps, the flexible stems make it extremely difficult to break free when hung up.

Perhaps the biggest reason anglers catch few slabs in shallow water is because they are too noisy. So avoid this common mistake and be

quiet. Also, use a long pole in clear water and keep the baits away from the boat so you can reach fish without spooking them.

Finally, be sure to tip your jig with a good scent or wax worm.

Factors

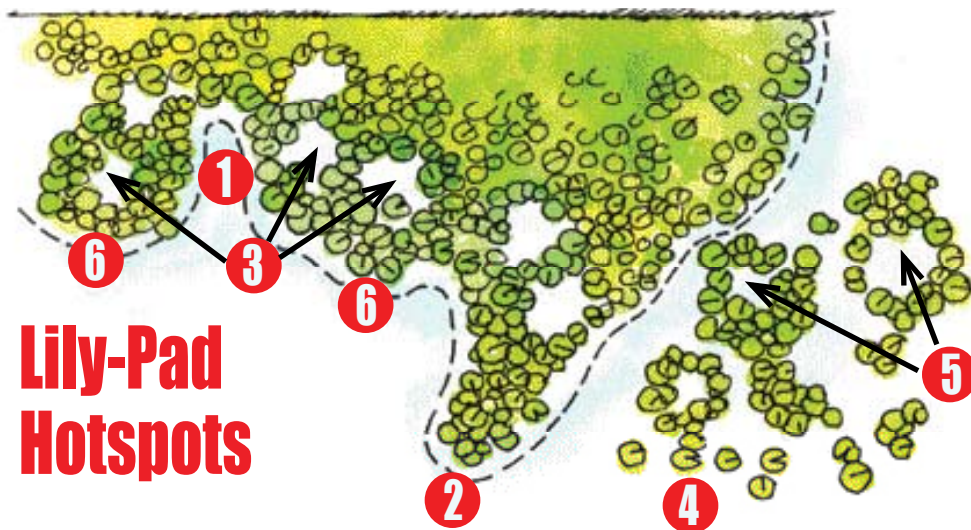
Wind — Open areas can be a problem in the wind. You have to maintain both boat and bait control.

Sun — Sunlight is good

for fishing the pads. It forces fish up under the leaves for shade and cooler water.

Rain — A rainy day can still be productive when the fish stay next to cover, but an overcast sky may send the fish roaming to other areas.

Fishing Pressure — Any hotspot can't be kept a secret. The more pressure an area gets, the more difficult it will be to catch numbers of crappie. 🐠



Lily-Pad Hotspots

- 1) Indentation within heavy mat
- 2) Pads forming a point
- 3) Holes within heavy pad cover

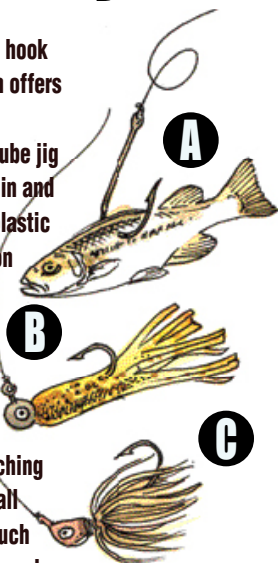
- 4) Small patches of scattered pads
- 5) Holes within small patches
- 6) Outside edges

Baits For Lily Pads

A) A minnow with a hook under the dorsal fin offers good bait action.

B) A 1¼- to 2-inch tube jig can be used to get in and around pads. The plastic tube provides action and color and is easy to change.

C) A small jig, like a ¼-, ½- or ⅝-ounce version, is excellent for pitching or dipping. The small size is similar to much of the forage in the pads.



Lily Pads By The Season

Early Spring — Old, dead stubble in 5 to 10 feet of water is excellent for the first movement of crappie toward shallow water.

Spring — Old stubble is still good and gets more activity as crappie move in toward spawning sites.

Spring Spawn — At this time, there will be patches of new growth. Look for crappie around the patches and toward the bank in very shallow water.

Summer — Pads grow to about 1 foot, forming a thick mat where crappie can hide. Shove your way into the pads and dip a jig in cracks and holes in the mat.

Late Summer — Most fish move out into deeper water away from the pads.

Late Fall/Early Winter — Crappie will move back up into the decaying pads to hold around the stubble.

Late Winter — Most crappie move out deep. Ice may form quickly on the stubble and in the shallow areas where pads are usually found.