

Crappies By Degrees
Temperature Template For Year-Round Action
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Of all the factors determining crappie location and activity, none is more critical than water temperature. With that in mind, I assembled a panel of veteran crappie guides including Jim Duckworth, Steve McCadams, Fred McClintock, Larry McMullin, Tom Moody and Harold Morgan, and picked their brains about how crappie locations and fishing patterns vary with changing water temperatures.

These experts pitched in to help me create this simple but useful cheat sheet that spells out where crappies will be and what you need to do to catch them in 5-degree water temperature increments year-round.

Water Temperature: 35 Degrees

Overview: Crappies will be deep and sluggish now, but they're still catchable with the right presentation.

Key Location: Check main-lake river channels for crappies holding tight to bottom cover in 30 to 60 feet of water.

Primary Pattern: Vertical presentations rule in the dead of winter. Fish straight down, using live minnows on a Kentucky rig (see diagram on page 30) or spoons jigged just above the fish.

Water Temperature: 40 Degrees

Overview: Crappies will begin migrating from deep river channels toward major tributaries, where they will eventually spawn. They'll often suspend in open water now rather than relate to cover or breaklines.

Key Location: Waves of crappies will stage off points leading into reservoir tributary arms, suspending off these structures 20 to 30 feet deep. Some fish will remain on river channel structure in considerably deeper water.

Primary Pattern: Wind-drift 1⁄8- to 1⁄4-ounce jigs on longlines around tributary points. Watch your graph for suspended baitfish schools—crappies are seldom far from a food source.

Water Temperature: 45 Degrees

Overview: Many crappies have started migrating toward their eventual spawning areas. It's prime time.

Key Location: Target crappies hanging tight to submerged wood on deep channel banks near the entrance to tributaries, 12 to 25 feet deep. Most fish will range from the primary point to about a quarter of the way back into the creek arm.

Primary Pattern: Target-cast grubs to channel bends with wood. Cast, let the grub sink until it contacts the cover, then immediately begin swimming it slowly and steadily back to the boat.

Water Temperature: 50 Degrees

Overview: The prespawn migration is in full swing now, with large numbers of crappies moving into reservoir tributary arms. Stragglers suspending in deep water off tributary points will make their move shallower following a few days of mild, sunny weather.

Key Location: Continue targeting the creek channel migration route, keying on isolated wood cover along channel bends for the largest concentration of fish. Crappies instinctively remain 12 to 20 feet deep now, probably to insulate themselves from the impact of frontal passages.

Primary Pattern: Map out the creek channel with marker buoys, then bump a Kentucky rig baited with minnows or a minnow/tube bait combination along the channel drop.

Water Temperature: 55 Degrees

Overview: Expect the bite to get more aggressive as crappies begin feeling “the urge to merge” and feed heavily before spawning.

Key Location: A few big fish will be in the upper half of tributary arms, but you’ll find numbers of fish in the lower half, still relating to the creek channel migration route.

Shallow ditches veering off the creek channel and running toward shallow spawning coves can hold huge fish.

Primary Pattern: Target ditches with grubs and small crankbaits; on mild days, crappies may be as shallow as one to three feet deep along these structures. Work the creek channel with grubs, keying on brushy cover in the six- to 12-foot zone.

Water Temperature: 60 Degrees

Overview: Crappies spawn in water from around 65 to 75 degrees, so the immediate prespawn period is a good time to load the boat with oversize fish. Baitfish schools continue to be a primary location factor now as crappies fatten up before spawning.

Key Location: Hopefully you did your homework while the lake was drawn down during winter and marked the location of brushy cover and stake beds on your map and GPS.

Now that the water is higher, crappies will be all over this cover midway into tributary arms, three to eight feet deep **Primary Pattern:** Tightlining minnows and jigging tube baits around sunken cover will score heavy crappie catches in murky water. In clear water, back off your target, make a long cast and swim a curlytail grub.

Water Temperature: 65 Degrees

Overview: Crappies will be shallow now; some will be spawning, but many will still be in a prespawn mode. Don’t rush the season—if you aren’t catching quality fish on likely spawning cover, back off and target prespawn crappies instead.

Key Location: Crappies will be in the upper half of tributary arms, holding tight to isolated stake beds and submerged brush piles. Prespawn fish will be in three to six feet of water, but will chase minnows shallower.

Primary Pattern: Tight-lining minnows on long rods is the standard method now, but target-casting grubs and tubes to submerged wood works, too.

Water Temperature: 70 Degrees

Overview: Spawning season kicks in big-time! Male crappies fan out the nest while females hang back waiting for the water temperature to rise a degree or two before moving onto the beds.

Key Location: Spawning takes place on woody cover (stake beds, brush piles, etc.) in the upper ends of brushy coves and creek arms, anywhere from three to 12 feet deep depending on the lake's clarity.

Primary Pattern: Cast tubes and grubs or tight-line minnows close to cover. If you're catching numbers of small males, back off and hit deeper isolated stake beds and stumps for the bigger females.

Water Temperature: 75 Degrees

Overview: Some crappies will be done spawning while others are finally moving onto their beds. Postspawn fish will hang around bedding areas for several days until the water temperature rises.

Key Location: Spawners will be on wood from three to 12 feet deep depending on water clarity. Postspawn fish will be on isolated pieces of cover adjacent to spawning sites.

Primary Pattern: Determine the crappies' spawning mode. If tube baits or minnows don't produce strikes in thick brush and stake beds, target-cast grubs to scattered wood.

Water Temperature: 80 Degrees

Overview: Most crappie fishermen hang up their rods after the spawn, but a shift in tactics can yield fast action on postspawn fish.

Key Location: Before moving to their deep summer haunts, many crappies gravitate to the edges of flats, hanging tight to scattered wood or suspending above the breakline closest to the structure.

Primary Pattern: Troll small diving crankbaits like the 200 series Bandit around the edges of flats in the six- to 18-foot zone, occasionally banging the plugs off stumps and bottom.

Water Temperature: 85 Degrees

Overview: Crappies will be moving out of tributaries via the same creek channel migration routes they traveled before spawning.

Key Location: Slabs gang up on secondary and primary points that drop quickly into deep water. Look for them suspending 18 to 30 feet deep around baitfish schools.

Primary Pattern: Target channel points using a Kentucky rig bumped slowly along bottom.

Water Temperature: 90 Degrees

Overview: In the Sun Belt, water temps in the 90s are common by August. Crappies suspend for long periods now to conserve metabolic energy. River-run reservoirs with a flowing channel usually have better fishing now than slackwater lakes.

Key Location: Channel ledges lined with standing timber or brushy cover offer your best bet now. Crappies are probably suspending 18 to 30 feet deep in 60 feet of water.

Primary Pattern: If fish are suspended high in the water column, slow-drifting minnows or tubes through the school can produce strikes. If they're tight to bottom, use a Kentucky rig.