



Go Deep for Late Fall PANFISH

by *Darl Black* photos by the author

When you mention panfish fishing, most anglers visualize fishing during the spring and early summer in relatively shallow water. Fall panfish fishing in deep water isn't on the radar. If you want to catch crappies, perch and Bluegills in November and December, it's time to rethink your game plan.

Locating late fall panfish

My first encounter with late fall deepwater panfish was by accident in the mid-1970s while fishing for bass on Lake Nockamixon, Bucks County. Techniques and equipment have changed dramatically in 44 years, but the natural instincts of fish have not. Wherever baitfish go when the water temperature falls below 50-degrees F, panfish are sure to follow.

The latest sonars feature both down scan and side scan modes, as well as a lake map on the screen. The digital down scan (what is under the boat) is far more accurate than traditional sonar, which provides many false signals. Meanwhile, side scan literally paints a picture of bottom objects to the left and right of the boat.

I can quickly discover deepwater structure, eliminating areas lacking bottom cover and fish signals. Granted, it is impossible to be 100 percent correct in identifying sonar fish signals, but experience will eventually let you make reasonable guesses as to likely species based on the size of each signal, separation or closeness of fish signals, relation

to cover, distance off bottom and possible rapid movement of signals.

On the impoundments and natural lakes I primarily fish in the late fall, I find White Crappies, Black Crappies, Bluegills, Pumpkinseeds, Yellow Perch and White Bass at depths between 20- to 35-feet, depending on the particular characteristics of the lake.

Presentations

Here are my four most productive panfish presentations for late fall cold water.

- **Jig-n-minnow:** Nothing is as basic as a jig-n-minnow for almost any fish species including panfish. Bluegills will take a minnow of suitable size, especially in cold water. First select a $\frac{3}{16}$ - or $\frac{1}{4}$ -ounce leadhead jig with a #6 hook—not a jig with a bass-size hook. Slip on a 1- or 2-inch soft plastic body. Tip it with a small Fathead Minnow or a 2-inch scented soft bait minnow. Drop straight down to the fish observed on the sonar screen, and use the rod tip to move the jig up and down or in circles. No casting and retrieving—just a simple vertical presentation.
- **Blade bait:** Over the years, blade baits have become my preferred method for all species of deepwater lake fish in cold water. Rigged with a snap and small power swivel on 8-pound-test line, I've caught everything that swims in Pennsylvania by burping the blade off the bottom—not ripping wildly. Burping is simply sweeping the rod upward until you detect the blade bait vibration,

then sitting it back down in place. It's deadly for panfish. To precisely target crappies, perch, White Bass and Bluegills, simply drop the size of blade bait down to a 2-inch, ¼-ounce or ⅜-ounce model. You can't go wrong with either silver or gold finish, but don't overlook painted finishes.

- **Jigging spoons:** Downsize big slab spoons used for bass, Walleyes and Striped Bass to a ⅜- or ¼-ounce model for panfish. Rather than the hard pump and jerk used for gamefish during the summer, use a finesse approach for panfish. First, if the spoon comes equipped with a heavy wire hook, replace the hook with a thin wire treble size #8. Second, don't pump the spoon on the bottom. Instead, reserve this for times when panfish are suspended off the bottom—particularly schooled White Bass. Determine the depth of the school on the sonar, count the spoon down on the drop to that depth, engage the reel and shake gently.
- **Drop-shotting plastic:** Most recently, I discovered just how deadly the bass technique of drop-shotting can be for panfish in cold water. While searching for Walleyes at Pymatuning Reservoir, Crawford County, in November, I observed some fish “bumps” laying smack on the bottom in 28 feet of water. I suspected Walleyes, so I dropped a blade, burped it once and caught a big crappie—then, nothing more. I rigged a rod with a drop shot weight and a 2-inch soft plastic shad imitator, positioning the bait only 6 inches above the weight. With the first drop, I caught a nice crappie. Then, it was a crappie about every 4 or 5 minutes. Let the drop weight rest on the bottom while keeping the line tight and quivering the rod tip gently in order to make the plastic minnow dance. This is particularly effective for tight-lipped crappies. ☐



During the late fall, White Bass are extremely active. Catch these bass on jigs, jigging spoons or blade baits.

When targeting late fall panfish in water depths greater than 18 feet, special vertical presentations are needed. Clockwise from top right are: (1) small plastic body jigs; (2) drop-shot rig; (3) small jigging spoons; (4) small ¼-ounce or ⅜-ounce blade baits.