

# HOW TO CATCH CRAPPIE LIKE THE PROS

ebook



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## Six Crucial Tips for Spring's Earliest Crappies

By Darl Black

***What's a fisherman's first sign of spring?  
The first crappie caught from open water.***

**Our crappie expert explains where and how to get that fish.**



Many people notice the first robin and noisy spring peepers as the harbingers of seasonal change. Fishermen traditionally judge the end of winter by that first crappie caught from open water. That's why the iced-over lakes won't melt soon enough for northern anglers who prefer soft water to hard water. However, with winter's mid-point in the rear view mirror, every day down is one day closer to spring thaw.

*Big rewards are possible if you follow these six tips to ice-out crappies.*

The initial melt in the backwaters of lakes and rivers sends anxious anglers in search of crappies. From the bank, by wading, or in a boat, many fishermen will catch speckled papermouths. Others will not, perhaps mystified why they didn't. To be successful, each fisherman must have an understanding of several key points for ice-out crappies.



### Tip #1: Know the Reason for Their Seasonal Movement

Some anglers mistakenly believe this early bite is a spawning run. Not so. A more appropriate analogy would be *a visit to the buffet table*. Early spring crappies are in and out of specific shallow-water locations in a fairly short time. Their departure is dictated by either receding water level or increasing temperatures stimulating the food chain on the main lake.



*Shallow, secluded bays with rich black bottom material are some of the most productive ice-out crappie spots.*

### Tip #2: Location is Oh-So Critical

Shallow, dark bottom sites removed from the main body of a lake are the areas which lose ice-cover first. Typically filled with submerged decaying vegetation, these areas absorb heat from the sun, thereby increasing the water temperature above that of the main body of water. This encourages plankton growth, which in turn attracts small minnows and crappies.

Specific lake sites include marshy seeps, the backs of secluded bays, marina basins and boat canals - sites with water roughly 2 to 4 feet deep (although the channel may be somewhat deeper). On major creeks or larger rivers, the early target areas for crappies are shallow slack-water sloughs, connected oxbow ponds, and flooded tributary stream mouths.

Some type of cover is always a prerequisite: flooded shoreline brush, last season's submerged vegetation, beaver lodges, logs, stumps and dock posts. Often the ice-out bite takes place in areas that fish abandon later in the spring as high water recedes.

**Tip #3: Timing is Everything**

With a couple days of warming sun, black-bottom backwater sites heat up quickly, attracting prey and predators. Crappies are eating, but not aggressively chasing. Most hover, almost motionless, gingerly sucking in small tidbits including zooplankton, aquatic invertebrates and small minnows. As noted, some of these shallow areas do not maintain enough depth to support fish once high water starts to drop; in these instances the fish may be present for a very short time - measured in days. In other situations, where water level is stable, the “ice-out” bite may extend for several weeks before crappies pull out.



Time of day is also a factor, especially during the winter-into-spring period when crappies will feed stronger in the late afternoon. Also, there is the impact of the proverbial cold - crappies get a major case of lockjaw when a spring cold front causes water temperature to drop. Factor everything into your timing and plan your fishing accordingly.

*As soon as ice cover begins disappearing, anglers should probe the backwaters for crappies.*

#### Tip #4: Use Fresh Line on Balanced Outfits

During the first outing of the open water season many fishermen will have neglected to change their line. Left on the spool over the winter, line takes a serious set which will greatly impede smooth, accurate casts.

For smaller diameter spools on panfish-size spinning reels, I prefer monofilament. Four-pound test on a light-action 6' spinning rod is perfect for casting. A suggested back-up outfit would be 9' long dipping rod with six-pound test. Since you do not want to disrupt the cover, never go with line so heavy that it cannot be broken easily if solidly snagged.



*In the early spring, crappies often bite best just as dusk approaches.*

#### Tip #5: Your Bait Should Be Tiny

Most fishermen automatically think a fathead minnow is the best live bait for crappies. However, minnows are not the first choice of experienced anglers at ice-out. Instead, a tiny ice dot jig tipped with a live maggot, or a micro-weight leadhead with a small scented soft plastic imitation bug larva are preferred.

These baits attempt to imitate zooplankton, aquatic nymphs, scuds and freshwater shrimp. Yes, small live minnow will work, but a live maggot or waxworm—more often than not—will out-produce a minnow right after ice-out.

A selection of micro jigs and bobbers used successfully to imitate the small organisms which ice-out crappies prey upon. Small baits rule in early spring, and bobbers are a critical part of ice-out presentation.



