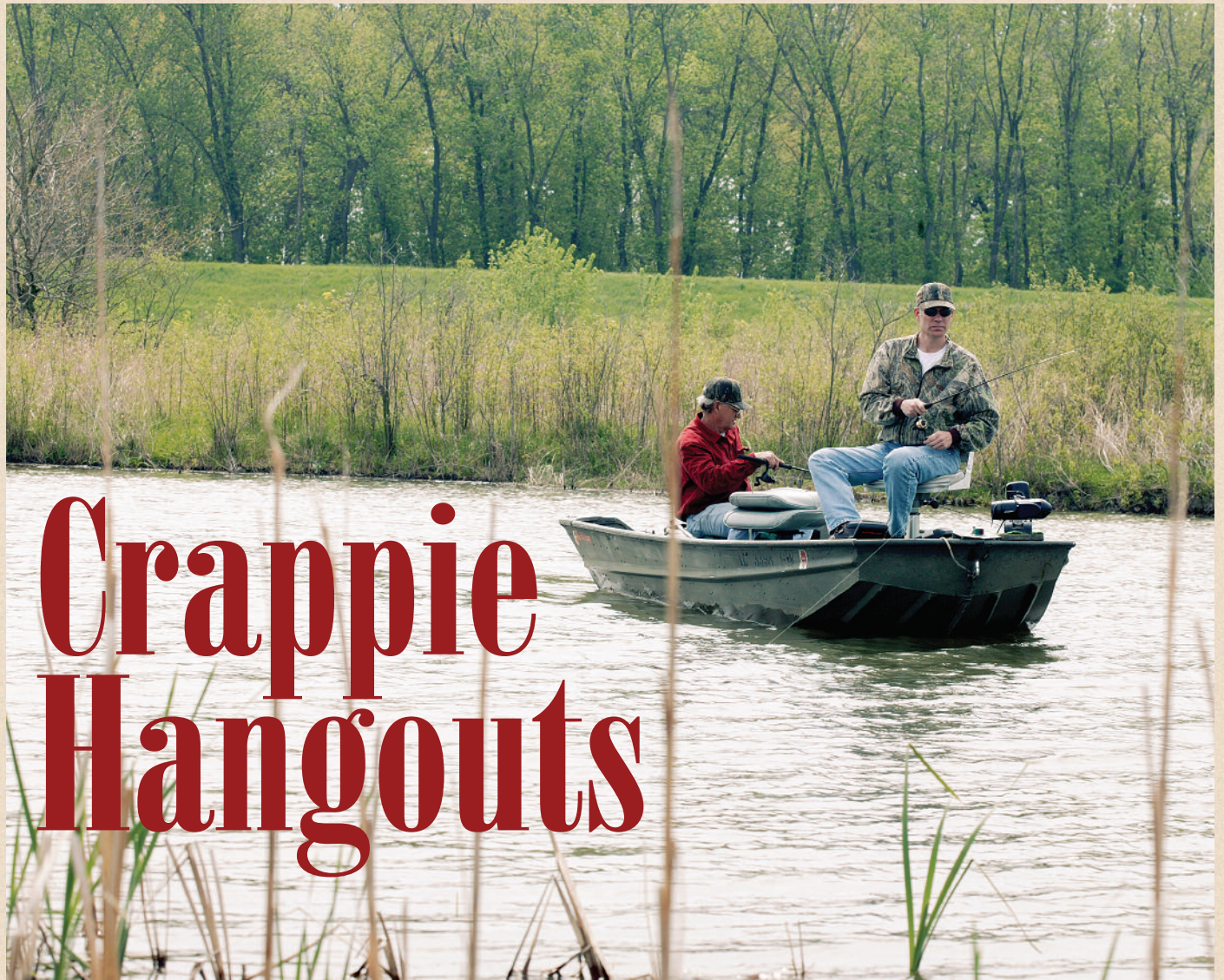


Cover is key to locating these popular panfish.



