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# Think Small For Big Bass & Crappie

**Smaller lakes can actually yield big dividends for these popular freshwater species**  
*text and photography by Soc Clay*

The first warming rays of sunlight were turning the mist rising from the mirrored surface of the lake into mystifying shades of gold. A light breeze swirling across the nearby dam caused the colors to move. “The lake’s dancing,” Mark Davis said, humming a ditty as he eased the bass boat off the trailer.

There wasn’t really a ramp there, just a grassy bank where others had unloaded small boats in the past. In fact, this might have been the first time a 22-foot high-performance fishing rig had ever been seen on this small lake in southern Alabama.

The big Skeeter is Mark’s home away from home. All his lures, rods, reels, rain gear, extra changes of clothes...you name it and it’s in this boat. The rig also sports a 24-volt trolling motor that provides a convenient way of getting around on small

lakes that may have a horsepower limit.

Mark is one of the top tournament fishermen in America, plus he holds a title a yard long from the Shakespeare Fishing Tackle Company, where he has tested consumer products for this historic tackle maker for nigh on two decades.

I suspect he’s also fished about every kind of water in North America, from the tiniest mountain streams to blue water salt. It’s hard to pin him down on the best places he’s fished, but the fact that he’s in south-

ern Alabama, fishing a series of small lakes, might be a clue.

In the two days we’ve fished here with friends of ours from the fishing tackle industry, our group has managed to catch two largemouth in the eight-pound class, a slew of two- and three-pounders, and too many crappie in the one- to two-pound class to keep count of. Not bad fishing for post-spawn bass and crappie during late-spring. Not bad at all.

Our targets during all this fish-catch-

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ing business were old watershed lakes that were constructed on the properties of Great Southern Outdoors Wildlife Plantation located near Union Springs, Alabama. These lakes are part of a huge system of reservoirs made possible with grants from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture during the 1960s and '70s period. Called "watershed lakes," there are nearly 5,000 of them scattered across the U.S., ranging in size from large ponds to big reservoirs. On average they run between 50 and 150 acres.

While large reservoirs reach their peak of fish production during the first 10-15 years, and are inundated with increased pleasure boat use during much of the fishing season, smaller lakes—especially those found on private lands—produce good catches year after year.

**It's long been said you can have quality crappie fishing in small lakes. The trick is discovering where in the water column the fish are holding, and what lures they're hungry for that day.**

Linda Rubis, Marketing Director for Pure Fishing (Berkley), had brought a sack full of scented Power Baits she wanted us to try out. Both Linda and



Matt Gray of Eagle Claw reminded me their respected companies have strong reputations for creating products for fishing small lakes.

Matt said these type of lakes are great news for anglers searching for places where they can bring the entire family and fish in a protected, laid-back environment that offers better fishing than almost anywhere, about any time of the season.

Rex Pritchett III, Big Rex (his father) and Big Pop (his grandfather) have managed the 6,000-acre Great Southern Outdoors Wildlife Plantation for trophy whitetail deer and wild turkey hunting for years. But since the facility has to be maintained year-round, they decided to utilize the great fishing potential the lakes offer to attract guests during the non-hunting seasons. After years of intense fishery management of the three lakes on the property, he's found the answer. Today, anglers are afforded excellent accommodations, terrific southern food, boats, trolling motors



and good advice for a reasonable cost—and the fishing licenses are free.

"You know, the biggest bass taken from Great Southern lakes to date is a 16-1/2 pounder, and it's still swimming there," said Blythe Palmara, my old friend from Pennzoil Oil Company, who was churning the waters to froth using the brand new SPRO BBZ-1 swimbait that was designed to catch a world-record bass from California. As I watched Blythe manhandle the big lure, I thought about the quart of Pennzoil in its yellow container that I've been packing in my fishing duffel for years. Force of habit from the old days, I guess, when I used it for everything from gas/oil mixtures for old outboards to replenishing the oil supply in my worn-out truck. I even use the stuff to oil my reels!

As Mark and I worked lures alongside an old fence row that was left when the lake was filled, the trolling motor sudden-



**(Left)** A tube bait proved to be the ticket for this strapping bass caught by Michigan Out-of-Doors TV host Kelly Gotch.

ly bogged down. We had come too close to one of the posts where a tangle of rusty barbed wire had been left.

Never fear, I told Mark, whipping out my trusty tool that I never leave home without. Made by Leatherman, the wire cutter on the back of the pliers made easy work of freeing the motor, and Mark and I continued our quest to find a big bass hanging out by the old wood.

