Crappie: Itâ€™s whatâ€™s for dinner

by Scott_Staats

I not only love to fish, I love to eat fish. One of my favorite eating fish can be found just east of town in Ochoco Reservoir. I knew there were crappie in the reservoir but never heard of anglers catching lots of fish or any big fish â€“ until the last few years.

According to Brett Hodgson, fish biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Prineville, crappie were first detected in the reservoir in 1997 during sampling and their numbers continued to increase each year. However, Hodgson predicts that the average size of the crappie will decrease in the next few years.

Mike Lunn with a crappie caught at Central Oregon's Ochoco Reservoir - photo by Scott Staats Last week I spent a few hours with Mike Lunn of Prineville specifically targeting these tasty panfish. We started out in the upper part of the reservoir around some submerged willows and other brush and began casting our jigs. It didnâ€™t take long for the fun to begin. Each of us got into fish on our second or third cast.

By the time we headed back to the boat ramp we figured we caught about 75 crappie. I brought eight of the fish home for dinner that measured around nine inches.

Most fish seemed to be near the bottom in eight to ten feet of water. They took our jigs so softly that at times it felt like we were stuck on the bottom. It appears we hit the spawn just right. These black crappie were very dark, especially around the face. Hodgson said this darkening indicates that they are defending spawning beds. As the temperature warms up, the fish will head for deeper water but fishing should remain good for the next few weeks or so.

As for technique to catch crappie, we cast jigs toward shore and brought them back slowly on the bottom. We used typical crappie jigs in chartreuse or red and white. A small split shot on the line an inch or two above the jig will give it a more natural swimming action the fish canâ€™t ignore. I found that I had more luck when tipping the jig with Power Bait Crappie Nibbles.

Lunn said crappie are among his favorite freshwater fish to eat. â€œThey have a mild flavor and are a nice flaky meat when you fry them up,â€• he added. He likes to use a batter called Louisiana Fish Fry, which is available in most grocery stores.

â€œI like crappie fishing and just catching whateverâ€™s biting,â€• Lunn explained. He added that crappie fishing at Ochoco Reservoir would be a great outing for kids.

Although crappie are fun to catch and good eating, ODFW would rather the fish not be in the reservoir.

â€œWe are quite disappointed that crappie and bullhead were illegally introduced into Ochoco Reservoir,â€• said Hodgson. â€œI think ultimately it will have a negative impact on the trout fishing; it already has in Prineville Reservoir.â€• He said that people think they may be helping out a fishery by planting other species illegally, but in reality they are hurting it.

Last summer I fished the very upper end of the reservoir and caught crappie on almost every cast but most measured only five or six inches. Two and three years ago, crappie were averaging nine or ten inches with several in the 12- to 13-inch range. It seems ODFW is right about the fish getting smaller each year since they compete not only with other fish but also with their own species. I guess it shows what overpopulation can do to a species.

One of the best ways to get kids exposed to fishing is to take them out after crappie. A few tips will help young anglers locate and catch these panfish in local lakes or reservoirs.

-Crappie are structure oriented and can be found near docks, floating logs, rocky shores, willows and gravel bars usually in about six to ten feet of water. For best luck try chartreuse or red and white crappie jigs on weighted hooks. Cast the jig toward your target and slowly work it back, bouncing it off the bottom. Or use a jig below a bobber so you can tell when you get a bite.

-If you want to have a more successful fishing trip, keep an eye on the barometer. When the barometric pressure is low, fish tend stay on the bottom and donâ€™t feed much. But, when the pressure is on the rise and between 31 and 34, theyâ€™ll hit just about anything you throw at them.

-An electric fillet knife helps out tremendously when you bring a few dozen fish back from the lake. When I got my electric knife out last week, I found that the battery was dead and used the â€˜ole traditional fillet knife. Lucky for me I only brought eight fish home. Dip the fillets in batter and fry up a tasty meal.

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