Crappie Hangouts

Story By Joe Bauer
Photos By Adele Hodde

To many outdoors people, the start of spring is signaled by morel mushrooms popping, or the ushering in of Illinois' turkey season. For others, spring has sprung when the crappies start to spawn. Illinois is home to numerous wonderful crappie fisheries—as well as hopeful anglers working hard to haul in some fish for the fryer.

One of these fisheries is Banner Marsh State Fish and Wildlife Area in Fulton County. This 5,524 acre area is located about 25 miles southwest of Peoria in central Illinois. It is a

reclaimed coal mining area that the Department of Natural Resources has managed since 1978.

Gary Sweeney has been fishing most of his life and has been a frequent visitor to Banner Marsh for “20 some-odd years.” He enjoys fishing for crappies, both the black and white variety, during the spring spawn.

“Crappies are easy to fish but are hard to find sometimes,” said Sweeney as he dragged a white-bodied, red-skirted crappie jig across a submerged brush pile. “Once you locate them on their spawning beds you can get into a good mess of fish.”

During an outing, Sweeney moves to numerous locations until he finds what he is looking for. Familiar with Banner Marsh, Sweeney knows the spots that produce for him and offers a few sug-

Submerged brush piles can be crappie hotspots, especially those near drop-offs and old creek channels.

gestions for newcomers to the waters.

Finding stick-ups and brush piles is key. “Crappies like the cover and they will move to these areas before and during the spawn.”

When asked if he thought the weather or the time of year was more important to triggering the spawn, Sweeney said the spawn always seems to get started around Mother's Day.

“Weather changes the places where you fish more than when you fish,” Sweeney explained. Changing water levels due to more or less rain will expose or cover some of his favorite brush piles and stumps.