### Tip #6: Bobbers are Mandatory

Ice-out crappies won't chase prey around the backwater once they have found cover to their liking. They remain almost motionless, surveying their surroundings while sucking in anything that appears edible when it slowly swims by. Crappies may mosey up to perceived prey hovering nearby, and scrutinize it carefully before ignoring it or sucking it in.

Without question, the best way to present tiny jigs either stationary or at dead-slow forward speed in shallow water is with a small bobber. Continue adjusting the depth setting of the float every few casts until you hit the magic depth where crappies are holding. The depth of the fish can change from day to day, and even hour to hour as evening approaches.

If you include these six tips in your ice-out strategy, you'll head home with a catch that announces, *Spring has sprung!*



## Hunting Ice-Out Crappies

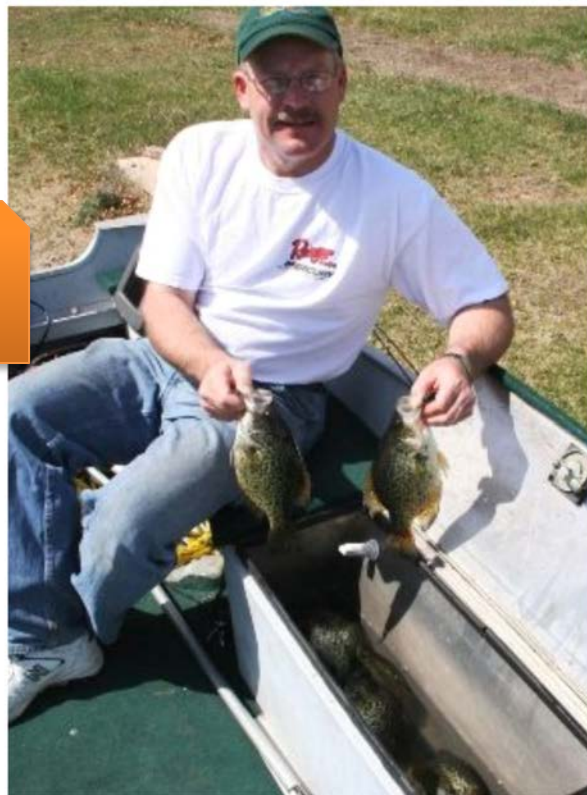
By Bernie Barringer

***Early spring crappie fishing can be a “spot-and-stalk” hunt.***

If you're like most people who live across the northern third of the USA, you get excited about the break-up of the ice that usually covers the lakes and streams in the winter. It's a special time of the year when redwing blackbirds sing the praises of spring and the earth wakes up from a long nap.

While ice-out crappies can be easy to find, they can be hard to catch. Many an angler has found a group of crappies sunning in a shallow bay, but throw a lure into their midst and they scatter like drug addicts at the sight of a police badge. A much more stealthy approach is necessary. In fact, to be consistently successful, it needs to be more like hunting than fishing. It's what I like to call *spot-and-stalk* crappie fishing.

*Early Spring crappie fishing can produce consistent action, nice catches, and great eaters.*







*Large specimens are vulnerable at ice-out more than any other time of the year.*

The spring sunshine warms shallow bays quickly, especially those with dark mud bottoms. In the right conditions, dark bottoms absorb sunlight and can warm the water as much as 8-10 degrees per day. This is where crappies will appear first, possibly as soon as a week following ice-out. They'll be sluggish at first, but they become much more active when the water temperatures reach 60 degrees. Finding the warmest water available ensures the crappies will be there.

After choosing which area of which lake to fish, go on the prowl and find them. The best way is with a bow-mount electric trolling motor and a good pair of polarized sunglasses. Polarized lenses filter the glare and help you see into the water much better.

It's important to ease around these shallow bays in stealth mode until you see crappies. They'll often be in loose groups right at the surface, putting the finishing touches on their pre-spawn reproductive systems by basking in the warm water.

The easier ones to catch will be near some sort of cover. Look for them around fallen trees, lily pad root wads, old reeds and bulrushes, stumps and brush. It can be difficult to move in close enough to see them without spooking them, Don't worry though, if they bolt out of the area when approached, they'll be back shortly. Leave the area for half an hour. Then, when you know where they are, quietly move back in, getting just close enough to see them.

Once you've located a school of crappies, you have to be ready with the right bait and present it properly. Early on, it's hard to beat a small, lively minnow. For these ice-out situations, I use a slip bobber, a small split shot sinker, and a #8 hook with a small minnow.

The key is to get the bait in position with as little disturbance as possible. Often, you must cast beyond the fish and then slowly draw your offering towards the waiting crappie. In many cases, the minnow needs to be wiggling within six inches of the crappie's nose or he won't bite. In fact, many times I've placed the bait mere inches from a crappie's face, only to see the fish reject it and move off. Or they may slowly move towards it and methodically suck it in. If the minnow is not wiggling, don't expect much success.

