

“Another new year, black-eyed peas, fishing guides and crappie”

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So what can new years, black-eyed peas, fishing guides and crappie have in common? Black crappie with their upturned noses, symmetrical dorsal and anal fins, and salt-and-pepper sides are as southern as, well black-eyed peas. With the cool weather of another new year all



around us, freshwater anglers will find black crappie, or specks as they are frequently called, one of the most active and tasty challenges around. The tradition of going after crappie in January and February, when they are congregating in large pre-spawning schools, is right up there with serving black-eyed peas on New Year’s Day.

Crappies thrive in clear, natural lakes and reservoirs with moderate vegetation. They are also found in large slow-moving rivers, provided the water is not too murky. Trolling with small, live minnows or a spinner-fly combination or casting flies, small spinners, jigs, or tiny crankbaits can provide for rapid action once you locate a school. The key is finding the right depth and moving quickly while testing various locations until you find a school of ravenous crappies. Concentrate your effort near the edges of vegetation stands, especially around dawn and dusk.

Spawning will occur from February to April when water temperatures reach 62 to 65 degrees. They nest in colonies and build circular beds, frequently around submerged vegetation in waters from three- to eight-feet deep. The male guards the nest and fry. Each female may produce between 11,000 and 188,000 eggs. Of those, only two must survive to adulthood to replace each pair of potential spawners and maintain the population. Consequently, it has not been necessary to restrict bed fishing, although some anglers prefer not to fish over beds.

As a sport fish, specific bag and size limit regulations apply (typically 25 fish, with no minimum length; exceptions are Lake Talquin and some specific Fish Management Areas; See

MyFWC.com/Fishing/rules.html for details). With the new year starting, it's a good time to verify that your license is up-to-date, if not you can conveniently purchase one on-line or call 1-888-FISH-FLORIDA. Register a qualifying catch, if it exceeds 14 inches in total length, or two pounds, as part of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's "Big Catch" angler recognition program, (See MyFWC.com/Fishing/BigCatch). You'll receive a personalized color-certificate and window sticker.



If you aren't familiar with speck fishing, it's always a good idea to consult a local bait-and-tackle shop, or to hire a guide. To make it easier, the FWC is in the initial process of registering outfitters and guides (MyFWC.com/outfitters/) as a service to the angler. Search the site for a local guide and urge any guides that you know to go online and register—it's free.

Meanwhile, if you want to know what FWC biologists think will be the hottest crappie fisheries in 2007 based on their research and experience, check out the following list, and for quarterly updates see MyFWC.com/Fishing/Forecast.

Orange Lake / Lochloosa Lake (located between Gainesville and Ocala)

The water level on Orange Lake is back up after being down for years. As a result, crappie fishing has also rebounded. Water levels are a little lower this year, but crappie are still biting well and a 16.5-inch trophy was caught in a November tournament. Crappie were biting in open water through last fall, and they'll start again when the weather warms up this spring. Crappie in this lake like to hit jigs and minnows. Lily pads are favorite hangouts.

FWC biologists poured some intensive lake management talent into 5,500-acre Lake Lochloosa, while Mother Nature raised the water level back to what it needs to be. As a result, crappie have responded there too. Fish around the lily pads in the southeast and northwest parts of the lake and in the narrow connection to Little Lake Lochloosa when you're after crappie. Also, the patches of maiden cane are good spots to try when crappie get ready to spawn in early spring.

Lake Monroe (near Sanford)

The FWC's habitat-restoration wizards have been tuning up this 9,400-acre sweetie-pie since the late 1980's, and they've got her really purring. Since the Commission lifted the 12-inch

minimum length limit in July 2005, anglers have flocked back to Monroe and put up impressive catch rates. Big crappie go for small jigs, Bream Killers, Hal-Flies or Beetlespins. Missouri minnows and grass shrimp also work.

Lake Jessup (south of Sanford)

You can wear yourself out catching crappie on this 10,000-acre honeyhole. They run a little smaller than crappie you'll find in other lakes in this part of central Florida, but there are bunches of them just waiting to get caught on minnows by anglers who drift-fish in the middle of the lake and near Bird Island. Lots of crappie also hang out in the Soldier Creek area and the north end of the lake, where it connects to the St. Johns River.

Lake Harney (between Sanford and Mims)

This 6,058-acre lake is the third lake along the St. Johns River on our list. While it is smaller than lakes Monroe and Jessup, Harney still supports one of the best crappie populations sampled this year. FWC biologists recorded the second-highest catch rates of harvestable-size crappie and the highest catch rate of crappie greater than 12 inches in length in 2006. Most of the angling effort occurs near the south shoreline in 6-7 feet of water, but concentrations of crappie are found throughout the lake. Techniques that work well on lakes Jessup and Monroe also work well at Lake Harney.

Lake Talquin (west of Tallahassee)

Think about it. This 8,800-acre reservoir is just outside Tallahassee. It's where the FWC's top brass goes fishing, so you know they're going to make sure this baby doll gets all the attention it can use. Is it any surprise the state record 3-pound, 13 ¼-ounce black crappie was pulled out of Lake Talquin? This lake has lots of submerged stumps and snags, so you don't want to go hot-rodding around it in a boat. But, if you want to catch some nice crappie, and you're willing to abide by the 10-inch minimum size limit, you'll love it here.

