

# Weightless Slabs

BY DANIEL REHM

No, we're not talking about crappie in space. What I'm talking about is leaving your split shot and jigs at home.

I'm also going to suggest that you get out on the water a little sooner than you might normally expect for spring spawners. The books all say from roughly 64 to 68 degrees is the optimum water temp for spawning crappie, but you could already have a few limits under your belt by then.

Primarily what we're talking about is water temps in the low to mid-50s. The best time of



year associated with a calendar date will vary. In southern Wisconsin those temps are breached historically within the first few weeks of May. In northern Wisconsin and central to north Minnesota, I've had more success in late May or even early June. Coincidentally, the first weekend in May usually coincides with the season opener for game fish in Wisconsin, so when the masses have walleye on the mind, you may have the hot spots to yourself.

Now, let's talk about what will and will not work. What *will* work is clear water and as little wind as possible. Start with a #8 short shank hook and a small fat head minnow. You can hook them just about any way you'd like, either through the lips, through the dorsal or even the tail. Just make sure they're still alive and kicking. Loosely hooking the bait will cause a few to fly away during casting, but the end results should make it worth the purchase of an extra scoop.

Long casts are key. It's only a few weeks since ice out and the water is clear so fish are usually pretty spooky. I like to use at least a nine-foot, ultra-light spinning rod, spooled with four-pound test mono. The length helps not only with casting distance, but also aids in the proper hookset. Crappie have soft mouths so a stern lift of the rod is usually all that is needed for a solid hook-up.

Don't get too excited and over zealously ram the hook home; you'll most likely end up either pulling the bait away, or worse yet, ripping their mouths. The secret is in the float. You will need to find a float that hooks to your line. A slip bobber will not work. You still need some weight for casting, so look for models that have a piece of lead crimped around one end. Try to stay away from the round

ones if you can—the resistance is a little high, but they will work in a pinch. Set the depth 25 to 50 percent deeper than the water you are fishing—if you are very shallow, and closer to bottom depth if the area is more than eight or nine feet deep. Long clipped-on bobbers can become difficult to control when casting if you set them much deeper. What I mean is, if the water is four feet deep, set the float at five or six feet. Experiment some, but generally a greater distance between the float and the hook is better as long as it is still manageable. The fish will somewhat determine the length anyhow based upon the depth of the water where you find them.

What *won't* work is an excess of wind. Wind hurts us for a number of reasons. First of all, avoid the urge to anchor. These early fish are nomadic and will be constantly on the move. Too much breeze can blow you through an area too quickly. Try to move into your targeted area as quietly as possible. Use your electric motors, oars, or a paddle to maneuver the boat. Start with a long cast followed by a few moments of patience. Give your minnow a chance to swim. Remember, there will be no weight between the float and the hook. Your minnow may only be swimming a few inches below the surface, but it will be swimming freely, and that is important.

Start a slow twitch and retrieve, and I mean slow. Reel in just enough line to take up the slack created by the twitch. Let the line behind your float act like a tail on a kite in a light breeze. Watch your float. It may only sink slightly below the water line or dance across the surface from left to right without ever going under. Set the hook, but again, not too hard. Start shallow and work deeper.

Keep your eyes open for brush that



might be sticking out of the water. These are key areas as crappie love wood. Don't get too close; remember, they're spooky.

It's not just boat control and casting that is hampered by the wind. The wind makes it harder to find fish. Once again, keep your eyes open. More times than not, after spending countless hours searching for fish, it was the crappie themselves that alerted me to their presence. Crappie love to chase minnows toward the surface. Often times, schools of minnows will break the surface presumably in their haste to escape being eaten. Every time I have seen this in likely spring holding areas, there were crappie close by. I would have never seen them with wind driven waves on the water. I have spotted ospreys passing overhead and spooking schools of minnows just under the surface that I would have never seen if waves were present. Again, crappie were close by.

Basically, skipping the split shot

keeps the minnow moving naturally and still allows the angler to control the bait and cover a lot of water. A tail hooked minnow will still swim under its own power but look wounded and therefore far more helpless and possibly more attractive. When the bite slows down, I'll try this for a change-up and it usually puts a few more fish in the boat.

Be prepared to tie into a few bass; it never fails. That's definitely okay though. That just tells me I'm in the right place for catching fish. I've used weightless techniques with leeches for walleye and red worms for bluegill. There is no question it will outperform other methods when the water is cold, clear and the fish are spooky. Maybe the best part about chasing early crappie is that it works well on bright, warm, sunny, spring days when the air seems to be alive with the sounds of spring and it's simply satisfying just to be there.

## Up North Fishing Report

BY ART ANDERSON

Open water fishing for game fish is here. May 7 is opening day for northern and walleye. Muskie open May 28 and bass season opens June 18. You can fish for bass starting May 7, but only catch and release only until June 18.

I can't wait for the "swoooosh" of a muskie, the reel-screaming run of a northern, or the headshake of a walleye. I'm ready! My hooks are sharp and the boat is shipshape. Although, I'm just a little out of shape from this winter and Kay's good cooking.

Please check out all the little things that can wreck a fun time. Grease those bearings, check that battery, check the lights on the trailer and boat and check tire pressure—on the spare, too. Make sure the anchor rope is in good shape, your rods are in good shape, and check the guides with a cotton swab for cuts. Check if the reels need oiling or need to be spooled with new line. Check your net for rot or cut webbing. Have a map of the lake you're going to, and call around to see where the fish are biting.

**MUSKIE:** Very shallow, very slow, and very small. Use small spinners that run shallow, twitch baits that stop, or six-inch sucker minnows rigged for casting into shallows.

**NORTHERN:** On the mud flats near drop offs, anywhere there are weeds. Use small spinners or a Johnson silver minnow.

**Walleye:** Fathead minnows are the bait of choice; in dark water use a brightly colored head, and in clear water use a silver or white head. Jump your retrieve and don't drag it; it will collect junk.

**BASS:** They will be on their beds. Please handle them with care because one dead fish is a mess of dead fry. We are blessed with a great bass fishery; let's keep it that way!

**CRAPPIE:** They're in shallow in last year's dead reeds. Use green jig heads with crappie minnows or a green tube jig—that's the color that works!

**PERCH:** They're on the mud flats in the short weeds hitting crappie minnows. Use a small jig, light green, and jump it along the bottom. Don't drag it; it will pick up junk.

**Panfish:** Use ice fishing jigs with squished grubs. They are in the weeds. Be quiet, as they will spook easy this time of year. Don't throw your anchor—slide it in. Don't drop anything in the bottom of the boat and no loud radio playing or shouting. It was very quiet under the ice over the winter.

Please read the regulations, know the rules, keep only what you can eat and save some for me.

Know the lake your on, get a map, have all the items the rules say you must have and a few more for your comfort. The water is still cold, so be careful and pay attention. Respect other fishermen and use your head and you will be respected in return.

Help someone in need on the water—it is a unwritten law. Have a great time and catch some fish. For more information, please feel free to write me at An Outdoor Experience Guided by Art, 635 Bond Blvd., Eagle River, WI 54521; or call me at 715-479-1758, or email at Art@nnex.net.

Release is the way to go!

A Great Wisconsin Fishing Experience Begins With A Great Guide

AN OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE  
GUIDED BY ART



- muskie
- walleye
- bass
- all tackle provided
- come learn from my 50 years on the water

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