*Shortly after the ice leaves the surface, crappies move into shallow bays to seek warm water. Dark-bottomed bays with standing bulrushes are the best.*



The slip bobber is an important component of this system. Crappies rarely feed down. They like to bite things that are right at their level or slightly above. A slip bobber allows you to move the bobber stop up or down to get the bait right at the exact level. I find myself moving it often; even moving it for each and every fish I'm targeting.

Use the smallest sinker possible while still getting the bait to sink to the level of the fish. Go too big with a sinker that makes a loud *plop* when it hits the water, and it may spook the fish. Also, using smaller sinkers will allow the bait to move as naturally as possible.

I use a long rod spooled with 4-pound monofilament in most cases. My favorite rig for crappie hunting is a 9-foot medium action, fast tip rod made for steelhead fishing. In some cases, casting is impossible. In this situation, use a pendulum-type swing of the rod tip to carefully drop your bait right in front of a fish. Often, the closest option will be dropping the bait into an opening in the cover.

Sometimes these crappies will tuck in tight to last year's dying reeds, which offer the vertical cover that crappies like to spawn in. This makes them hard to extract once they're hooked. That's when I use a stout set-up with a non-stretch line, like FireLine. I wrestle them immediately to the surface and swing them right into the boat. Don't give them a fighting chance or they'll tangle in the rushes and you'll lose a large percentage.

Something about early spring crappies appeals to just about everyone. It's some of the finest fishing fun of the year!

### RECAP:

- Find shallow, warm water with nearby cover, and approach with stealth.
- Use a small split shot, and a #8 hook with a lively little minnow.
- Add a slip bobber to get the bait at the same depth as the fish.
- Drop the bait close to the fish using a long rod.
- Don't let the fish get into weeds.





## For A Great Many Anglers, Crappie Are #1

By Darl Black



What do papermouth, speckled perch, calico and strawberry bass have in common? All are nicknames for crappie.

There are two species of crappie: the *black*, sporting irregular dark spots on its sides and the *white*, with faint dark vertical bars. Although some minor differences exist between the two, the same fishing tactics and lures work for both.

Crappie are found in all contiguous 48 states, with respectable populations of the fish in every region of the country. What angler does *not* fish for crappie at least several times each spring?



*Crappie fill that “challenging yet enjoyable with a tangible reward” opportunity.*

I admit to being a smallmouth bass addict, but crappie fishing holds the number two spot on my list. However, for a great many anglers, crappie are #1. My wife, Marilyn, is one of them.

With the demands of her current job, Marilyn does not have a lot of time to fish. So, when she has the opportunity to get on the water, she doesn't want to spend too much time chasing species that are reluctant to bite. While she certainly desires a challenge when fishing, she also expects to be rewarded with a substantive catch. (She would never go musky fishing, where deeply troubled individuals spend all day casting, with their only expected reward being a glimpse of a 'lunge *following* their lure!)

In lakes with a self-sustaining population of crappie, these fish are abundant and always willing to bite (more so than smallmouth bass on many days). Furthermore, it takes skill to locate and catch crappie. Granted, speckled perch don't match the aerial acrobatics and lightning fast runs of some gamefish, yet a one-pound calico will give a good accounting of itself on light tackle. Hooking a true two-pounder will give a thrill which is not soon forgotten.

Some may choose to release the crappie as they are caught, others may opt to keep some for a meal. Try my [Low-Fat Oven-Fried Cajun Crappie Recipe](#) at the end of this e-book, and you'll be keeping crappie on every fishing trip!

## One Rod vs. Many

The approach to crappie fishing varies considerably depending on the region of the country. In many southern states, fishing regulations allow the use of multiple poles for crappie – as many as 16 rods in one state! In the South, anglers use slow trolling techniques with several 10 to 16 foot rods hanging over the gunwales. In some areas the strategy is referred to as spider rigging because a boat with so many rods and lines over the sides takes on the appearance of a spider.



*Slow trolling isn't the approach that Marilyn and I take....we cast.*

Someone might argue that our choice is based on the fact that we grew up fishing in states where the number of rods is restricted to one or two. In all honesty we find casting and manipulating a lure during the retrieve, plus feeling the bite while holding the rod, far more enjoyable than watching half a dozen rods sitting in pole holders.





Various rods are needed for specific purposes. My arsenal consists of 5 rods: a 6'6" light power for 1/32 to 1/16-ounce lures in the shallowest water; a 6'6" medium light for 1/16 to 1/8-ounce lures for all around use; a 7' medium power for 1/8 to 5/16-ounce lures worked in deeper water; a 9' dippin' rod; and a 5' moderate parabolic rod for dock shootin'.

