

HOW TO FISH FOR **SPRING PANFISH**



by Carl Haensel *photos by the author*

Fishing for panfish in spring is one of the true joys of the season. Warm spring days with brilliant sunshine and new growth all around make for beautiful days on the water. The fishing can often be some of the most memorable of the season. Panfish concentrate in shallow waters, making them easier to find, access and catch. Big panfish, often hard to come by, are visible in shallow water and make for exciting angling.

Tips and tricks

When I'm out on the water searching for spring panfish, I'm usually not alone. Plenty of people get the itch to go fishing in the spring, and with good access to nice fish, you will often find plenty of people on the water. More often than not, they're not catching a lot of fish. Here are some tips to find the fish and get finicky fish to bite and make your spring panfish outing successful.

Structure

Finding good structure can be the key to catching spring panfish. Wood is often the most important component. Trees that have fallen in the water next to the shoreline offer branches for panfish to hide among and are excellent areas to target. While structure can snag a lure from time to time, it often produces the biggest fish as well. Wood that has degraded and is merely a log on the bottom can hold fish, but is not as good an option. When the water begins to warm slightly, the fish will start to move into deeper water. Habitat structures that have been installed in lakes and reservoirs, like the porcupine cribs created by the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission, can be great options, especially if they are shallow enough in the spring.

Fish dark bottomed areas

When on your local lake or impoundment, look for shallow areas with dark bottoms to hold the most fish. If it's truly early in the season, try to find locations on the north side of the water body. These areas will not be shaded and warm up quickly. While you will find plenty of dark-bottomed areas on large flats, look for spots that are closer to deep water. Fish are more likely to head to these spots first, and don't like to cross these larger flats.



Look for downed trees near shore, like this spot on the Lehigh Canal near Allentown, to provide great fishing opportunities for spring panfish. Turtles resting on logs are a good sign that the water is deep enough to hold fish.

Think light weight

When you're fishing for spring panfish, think light. First, your rod and reel set-up should be lightweight. It's important to emphasize that light does not mean small. Longer, lightweight rods cast light baits better than short rods. Larger spinning reels have less resistance when casting and can cast further. Use 4-pound-test line to spool your spinning reel. Some anglers like to use 2-pound-test line, but it's hard to bring in a large fish when you hook one. A 2-pound crappie can put up quite a fight on light line. Next, use small hooks, lures and bobbers. It's a rare day when hooks larger than size 10 will bring in more fish than smaller ones. If you're fishing with a bobber, you can use a heavier bobber to get a greater casting distance, just make sure to weight the line below the bobber so the fish have the least amount of resistance to pull it underwater.

Sunfish

Sunfish are found in almost all good panfish waters. They're fun to catch and easy to target. Use



In waters without lots of wood, look for spring panfish around emerging aquatic vegetation like this yellow pond lily. Lilies and other emergent vegetation hold panfish throughout the spring and into summer. Panfish are easiest to fish in the spring.



Black Crappies spawn in the spring. Look for darkly colored males as a sign that Black Crappies are spawning.

small hooks to get them to bite consistently. Tiny jigs work well in the spring, and using 1/80 or 1/64-ounce models will bring more fish to hand. If cold weather sets in, use small baits like waxworms to entice sunfish. Using bobbers is more important with sunfish than other types of panfish. Often, a slower presentation with an ultralight bobber can make the difference.

Crappies

Some of the most popular spring panfish to target early in the year are black and white crappies. Crappies are particularly drawn to brushy cover, and finding a good "crappie tree" in a local lake can lead to years of good fishing. Crappies hit small jigs well, particularly feather or marabou versions. To draw crappies out of the brush, use a small Fathead Minnow on a plain hook. Set it below a bobber without any weight on the line. As spring progresses, crappies will hold under shallow-growing lily pads, sometimes in as little as 1 foot of water or less. A light presentation can take these fish as well.

Yellow Perch

While a popular winter panfish, Yellow Perch are often an afterthought in the spring. Perch are great table fare and good fun on light tackle. Look for perch to cruise flats in schools and be out in the open more than either sunfish or crappies. Yellow Perch will take both minnows and other small baits like waxworms or maggots. Small spoons can also take perch as the water warms. ☐