



# The School of Fish

by Duane Ryks

## Ice-Out Panfish.

Please note:

The information that I am about to share with you will help you catch more fish. Please practice catch-and-release. It is OK to keep some fish to eat, but release some for the future.

As I write this, winter still has us in its grip. It looks like ice out is still a week or two away in central Minnesota.

The earliest open water fishing most anglers enjoy is panfishing. I am no exception. Even though I don't eat a lot of panfish, I do enjoy catching them. Those without a boat find this a great time to be out because often the best action is close to shore. Be considerate of shoreline owners. Do not trespass on other people's property. Many will give you permission if you ask politely and pick up after yourself. Road right-of-ways and bridge areas usually don't require permission.

The first places to look for early season sunfish and crappies are in shallow bays and channels off of the main lake. Timing can vary from lake to lake. Shallow, dark water or stained water lakes warm first. Sometimes anglers can be catching fish on these lakes while neighboring lakes are still covered in ice. All the ice doesn't have to be off a lake to find panfish in these shallow bays. I have caught crappies by casting onto the receding ice and then dragging my bait off the edge to waiting fish.

Remember those areas of the lake that were weed-choked last summer? That's where you want to start. Bays that have a lot of decaying weeds and muck warm more quickly than those

with clean sand. I look especially in areas that have lily pads later in the season. The roots of lily pads are often floating shortly after ice out. They draw panfish like magnets. I believe it because they provide some overhead cover and there are a lot of emerging insect larvae and minnows drawn to the darker mud below.

Another good place to look for panfish is in remnants of reeds and cattails. Downed trees in the water also draw fish, especially those with a lot of small twigs and branches still left on.

If the lake doesn't have a bay, then check the shallow water on the northeast side of the lake. It usually warms the fastest because it gets the most sun. Small creeks, that may be dry later in the year, drain warm runoff water into lakes this time of year. Baitfish gather close to the mouth of these streams and attract the larger predators in search of a meal.

As the season progresses, small man-made channels off of the larger lakes become hot for panfish action. These larger lakes may not be known for their panfish, but they may have the largest crappies in the area. Most of these channels are so narrow that you can cast across them. The warm water draws baitfish and the crappies follow.

I do most of my fishing from a boat. It allows me to move to different areas easily without having to ask permission of the lakeshore owners. I start searching for panfish in the farthest reaches off of the main lake. Shallow water fishing requires being very quiet. In a boat, that may mean pulling my electric motor up nearly out of the water and then motoring a long way to get to

these shallow areas. A good pair of Polaroid sunglasses is a must. Your sonar probably won't do you much good in this shallow water.

My favorite bait is a small jig tipped with a minnow for crappie, or a wax worm for sunfish. If the fish are feeding aggressively, I go without live bait. Small hair jigs, or soft baits like Berkley Gulp work well in these circumstances. You can catch a lot more fish if you don't have to stop to bait your hook every time. Try white or chartreuse colors first. Later in the season I like pink, black, or silver colors for crappies.

A small bobber that clips to your line helps to get your line out further and detect light bites. I like to use a casting bubble to get my bait out even further. Casting bubbles are sometimes hard to find. They are used most often by trout anglers and are sold in those departments in tackle shops. Casting bubbles come in colors and clear plastic, I favor the latter. They have a rubber stop on both ends connected by a hollow rubber shank. You thread your line through the bubble. Then, pull one end open and allow some water to fill the bubble. Don't add too much water because you don't want a loud splash when it hits the water. Then twist the rubber to grip the line at the depth you want. It also makes it very easy to adjust the depth. Because your line runs through the float, they don't snag easily in weeds or brush.

Sometimes in early season you will find crappies staging in deeper channels adjacent to the shallow bays. This is especially true after a cold front. At those times I use my sonar to locate fish. You will have to use a slip bobber to get to these deeper fish, but otherwise my presentation remains the same. Deeper fish may be finicky and you may have to work your bait slower.



Casting bubbles, like those shown in the upper left, allow the angler to add water for weight. They have a rubber tube running down their spine which twists to grip the line making it easy to adjust the depth. The bobber in the lower right is a new style that twists to tighten on the line. The clear color doesn't spook fish in shallow water as easily.

While sunfish seem to bite best in the shallows during midday, crappies tend to bite better in early evening. That doesn't mean the crappies have left the area, they may simply drop back into deeper holes or channels during the bright part of the day, and then move back in later.