### Springing Into Action

*Being a "single pole" angler does not mean owning one crappie rod.*

In Pennsylvania, and other northern tier states, springtime crappie fishing begins as a lake's ice cover melts. The earliest biting fish are ones that have migrated to cover-laden shallow water, likely moving in prior to ice-out. Types of areas that crappie congregate this time of year include: backwater sloughs, shallow cuts with submerged wood, wind-protected bays with remnant beds of last season's spatterdock beds, and dead-slack pools at the mouths of tributary creeks.

Ice-out crappie are not in a chasing mood. A struggling baitfish that seems unable to move off is the favorite target of calicos at this time. That's why a fathead minnow or emerald shiner suspended below a shallow-set bobber is so effective.

There are other methods besides still-fishing with live bait. Another option is to try casting a small egg-shape float positioned 12 to 18 inches above a minimal action minnow-like jig. A 1/32-ounce hair jig or split-tail grub is a good choice. Cast beyond shallow cover and retrieve very, very slowly with long pauses.

There is a reason crappies have the nickname "papermouth". Jerk too forcefully when a crappie takes the jig or bait, and it will tear the hook from the delicate mouth tissue. Instead, employ a firm, but gentle, sweep when setting the hook.

Within weeks after ice-out, crappie abandon the extremely shallow backwaters. These fish re-locate not far from future spawning sites, and are joined by additional crappie that did not move up for the early shallow-water feeding spree. Check out stumps, brush piles and hard bottom marl or gravel sites near mouths of bays in water depths from 5 to 14 feet, or run secondary points from shallow to deep, to find staging fish.

*Minnows have entered the shallows and crappie are here to feed, not to spawn.*



During pre-spawn, crappie are usually aggressive, falling victim to an array of action-tail jigs and swimming lures in the two to three-inch range. Typically these jig lures weigh-in around 1/16-ounce, although a slightly heavier head may be needed to maintain contact with the jig under breezy conditions or in deeper water.



Tubes and small curly-tail jigs have been the standard among crappie anglers for decades. However, changing to a jig with a slightly different look or action may be the trigger for the day – especially for bigger fish. In addition to the usual suspects, I also carry 1-1/2 inch Slider Crappie Grubs, 2-inch Lake Fork Live Action Baby Shad, 2-inch Skippy Fish, 3-inch Bobby Garland Slab Slay’R bodies and 1/16-ounce Road Runner jig-spinners.

Once schooled crappie\_ have been located on a key staging structure, the jig must be kept close to the bottom or within inches of the tops of submerged cover. Many days a steady do-nothing retrieve works best, but on other days you may need to tweak it with pauses or little lifts and drops.



## Late Spring Spawn



Spawning does not begin until the water temperature in the shallows stabilizes around 60 degrees or slightly warmer, (typically mid-May or early June in Pennsylvania.) Unlike the soft, gooey black bottom areas where crappie had their ice-out feast, saucer-like nests are built by fanning a thin layer of loose silt or loam away from a firm bottom.

The depth at which crappie spawn depends largely on the clarity of water. In my region of the country, the bedding depth is generally between three feet and ten feet. In clear water it may be possible to see beds, on other dingy water lakes the beds will not be visible even though constructed in quite shallow water. In addition, crappie beds are usually camouflaged among vegetation, reeds, stumps or stick-ups.

*The bait must be close enough to be inhaled by the crappie without making the fish move.*

Knowing exactly what type of cover to target is vital during the spawn because fan casting an area may not produce fish. When on beds or in the post-spawn funk, crappie revert to a non-chasing mode. The bait must be close enough to be inhaled by the crappie without making the fish move. When targeting locked-down spawning fish, I prefer to fish “quiver tail” soft plastic bodies such as a Bobby Garland Baby Shad or Yum Woolly Beavertail.



Here is where dippin' shallow cover with a long rod comes into play:

- Simply lower the bait beside cover and hold it for a few seconds
- “Swim it” by moving the rod tip and pause again
- Raise or lower the jig, and repeat



*Late pre-spawn to post-spawn crappie may hang around docks.*

If you don't have a long dippin' rod, a shorter rod with a bobber to suspend the jiggling lure will accomplish the hovering presentation.

Late pre-spawn to post-spawn crappie may hang around docks. Reaching these fish requires skipping or shooting a small jig far under the dock, thus the need to keep a short, parabolic action rod handy. A solid body 2" Yum Vibra King Tube holds up to repeated skipping, and it can be fished slowly or even dead-sticked in place if needed.