"The reason these particular lakes are such good producers of quality size bass and crappie," Mark said, making a cast that sent the lure a country mile, "is due to fishery management that keeps water quality high with lots of forage fish providing food for bass and crappie." He explained that the catch and release program here protects big bass, but anglers are encouraged to keep limits of crappie, bluegill and channel cats to keep those populations in check.

Yet while small bodies of water like those found at Great Southern are often

filled with bass and panfish, some anglers have a difficult time catching fish. To remedy the problem, Mark's advice is to focus on two techniques for dissecting small, foreign bodies of water quickly for both bass and crappie.

## Bass Strategy

Starting with bass, Mark wants to identify and match the primary food sources in small lakes and impoundments he hasn't fished before. It's easy to find out if there are shad, golden shiners or a specific type of baitfish native to the region. Local fisherman, lake owners or the local bait and tackle shop will know. His first lure selection will be slender neutral color (chrome blue/chrome black) minnow imitations he calls "search baits" that cover water quickly. These include jerkbaits, crankbaits and topwater.

Depending on the amount of cover and water clarity, anglers should use the lightest line they can get away with. Not only

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**(Left)** A diversity of lures are recommended in order to pinpoint fish location and food preferences for the day. **(Right)** A hand-full of Roadrunners, grubs and leadheads are the lures needed to catch a boat-load of crappie on smaller impoundments.



**(Left)** Even Mark Davis, who holds several titles at the Shakespeare Fishing Tackle Company and is considered one of the top sport fishermen in the nation, is proud of these twin eight-pounders taken from the fertile waters of Great Southern Outdoors Wildlife Plantation.

will light lines improve the action of the lures, they also generate more strikes, especially in clearer conditions. Mark opts for 8-12 lb. test for both jerkbaits and crankbaits, and a bit heavier on topwater offerings if cover is present. He advises anglers to focus on banks and visible struc-

ture, such as lay-down trees, stumps, grass lines, points, islands and docks. If this approach fails, change lures.

Reaction bite lures include lipless

crankbaits and spinnerbaits fished around woody or weedy cover. These are designed for covering water quickly to find active bass. Mark also uses lipless crankbaits to

probe open-water flats, breaks and areas not covered by the first approach. The spinnerbait stays at the ready for multiple casts to structure targets such as docks, stumps and grass lines—anything that can be considered an ambush point. The key is keeping fish from getting a good look at the lure. Think of a mouse running across the floor. The cat doesn't think about it, it just reacts. Same thing for bass.

typically be more difficult than bass is that they use the entire water column (shallow to deep), but their strike zone is smaller. That means you need to make a conscious effort to vary the depth your bait is running until you find them. Since crappies are school fish, duplicate the retrieve once you have them figured out.

Start with light line (4-lb) and a 1/16-

to 1/8-ounce bait, such as a Roadrunner. If you don't have any luck, change colors and presentations until you find the fish and figure out the color. Start by positioning yourself for a long cast out from the bank and working the bait back through the water column at different depths, changing colors periodically. If that doesn't work, Mark suggests anglers use the depth the boat is sitting in as their new bank and back off a long cast, and so on until fish are found and a pattern is established. If there's any structure or shaded areas, it's important to work them thoroughly. The long-time pro from Shakespeare reminds us we are after a fish that might not be at the top of the food chain, so expect them to school up or hang close to structure for safety.

## Dissecting Lakes For Bass & Crappie

### BASS

- Identify the main food source. Match lures size and color with the food source (shad, frogs, sunfish, etc.).
- Use the lightest line possible to fish search baits (jerkbaits, crankbaits and topwater) to find bass along shorelines, sunken islands, point drops and ledges.
- Use reaction lures (spinnerbaits, lipless cranks and rattle lures) around wood, weed or rocky cover.
- Use Texas-rigged plastic worms, lizards and such to probe point drops, ledges and other bottom structure.

### CRAPPIE

- Identify the main food source.
- Use light lines (four-pound test).
- Work the shoreline with small lures, such as a Road Runner, tiny crankbaits and spinners.
- Use slow, stop-and-start retrieves along banks and visible woody cover.
- Change lure color frequently until the preferred one is found.
- Back off banks and work various depths to locate crappie.
- Once crappie are located, fish the area thoroughly, searching for schooling fish.

### Crappie Sense

Crappies in smaller lakes are typically dependant on two things as well—color and location. Get those two things nailed down and you'll be home free with crappies. You can be in the right area with the right bait with bass and still not get any takers, but crappies are usually less picky. Mark notes line size is a key with these panfish, not only because of better action with smaller baits, but because lighter line allows longer casts and faster coverage of water. The one area where crappies can



### For More Information

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### About The Author

Soc Clay's favorite lakes to fish for bass and crappie are those less than 300 acres in size.