



# Chattering Late Spring Panfish

*by Jeff Knapp*

*photos by the author*

## Few lures have impacted the fishing industry as rapidly as chatter-style baits. Their initial success on the bass tournament trail led competing manufacturers to develop their own chatter-style offerings quicker than an office worker grabbing a free donut.

With the dust now settled, the opportunity exists to determine what niches chatter-style baits fill. The current variety of such lures lends itself to application beyond the pursuit of largemouth bass. Smaller versions have established themselves worthy of use by pan-anglers, particularly during late spring and early summer, when warming water temperatures warrant the use of moving bait.

A metal non-rotational blade—which varies in shape among manufacturers—is what gives chatter-style bait its chatter. The blade doesn't revolve; rather, it's hinged to the trailing bait. As the bait is retrieved, the blade's bite in the water transmits an irregular pull, resulting in a random action, which many days can be an intense trigger.

Most chatter-style baits incorporate a leadhead jig design, with plastic trailers of several shapes, including minnow-shaped bodies and synthetic skirts. More recently, stickbaits employing a chatter-style blade have hit the market, these too having a place in pan-fishing. A host of companies make jig-style chatterbaits in scaled-down sizes fitting for panfish.

Joe Renosky, a Pennsylvania lure-maker, has been on the chatter-style bait scene since the beginning, helping the manufacturer of the original version keep up with the intense initial demand. Since then, he's been a driving force in expanding the chatter-concept to other shapes and sizes. In-the-field experimentation is a constant aspect of this process, the results of which pan-fishing-wise, he shared with me.

### Wood cover crappies

The connection of springtime crappies to wood cover is a strong one. On most lakes, it's likely that the majority of the fish taken during the year come from such stuff, most often by folks soaking a small fathead minnow beneath a bobber.

As the water warms, though, a more active presentation can increase crappie catches in and around shallow wood cover. Chatter-style baits can be part of the formula for success.

"I think the vibration is the biggest factor," said Renosky, referring to the bite-triggering attributes of chatter-style baits. "The vibration is so much different than that of more conventional baits."

Smaller jig-type chatterbaits made for panfish and trout are most appropriate for crappies, as well as other panfish such as yellow perch and bluegills.

Most early spring wood-related tactics call for getting back in the thick stuff, where crappies hold. It pays to work the fringes of the cover as well as the open water near brush piles, beaver lodges and shoreline laydowns.

"The blade of the bait does a pretty good job of protecting the exposed hook," said Renosky. "It actually comes through the edges of wood better than you might expect."

Chatter-style baits have a built in erratic action, one likely to generate strikes on its own. Still, it can pay to experiment a bit, including a bit of stop-n-go, as well as bumping into cover where possible.

In regard to trailers, the standard dressings on most bait are skirted ones, sometimes married to a straight split-tail grub. Renosky, though, said he's had the best success with a

simple soft minnow-shaped trailer. Consider switching out the skirt on the bait for a soft-bodied minnow if it's not generating strikes.

"The action the blade imparts on the minnow really brings it to life, particularly realistic-looking minnows that have foil content," he said

While the high percentage spots will still be close to wood cover, fire the occasional cast out away from it to target schools of slabs suspended in nearby open water.

### Weed-edge panfish

The arrival of summer will bring more than just warmer water temperatures. Submerged weeds will be developed



*Crappies have larger tunnel-shaped mouths, while bluegills have smaller openings, something to consider when picking the size of chatter-style lures.*



***Farm ponds provide a good venue to oversized bluegills.***

enough to serve as a significant draw to not only larger gamefish, but panfish as well. It's well known that on clear water lakes like Armstrong County's Keystone Lake and Crawford County's Conneaut Lake, healthy stands of coontail and broad-leafed pondweed invite crappies, bluegills and yellow perch. While these fish will sometimes be located right along the edges of this cover, at times they will suspend out away from it a bit, perhaps to separate themselves from larger gamefish that may be holding on the edge.

Chatter-style baits are ideal for covering these zones. Since the smaller versions are available in sizes from 1/16- to 3/16-ounce, an angler can tailor things to the conditions of the day. On a clear water lake that has weedlines out to 12- to 14-feet, start out with a heavier version, relying on the faster drop rate to allow the lure to reach greater depths in a reasonable time. On a darker water lake, like Pymatuning Lake or Lake Arthur, it may be necessary to go lighter, since the weeds only grow out to depths of 5- to 6-feet. Size matters as well in relation to the species present. Crappies have pretty big mouths, capable of accepting a larger lure. Bluegills, however, have rather tiny mouths. If bluegills are the targeted species and the lake or pond isn't known for holding bronco-sized 'gills, stick to the smallest baits.

Use a fan casting approach to work along weed edges and open water areas that are within a cast's length of the outside edge. Approach the edges from different angles; pulling up close allows for casts parallel to the edge, while staying back provides a more perpendicular look.

Keep a semi-tight line on the lure's initial fall, since the bait will attract bites at this time. To keep an accurate

picture of the depths you are working, count off the seconds you allow the bait to fall. Vary the drop durations, so you efficiently cover different levels.

## Farm pond 'gills

Farm ponds are one of the finest places to find oversized bluegills. Since most ponds support largemouth bass, and the forage base is often limited to bluegills, the bass tend to keep 'gill numbers in check. Thus, the average bluegill is often bigger than that found on a public lake.

Chatter-lures that employ a hard stickbait are a good option for working such farm ponds. Go with a lure with a two-inch stickbait, the smallest version currently available.

Many ponds lack much in the way of cover or structure, which plays well into the chatter stickbait's ability to cover water. So, the simple process of walking the shoreline, fan-casting the open water of the pond, is a sound one. Mix up the retrieve cadence a bit to see if the 'gills have a preference. And, expect to catch a few nice largemouths along the way. ☐



***Regardless of maker, it's the blade of the lure that gives it its chatter.***

## Chattering Lake Erie perch

Chatter-style baits are not only great panfish lures on inland waters. They also excel on the open waters of Lake Erie, where each summer the lake's yellow perch fishery creates a high level of attention.

Last year, Joe Renosky experienced two distinct patterns where chatter-style baits equated into fine catches of yellow perch.

Stickbait style chatterbaits pulled behind downriggers accounted for excellent catches of jumbo-sized yellow perch. While walleyes were the targeted species, the perch provided an unexpected, but welcome bonus. These perch hit three-inch stickbaits. Dropping down to two-inch might be a wise adjustment if specifically targeting yellow perch.

Leadhead style chatter-lures worked well when fished from an anchored position, the boat control method of choice by many when working perch schools. The bait was allowed to drop to the bottom. Then, it was yo-yoed in a vertical manner. Every ten or so pumps, allow the bait to contact the bottom. The blade bites on the upstroke, creating a vibration action; on the drop it flutters.—JK.