## Color My World Natural



Southern crappie fishermen are into bright, bold colors in their crappie jigs. These fishermen often use tri-colored soft plastics in an attempt to find the right color to trigger strikes. Typically, bright hues are employed on the dirty water lakes being fished.

On the other hand, a good share of my crappie fishing is done on clear natural lakes or moderately clear reservoirs. I find success with more natural minnow, shiner and shad-colored baits. White, silver, watermelon and clear with sparkle are among my favorites. I'll go with a darker body and chartreuse tail when the water is cloudy or somewhat dingy – but rarely will you find a gaudy tri-colored jig body on the end of my line.

***Now get out there and catch those spring crappie!***



## 4 Secrets Crappie Don't Want You To Know

By Bernie Barringer

*As told by, Slab.... from somewhere in Minnesota*

I know you're not expecting me, a crappie, to tell you how to fish for a crappie, but I just can't hold it in any longer. And really, the honest truth is that I have my own self-interest to consider.  
**Here's the deal...**



There are some things not very many fishermen know about us, and I'm going to spill the beans. I suppose this will mean more of my buddies are going to get a close-up view of your boat's carpet, but so be it. I'm offering a deal. You look like an honest guy. I'll give you the secrets, and you throw me back if you catch me. OK? Here goes...

## Crappie Fishing Secret #1

**We don't feed on the bottom. In fact, we don't feed down at all.** We are designed so that our mouths are made to take in food that is slightly above us. Looking at the shape of our jaws and the position of our eyes makes this obvious, but many fishermen are still dropping their baits below us.

We aren't going to tip ourselves over, like those darn walleyes, for even the best bait. If you're fishing below us, you won't get a bite. Make sure *the jig is up*. You think that's a bad thing in your world, imagine how we feel about it.

## Crappie Fishing Secret #2

**We Love Pink.** It's true. Pink is very visible and we can't resist a closer look. Orange and chartreuse, and even white, get my attention too, but there's just something about pink. I know more crappies who have been pulled from the water by a pink and white jig than anything else.

*A little pink jig with a fresh minnow on it... be still my pounding heart! It's like crack for crappies!*



### Crappie Fishing Secret #3

*Wood is  
Good.*

We like wood for a reason. You know those sunken brush piles, downed trees along the shorelines, old beaver lodges with their brushy feed beds?

We spend a lot of time there because a lot of food hides there. Older wood is better, too. The longer the wood is in the water, the more attractive it becomes to little bitty organisms. These organisms are food for minnows and insect larvae. When a little wind begins to blow into these woody buffet lines, the entire food chain is activated. If our food is getting knocked off the underwater wood, then guess what, and we'll be there.

The microorganisms are easy pickings, so the minnows and other tiny fish move right in and we're there to take advantage of the abundance of food. Give me a sunny day in the spring when the insects are hatching and I'm in heaven hanging around an old beaver lodge.

I'll eat until I can't eat any more, then I'll just lay there by a nice branch and soak up the sun while I digest my meal. Then in a few hours I'll do it all again. Life is good. Until I see a pink jig that is. But you better be stealthy, because I'm right near the surface and I spook really easy if I see you coming.





*Bernie thinks walleye talk to him sometimes too.*

### Crappie Fishing Secret #4

**We don't just "disappear" in the summer!** We don't get harassed by anglers very much in the warm summer months. That's because so few of them know where we go. We don't just evaporate - we go where the food is. And the food is suspended out over the deep water. In fact, we spend the bulk of our time suspended just over the thermocline above the deepest part of the lake.

I can't believe I am revealing all this to you, but if you just see a ball of baitfish or young-of-the-year bluegills 15 feet down over 40 feet of water, we won't be far away! You can drift over us with a little jig, or even try bobber fishing with a slip bobber set at the right depth. Even some of my buddies have been jerked to the surface because they couldn't resist a tiny minnow-imitating crankbait going by!

Now you know some things few crappie fishermen know. And this information, if you use it wisely, will give you an opportunity to show the inside of your livewell to more of us.  
**Just remember – we have a deal!**





## How To Get Crappie For Christmas

By Bernie Barringer

(Photos courtesy of Kevan Paul)

***An expert shares his secrets to catching winter crappies.***

No matter where you live across North America, or what you fish for, every species of fish has peak spawning times, making for easy pickings during the spring – crappies included.



*First Ice is a second peak period for crappie fishing.*

But across the northern half of the USA, there is a second peak period for crappie fishing, around here we call it “first ice”. Crappie anglers anticipate the first safe ice of winter because the crappies are in predictable locations, and they are quite aggressive.

