

Thumpin' for Crappies

By Lonnie King

Each year I find myself spending more and more time ice-fishing. One reason for this is that the sport is getting easier and easier to enjoy. Lightweight portable huts with micro-heaters, sharper more reliable augers, lighter and warmer clothing and state-of-the-art electronics (both GPS and sonar units) has resulted in far less time spent getting to the fish and more time actually fishing. All this technology also makes it easier to stay mobile, which is a big part of being effective and catching fish every time out.

One of my personal ice-fishing passions is crappie, since they are quite prevalent where I live and provide great sport. Action can be extremely fast, and it's tremendous fun to duke it out with a big slab on light tackle. Yet, what's so perplexing about crappie is how they can be so aggressive and willing to hit one moment, yet without any apparent reason, completely shut down the next. Last year in particular this seemed to be more the rule than the exception. In trying to overcome my dilemma, I poured over any literature I could find on winter crappies, and experimented with a wide variety of techniques, which led to the incorporation of several new tricks into my wintertime crappie arsenal.

The Technique

One of the most effective was a technique called thumpin'. Let me restate that this is not my opening bid on most days. Typically I will choose easier approaches when fish are willing, but on days when I'm sure I'm on top of crappies and just can't get them to go, I have found very aggressive techniques will often turn them on.

The key to this presentation is to have a heavy jig relative to the line you're using. On 2-pound test monofilament, I use one size up from the smallest Genz worm. These jigs are designed to sink nice and fast and show up beautifully on your sonar. On heavier line, a bigger jig would be required to overcome the added resistance of the line. If you're running any type of bait on the hook, keep it small.



The author displays some of his favourite jigs for thumpin' slab crappies



A maggot or two just to add some scent is all you want; anything bulkier will only subdue the presentation. I typically start by lowering my jig to the depth of the fish, or just a few inches above them. I use a Vexilar FL-18, so this type of precision is easy.

The presentation involves making your bait hop in short; rapid bounces for a sustained period of time. The sinking speed of your jig and the height of your hops are the limiting factor on how fast you can get your bait thumpin'. The object is to have your bait fall

quickly, and to time your upswing perfectly with when the bait settles out. Thereby never letting it sit still, not even for a second.

In the past I used this sort of action to draw fish in from a distance and then try to finesse them to bite, but when all you are getting are lookers, keep the jig thumpin' continuously. It really is amazing to see your rod tip stop dead after 3 full minutes of thumpin'. In fact you may be watching fish on your sonar, watching your bait the entire time, until all of a sudden they snap. It's worked great for me during the day or at night.



Lonnie displays some nice crappies caught with the thumpin' techniques he describes

Thump your bait in place for a few minutes and then try thumpin' it up toward the surface. It takes practice to coordinate your reeling hand and your thumpin' hand, but don't be surprised to see fish follow you all the way up to the surface. Fish may hit at anytime during the retrieve. Thumpin' the bait downward is a bit trickier, but also effective. When the fish hits, you either snap in a clean hook-set immediately on your upswing, or if the fish rushed upwards to hit (as often happens), it will feel like you missed a heartbeat as you lift up into slack line. Keep in mind this all happens in a split second. I have to admit that it is a tiring technique, which

is difficult to maintain for any prolonged length of time, but incredibly effective under the right circumstances.

A very similar, yet more subtle action is made

possible by new generation icefishing rods such as the Buzz-Stick and more recently the Buzz-Stick II. These rods have a floating blank and a battery-powered vibrator, which allows you to shake your lure for prolonged periods without so much as tensing a muscle. The Buzz-Stick II offers an even more powerful vibrator for bigger lures, or as I'm hoping, a more violent shake on lighter baits. This technology also makes those otherwise cumbersome upward and downward vibrating swims as simple as holding a button and slowly raising or lowering your bait.

There are few things more frustrating than seeing fish on your sonar and not being able to get them to bite. But this year, once you've tried every trick in the book, give thumpin' a try. Although I guess if you were using a Buzz Stick, then it would technically be called buzzin'. That begs the question then, what would you call it if you were thumpin' and buzzin' at the same time My wife often finds it difficult to follow along when my buddies and I are talking fishing, and I'm starting to understand why.

Lonnie King is a well-rounded multi-species angler, and he formerly hosted his own cable television show entitled 'Niagara Outdoors'.