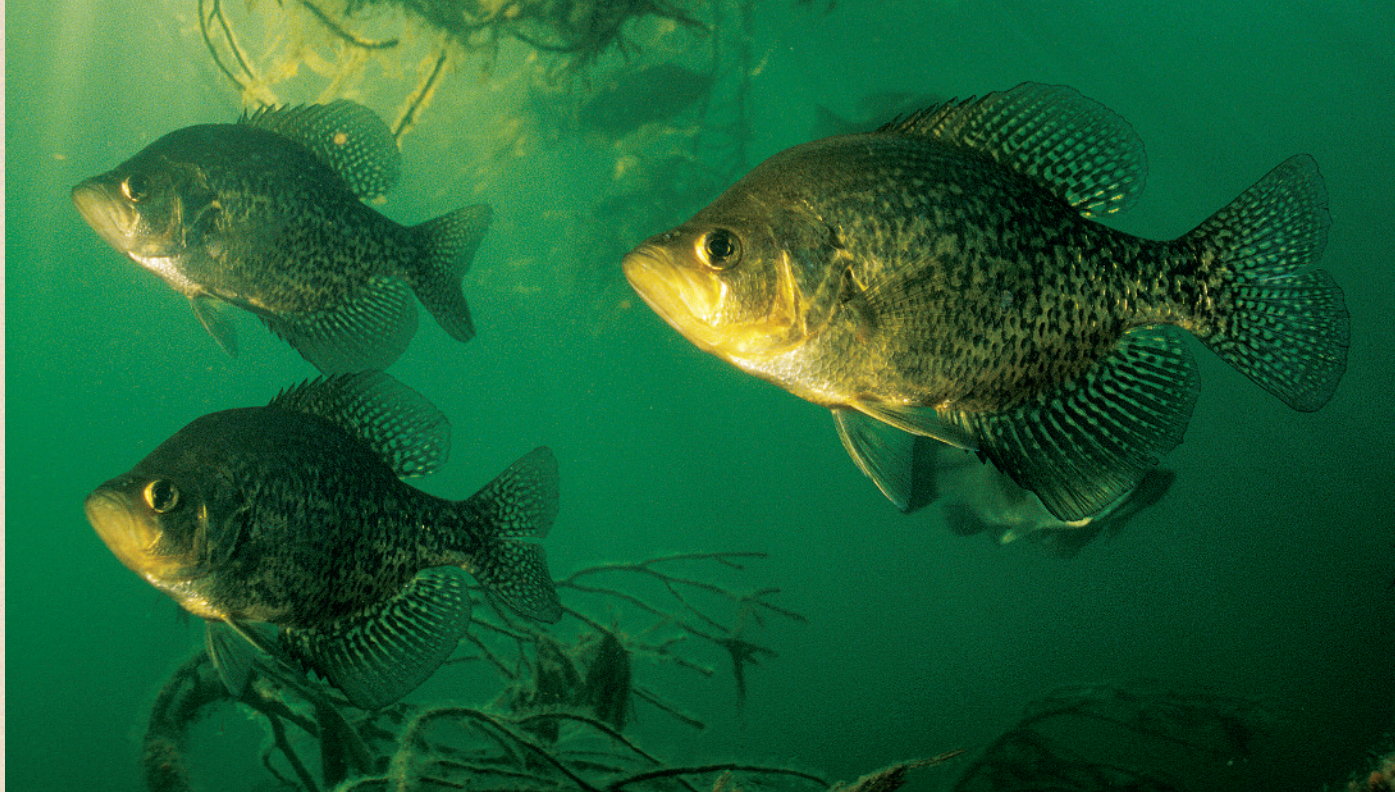


Photo by Eric Engbretson, Engbretson Underwater Photography, www.underwaterfishphotos.com.

A member of the sunfish family, black crappie (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*) are found statewide in well-vegetated lakes and in the clear, backwater areas of rivers. This fish is less common than its cousin, the white crappie.

Sweeney used several different fishing techniques on this day. In calmer areas, he cast a crappie jig with a bobber near a brush pile, retrieving the lure using a jigging action, giving the rod tip a slight tug—letting the lure rest for a few seconds—and then repeating the process until the jig was back at the boat. When the crappies are doing what Sweeney hopes, the bobber will disappear with a splash and a glistening fish ends up in the boat.

In windier areas, casting light tackle can be more difficult. Sweeney switches to his long crappie rod and either hangs the jig over the boat or extends the rod

out to get to the ever-necessary stump. Using this fishing style takes a bit more finesse and waiting to feel the fish hit the jig. On occasion, Sweeney tips his jig with a minnow; however, he has a thought on this technique. “If the crappies are going to bite, they’ll hit the jig.”

Sweeney also has a few unorthodox methods that he uses to see if the crappie fishing is getting “right.”

“Sometimes I will come out here and throw a small- to mid-sized crankbait. If



the crappies are aggressive enough to hit that, the fishing is going to get good.”

An angler’s favorite jig head/body type and color combination are as varied as the people themselves. Add to the mix a few different weights of the jig head and the number of possible presentations is staggering. The good news is that most of this type of tackle is inex-

pensive, so a person can have a wide variety without a serious investment.

Water clarity and sky cover seem to be the biggest influences on what fish will hit on any given day, so don’t be afraid to try a few different combinations before deeming a spot void of fish. With a little patience, you might strike the right coupling and find the “fish favorite” that day.



Joe Bauer is an avid outdoorsman and works for the DNR Division of Education in Springfield.

During the summer months, Banner Marsh crappies head to deeper water and the fishing becomes more difficult. You must locate the fish and work a jig deeper into the areas where the fish are at. Modern electronics, such as a depth/fish finder make this task much easier.

Fishing regulations change significantly during the fall. Waterfowl hunting is a big draw at Banner Marsh and the lake is closed to boats, with the exception of waterfowl hunters, for the duration of the waterfowl season. Bank fishing is allowed after hunting hours end for the day, which is 1 p.m.

For further information, including site fishing regulations, contact the site by calling (309) 647-9184 or visiting www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R1/banner.htm.



One of the staggering number of jig head/body combinations available to crappie anglers.