Here in North Central Minnesota, the first safe ice usually happens within a week or so of Thanksgiving. In areas farther south, the first safe ice fishing takes place around Christmas. If you can safely get on the hard water, the entire month of December is prime time for crappies.

Whenever I talk ice fishing for crappies, I think of my friend Kevan Paul, a fishing guide in northern Iowa. He's a premiere panfish guide, both on the open water and the hard water. I called him and asked for some advice about those first ice crappies....

### **Secret #1 – Focus on Shallow Water**

*“Crappies can be found in as little as 3 to 4 feet as the winter wears on...” – Kevan Paul*

“In late fall, the fish will be off the deep breaklines in at least 18 feet,” Kevan explains. “But when the lakes ice over, they start to move toward the shallows.”

Kevan says they can be found in as little as 3 to 4 feet as the winter wears on, but the best early-ice locations are breaklines and bars with weeds on top in 10-13 feet of water, depending on water clarity.



## Secret #2 – Look for Weeds

“The place to start is right in the deepest weeds you can find in the lake.” Weeds are the key to finding crappies, and Kevan uses an underwater viewing system to find the greenest, tallest patch of weeds he can find, and then looks for crappies located near them.



“The crappies that you find near the bottom of the weed patches are not very active, but the fish you can easily catch are those that are out off the edge of the weed patches and well up off the bottom.”

## Secret #3 – Seek Active Fish

*Weeds are the key to finding crappies.*

If Kevan doesn't see active crappies, he simply drills another hole and drops the camera down again. No sense targeting fish that are not likely to bite. First, spend the time to find the active fish, and only then, start fishing.

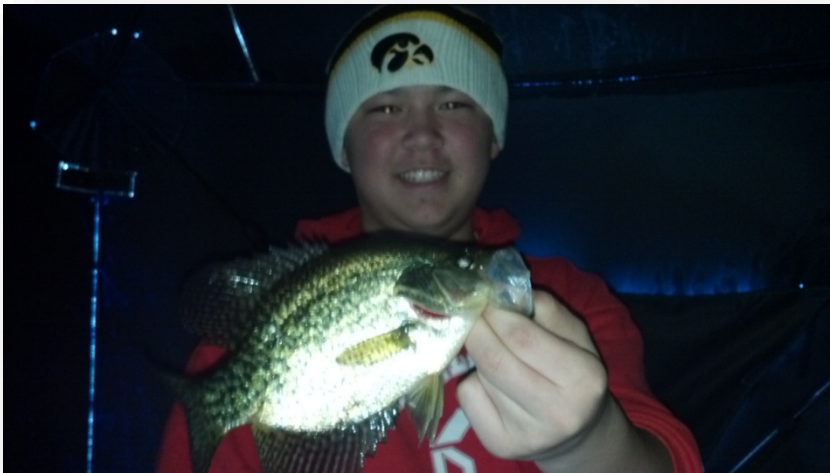
Active crappies move along in loose schools, and once you find them, the action can be terrific. They roam from one weedy area to the next. Often lakes have weed patches that are more like clumps. Some of these patches may be as small as the hood of your car. If you find crappies in one of these clumps, you can catch them quickly since they are concentrated in a small area.

If the action dies down, simply start moving from weed clump to weed clump, until you find another pod of active fish. By now you can see how important an underwater viewing system is to a successful trip.

## Secret #4 – Use These Surefire Techniques

Once you find schools of active fish, Kevan has some suggestions for catching them.

**(1) Minnows** – He likes to use a slip bobber with a minnow and a bare hook. You know how deep the crappies are because you have seen them on your depth finder or your camera. “Keep your bait a little above the level of the fish,” Kevan explains. “Crappies feed up, and you will catch a lot more fish if you position your bait right above them.”



**(2) Plastics** – While the simple minnow and sliding float method is his go-to technique, he says some days they seem to like plastics better. When this is the case, he uses a tiny jig with a Berkley GULP! Minnow and keeps it moving slowly. Crappies move very slowly in cold water and often suck in a bait, then sit there.

**(3) Spring Bobbers** – Crappie bites can be so hard to detect, in fact, that every one of his crappie rods has a spring bobber on the tip to help him determine when a crappie has sucked in his bait. Sometimes, he says, all you see is that the spring bobber is loaded up a little more and then you set the hook.

*Since crappies feed up, position your bait right above them.*



Use brighter colors in dingy water.