Tenoroc / Mosaic Fish Management Areas (Polk County)

Fishing for crappie on Tenoroc, a 7,300-acre Fish Management Area near Lakeland, can be a rewarding experience, especially during cooler months. With lakes ranging in size from seven to 227 acres, anglers will have plenty of areas to dunk a bobber with a minnow or jig.

Schooling fish can often be caught using this rig near deep drop-offs and underwater humps. Casting a small beetlespin lure or jig tipped with a minnow can also produce some nice stringers of fish. Try Lakes 3,4,5, and F for some of the best action. Call the Tenoroc office at (863) 499-2422 for more information or to make reservations, because these lakes are only open to fishing four days a week.

Lakes within the 1000-acre Mosaic Fish Management area near Ft. Meade in southern Polk County, have some mighty fine crappie populations. The dozen lakes on the area range in size from 10 to 200 acres and many have shorelines with an abundant supply of woody brush, tree tops, and vegetation that are perfect targets for placing a well-hooked minnow under a float. Trolling deeper areas with this rig can also be productive, especially during the winter months.

Casting a small beetlespin or jig into deeper areas can also produce fish at times. Try Pine Lake East, Coulter Lake and Haul Road Pit for some of the best action. The area is only open to fishing four days a week and it's first come-first serve - but don't worry, you'll always have a spot somewhere. For more information, please call (863) 499-2421 ext.104.

Lake Istokpoga (near Sebring)

This lake may best be known for its largemouth bass fishing, but others know that winter is prime time to catch crappie in this 28,000-acre fishing wonder. From November through April, anglers troll open water with Hal-Flies, doll flies, spinner jigs and Napier jigs to locate schools of crappie and then rack up the numbers. When the water temperature stabilizes around 65 degrees, crappie move into bulrush and spatterdock along the shoreline to spawn. There's a trick to catching them when that happens. Move slowly through the vegetation in three to six feet of water and thoroughly cover the holes and pockets among the vegetation with a crappie jig.

Lake Kissimmee (east of the city of Lake Wales)

It's not just a famous largemouth bass fishing spot. A few years ago, you wouldn't have seen 35,000-acre Lake Kissimmee on this list, but . . . BOOM . . . things changed about four years ago, and crappie fishing here has been excellent ever since. Anglers are catching big ones too. Some of them throw the 10-inchers back, and say things like "That one was tiny." To catch your share of crappie in this lake, fish with minnows and jigs along the grass line and offshore. The deeper holes off the grass lines are good spots too.

Lake Marian (southeast Ocoola county, east of Lake Kissimmee)

This is the lake to fish when you want to catch lots of crappie, and you don't care if they're not the biggest fish you've ever seen. They're big enough at 9 inches or more though, and they're packed into this 5,739-acre lake; so, it's not hard to find them with minnows, small jigs and such. Troll, drift fish...whatever works for you, and go home and have fresh fish for dinner. Then, just for fun, call your friends up north, who are in the middle of a blizzard, and rub it in about your fishing trip.

Lake Weir (south Marion County)

This is another lake on the rebound that is producing very good crappie catches. FWC biologists have observed that crappie sizes are running slightly larger in the early part of the 2006-07 season compared to last year's sizes. Located near Weirsdale, this 5685-acre lake is somewhat atypical, with lots of depths exceeding 20 feet and irregular bottom encounters. The FWC refurbished many old fish attractors and built several new ones this summer and anglers are already utilizing them successfully. For productive GPS coordinates of these attractors, contact our fishery biologists at 352-732-1225. Most anglers use minnows and grass shrimp near the attractors, but some will drift the open waters too.

West Lake Tohopekaliga (south of the city of Kissimmee)

In addition to its fame as a nationally acclaimed largemouth bass destination, Lake Toho has quickly gained a reputation in central Florida as a super spot for big and abundant crappie. Quite a few FWC "Big Catch" crappie (minimum 14 inches in length or 2 pounds in weight) have already been reported this year and fall catch rates approached 2½ fish per hour. Anglers are having the most success on FWC fish attractors with Hal Flies (most any color) and minnows. For GPS coordinates of the fish attractors on Lake Toho, contact our fishery biologists at 407-846-5300.

Lake Trafford (southwest of Fort Myers)

Located about 30 miles southwest of Fort Myers, this 1,500-acre lake has historically produced the highest catch rates of crappie in Florida. A devastating fish kill in April 2004 forced us to take Lake Trafford off the list, and we were hoping to add it back in a few years. However, the crappie population has roared back much faster than anticipated, and we are very pleased to add Trafford back to the list this year. Overall crappie catch rates in FWC nets in September 2006 were the highest of any lake sampled this year, as were catch rates of harvestable-size crappie. Most of the harvestable-size crappie were between 9-10 inches, but they were plentiful. A lake restoration project has taken over four million cubic yards of sediment from the lake, substantially deepening much of the lake. Try drifting minnows early or late off the eastern and northern shorelines, or jigging along the vegetated shorelines.

Oklawaha Chain of Lakes (Lake County)

Of the many lakes found in this large chain, we would like to recommend lakes Dora, Beauclair, Griffin, and Harris to anglers searching for crappie in central Florida. If you are looking for large numbers of crappie, try Griffin and Harris. For bigger fish, go where the tournament anglers fish go when on the trail, lakes Dora and Beauclair. These two lakes have consistently produced the top weights in all of the tournaments the past three years. Try drifting jigs tipped with minnows along Dora's north shoreline and Beauclair's west shoreline. For more information, contact biologists at 352-742-6438.

See MyFWC.com/fishing/updates for more FishBuster columns.