

Crab Orchard's Fabulous Crappie

by Lee Keck

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It hadn't been more than a few years ago when on the water no more than 10 minutes when Larry "Fatman" Fitch set his hook into one of Crab Orchard Lake's monster crappie. Measuring somewhere between 14 and 15 inches in length, this fish was one of the largest I'd seen this year.

"These Crab Orchard fish are definitely some of the nicest crappie you'll find in Illinois," Fitch said. "And, it seems like this lake holds plenty of big crappie every year."

Fitch, like most folks in our state's southern reaches, has been blessed with a nickname. In his particular case, most folks refer to him as the Fatman. Though most folks in this area might disagree, I find this name a bit odd since he really is not particularly heavy.

"Folks here have called me Fatman ever since I was very young," he explained. "In fact, most people around these parts wouldn't know who you were talking about if you referred to me by my real name."

Furthermore, his son is called Fatboy and his grandson is nicknamed Fatbaby. His telephone answering machine even answers phone calls with a recording something like, "This is the Fatman, leave a message after the beep."

Still, nickname or not, Fatman knows how to catch these Crab Orchard Lake crappie. Even on a very slow fishing day like last Tuesday, he managed put together a respectable catch of quality crappie within only a few hours.

While other crappie anglers on the very same lake were complaining that the fishing had slowed to a mere crawl, the Fatman was hauling in the big slabs.

"The water temperatures in this lake are still in the low- to mid-sixties," he explained.

"Once they cool down into the fifties, we'll likely see this crappie bite explode."

Like most of Crab Orchard's regular crappie anglers, Fatman plays a major role each year in the building and sinking special fish attractors. There are now literally hundreds of these stakebeds, as most locals refer to these attractors, placed throughout the lake.

"The fish seem to use them just much, if not more, than the brushpiles we used to place in this lake," he explained. "Best of all, these stakebeds are much easier to fish and we lose fewer lures and hooks in them."

During these slow fishing times, Fatman's technique was to go from stakebed to stakebed, catching an occasional fish or two from these locations.

"It currently seems like the stakebeds located in deeper water are the best producers," he explained. "As these waters continue to cool, crappie will start swarming to nearly all the attractors and the fishing will be much better."

With the warmer than average temperatures experienced last year, anglers at this lake enjoyed good fishing from January through early spring.

"Right now, I look for the bite to really turn on during November and December," he explained. "And the way things look, this could be a particularly good winter for catching really big crappie from this lake."

Until then, Fatman plans to focus most of his attention to his favorite pastime of squirrel hunting. When time permits, he devotes several mornings each week to pursuing these bushy-tailed critters.

"I've always loved to squirrel hunt and the lands here in the Crab Orchard Refuge are loaded with them," he explained. "Unfortunately, I now have some health issues with my legs and cannot walk nearly as much as before."

Fatman had hoped that he could use some sort of four-wheeler or off-road vehicle to help him get around the hills and valleys of the refuge. However, refuge regulations do not permit the use of such vehicles.

"That's why I bought a couple of mules," he explained. "These are legal to use and are much more sure-footed than horses."

At that point, I just couldn't keep from asking him if the two mules were named Fatmule One and Fatmule Two. I was almost sure that the answer would be a definite yes.

"Nope," he replied. "I call them Fred and Pearl."

Anglers wishing to learn more about the fishing opportunities at Crab Orchard Lake or other great destinations in the area can contact the Williamson County Tourism Bureau at (800)433-7399. The bureau offers assistance with planning trips, as well as offering advice on lodging, angling and dining options.