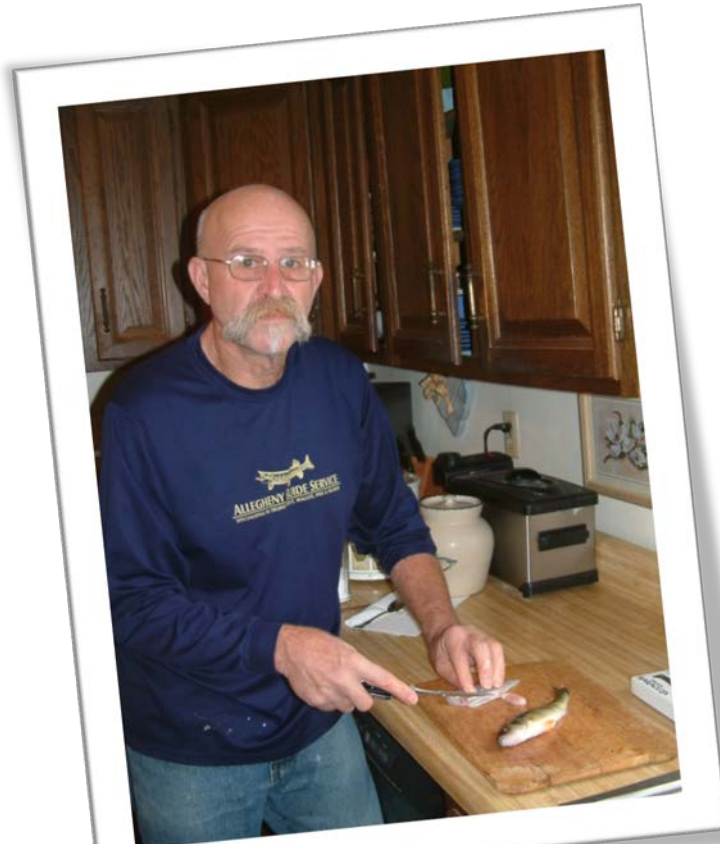


**(4) Colors** – “It’s hard to beat pink for crappies,” Kevan says when he talks about colors. In clear water, Kevan stays with the more natural colors such as motor oil and brown. But in the more dingy water, he might go with brighter colors such as chartreuse.

So when the ice is safe to venture out this winter, head out to a place where you can find deep green weeds near the open water basin of the lake – here you’ll find the active crappies. And if you take your time and target these finicky speckled fish the right way, you are well on your way to a delicious winter fish fry.

## How To Undress A Bucket Of Crappies With A Havalon Knife

By Steve Sorensen



*Pro Fisherman (and fillet artist) Charlie Brandt .*

When I needed a lesson in knifemanship, I figured my neighbor, pro fisherman Charlie Brandt, was the best teacher. So I asked him to call me whenever he brought home a fresh catch. I had a Havalon Baracuta-Edge fillet knife I wanted him to field test.

“I have a bucket of crappies. If you come over now you can watch me get ‘em ready to eat.”

“I’ll be right over.”

I handed Charlie the Havalon fillet knife and explained the principle behind it. “This is a folding fillet knife, and it’s deadly sharp – sharper than you or I could ever make a blade. That’s because the blade is made by a company that makes surgical scalpel blades. You don’t sharpen it – you just replace it.”

Charlie looked it over closely, then pressed the point of the knife against his cutting board. “Good flexibility. On panfish I go right through the ribs, and this oughta take the clothes off these crappies real nice.”

“You probably noticed it’s fairly stiff on the hinge end,” I said. “That’s because of the fitment that holds the quick-change blade.”

“That’s OK. That’s not really the business end. How’s the edge hold up?”

“You tell me, Charlie.” He was all set up, so he grabbed a fish, turned the knife over in his hand a few times, and began cutting.





## Meat, Bones and Skin

“Look here. I just follow the back of the gill plate with the point of the knife. Then push the tip of the knife down through the back to the backbone, and follow the backbone right down to the tail. On small fish like these I cut right through the rib cage. After the slab meat is off, I can see better to trace around the ribs and peel them away. Saves more meat that way. Then I put the slab on the board, skin side down, and run the knife between the meat and the skin.”

In a matter of seconds, he had two pretty pieces of fish flesh. What was left was a skeleton with head still attached at one end and two pieces of skin clinging to the tail end. That, and whatever fish guts and scales don't stay intact, are simply scraped into the garbage pail.

It took longer to say it than to do it, and he was on to the next fish. Charlie's knack for this is impressive.



## Not a Fisherman, but a Catcherman

“Where'd you catch 'em?” I asked.

“Lake Erie. I'm always amazed at the ice fishermen I see up there. Guys drill one hole through the ice and then act like they're frozen to it. They don't move even if they never catch anything. Me? I drill lots of holes. I drill 'em until I find fish. I call it prospecting. I stay busy so I never get cold, and eventually I catch fish. I never have a bad day on the ice.” Charlie is more than a fisherman - he's a catcherman. He seldom comes home without fish to clean.

*In a matter of seconds,  
Charlie had two pretty  
pieces of fish flesh.*



About half way through the bucket, Charlie said, “I’ve undressed at least 20 fish, and the edge is holding up real well. With other knives I’d be hitting the whetstone or switching knives, about now.”

As Charlie whittled away on fish after fish, he prattled on. “Perch, crappies, pumpkinseeds – they all make a nice fish sandwich. Did you know there are seven different varieties of pumpkinseed?”

“A few of these are perch. Lake Erie perch are even better than walleye, especially when the water is cold. Cold water equals great taste.”

### Fish More and Sharpen Less

*“...after a bucket of crappies it was still sharper than any other fillet knife I have.”  
– Charlie Brandt*

If I hadn’t seen him at work, I wouldn’t have believed he could work so fast. When he took the last fish from the bottom of the bucket, I asked a few questions. “Did this knife make the job faster, or slower?”

“I wasn’t keeping track of the time. I guess it was about average. But if I hadn’t been running at the mouth it would have been faster.”



“Blame me for that. I came over to hear what you have to say. Did you feel the blade getting duller as you worked?”

“It wasn’t as sharp on the last fish as it was on the first fish, but even after a bucket of crappies it was still sharper than any other fillet knife I have. It slides through those ribs real nice.”

“That’s probably because the edge is created with more precision than hand sharpening can duplicate,” I said. “Final question. Do you want to keep the knife?”

“I have lots of knives, so I don’t need it. But this one will let me fish more and sharpen less.”

“So your answer is yes?”



“I didn’t want to ask, but I’d love to have it. Thanks.”

I pitched in to help with clean-up. “Use newspaper to soak up the slime,” Charlie said. “Then I sanitize the cutting board, and rinse out the sink. Done.”

“I don’t waste anything,” he added. “I use the eggs for chumming walleye, and I dump everything else back in the valley for the raccoons.”

“Yes, I’ve seen those scraps before. I’ve even seen tracks where deer were sniffing around them,” I added as I washed the open-frame knife under the faucet. Then I handed Charlie five extra blades and a brochure with an order form for more.

I never thought cleaning a mess of crappies could be so fast and easy. I was hoping Charlie would offer to let me take them home. Even a landlubber like me knows what to do with a fine kettle of fish. But then he said “That knife for these fish would be a great trade for me, but these fish are already called for. How ’bout I take you out to get your own?”

With Charlie Brandt making that offer, that’s definitely a trade to my advantage.

## *Low-Fat Oven-Fried Cajun Crappie*

### **Ingredients**

- 10 to 12 crappie fillets
- 3/4 cup Egg Beater
- 1 cup bread crumbs
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1/2 tablespoon black pepper
- 1/2 to 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning depending on taste
- Spray margarine (or 2 tablespoons melted butter)
- Cooking spray
- 2 shallow bowls
- Baking sheet or large glass baking dish

Use your [HavalonBaracuta Edge](#) to fillet crappies, including removing the skin from each fillet, rinse thoroughly in cold water and pat dry.

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees
2. Coat the baking sheet with cooking spray
3. Combine dry ingredients (bread crumbs and seasonings) in one bowl
4. Place liquid Egg Beater in second bowl
5. Dip each fillet in Egg Beater
6. Then in the bread crumb mixture, coating each side evenly
7. Place each fillet on the baking sheet and spray lightly with margarine (or drizzle melted butter on each fillet)

Bake in oven at 450 degrees for 8 to 10 minutes or until fish flakes easily with a fork.

## About the Authors



Outdoor writer and speaker **Steve Sorensen** loves the [Havalon knife](#) and has been a fan of knives since he was six, when he began begging his dad to take him hunting. His articles have been published in *Deer and Deer Hunting*, *North American Whitetail*, *Sports Afield*, and many other top magazines across the USA. Invite Steve to speak at your next sportsman's event, and follow his writing at [EverydayHunter.com](#).



**Bernie Barringer** is a lifelong angler who has competed in professional walleye tournaments. He enjoys fishing for all species and writing about his experiences, he has published more than 400 articles in two dozen outdoor magazines and authored ten books on hunting, fishing and trapping. He is the managing editor of *Bear Hunting Magazine*. Read about his fishing and hunting adventures on his website [www.bowhuntingroad.com](#).



A lifelong freshwater angler and veteran writer and photographer, **Darl Black** tackles a wide variety of fishing related stories for print publications and websites. Of all fishing, angling for smallmouth bass is his favorite pastime. He may be reached for assignment at [darlblack@windstream.net](mailto:darlblack@windstream.net).



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