



Black Crappie

Pomoxis nigromaculatus

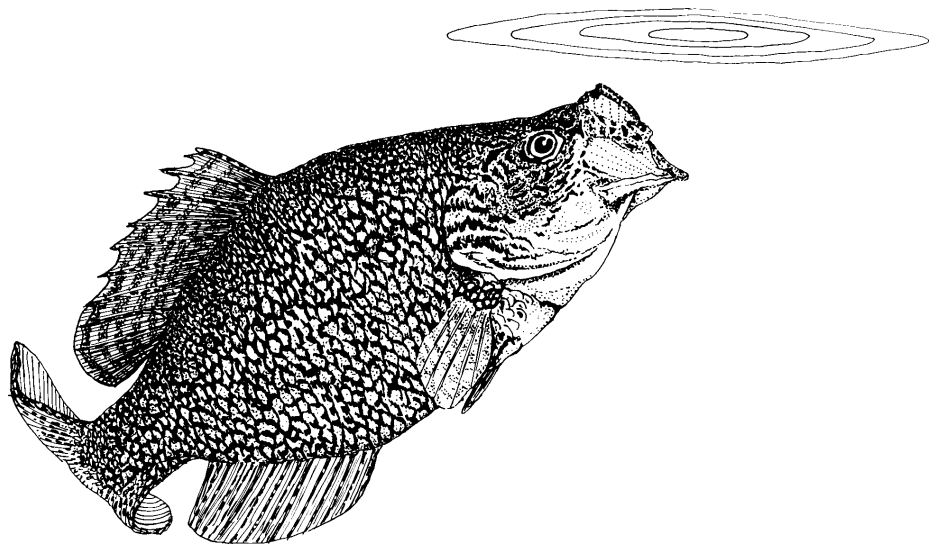
Papermouth, calico bass, sac-a-lait and speckled perch are just a few of the nicknames people call the black crappie. The black crappie is one of two species of crappie found in North America, the other being the white crappie (*Pomoxis annularis*). The black crappie is a member of the sunfish family that includes largemouth bass and bluegill, and the fish is one of the largest of the panfish species. Over the years, their sportiness on light tackle and their quality as “tablefare” have led to increasing popularity among freshwater anglers. Today, crappies are one of the most fished-for species in North Carolina and throughout much of the southeastern United States. In the Southeast, about one-third of all sportfish harvested are crappies.

History and Status

Black crappie are native to North Carolina and can be found in most waters throughout the state. The black crappie is quite hardy, tolerating a wide range of environmental conditions. However, it flourishes especially in Piedmont reservoirs and in rivers in the Coastal Plain. Black crappie have been widely stocked into suitable waters throughout the state and the Southeast.

Description

Black crappies are best characterized by irregularly spaced black blotches on their silvery-green to yellowish sides; in white crappies these blotches often form vertical bars. Black crappies have a dark green, olive-colored



back and a thin, compressed body, which is somewhat deeper than that of white crappie. The dorsal and anal fins are about the same shape and size and are colored with rows of greenish black spots. Black crappie have seven or eight spiny dorsal fin rays, while white crappie only have five or six. Because hybridization sometimes occurs between black and white crappies, and water quality often affects fish coloration, counting spiny dorsal fin rays is the best method for distinguishing between black and white crappies.

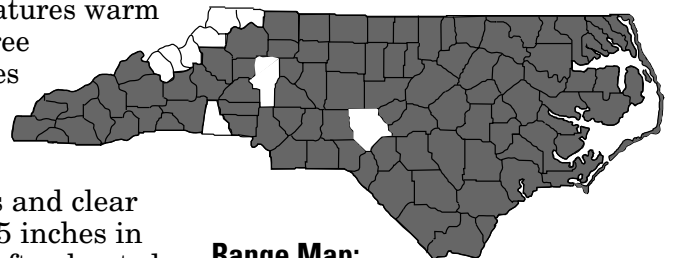
Habitat and Habits

Black crappie are usually found in cool, clear ponds, reservoirs and slow-moving rivers, while white crappie prefer more turbid waters. Crappie tend to congregate around areas with abundant aquatic vegetation, brush piles or other types of cover. Crappies have an extraordinarily high reproductive rate. The black crappie spawning season in North Carolina lasts from about March through May, when water temperatures warm to the 60- to 68-degree range. Black crappies become sexually mature at 2 to 3 years of age. Males select the nest sites and clear circular beds 8 to 15 inches in diameter. Beds are often located in 3 to 8 feet of water and are

formed in gravel, or in soft, muddy river or lake bottoms. Females spawn with different males over several nests and produce between 11,000 to 188,000 eggs apiece. Males guard the eggs, which hatch within three to five days. After the eggs hatch, males continue to guard the fry for a few days until the young leave the nest.

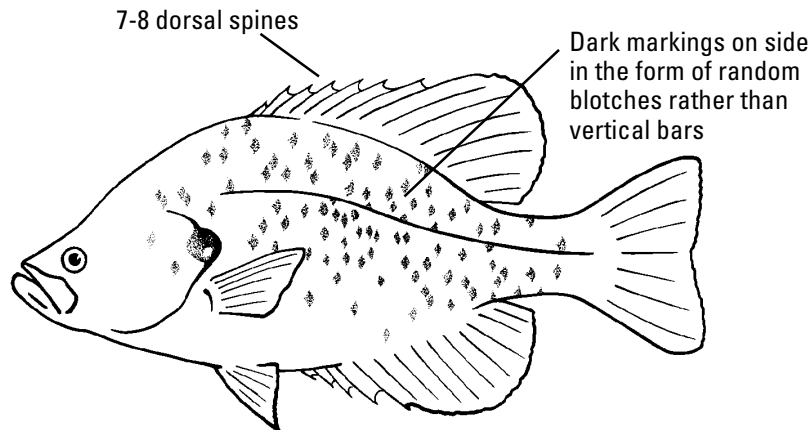
Microscopic animals, called zooplankton, and insects are the preferred foods of these young-of-the-year black crappies. On this diet, they can grow up to 4 inches during their first year. When they reach 6 to 8 inches, black crappie eat mostly smaller fish and minnows.

Adult crappies prefer forage fish found in the open-water areas of reservoirs, particularly threadfin and gizzard shad. However, crappies are often willing to feed on anything that fits into their mouths, including their own young. When little or no prey fish are available, which is often the case during the winter and early spring, adults will shift



Range Map:

Occupied range ■



back to feeding on insects.

Black crappie grow slower than white crappie but because of their stockiness, a black crappie will weigh more than a white crappie of similar size. Growth is dependent on habitat, food availability and crappie population size for a given body of water. Too many crappies and not enough food results in slow growth or “stunting.” The tremendous reproductive capability of crappie often results in stunting, particularly in small ponds.

Range and Distribution

The native range for black crappie extends from the upper St. Lawrence River and Manitoba south to northern Texas, including most midwestern states, but excluding the Northeastern seaboard. Their range generally extends farther north and south than the white crappie. Demand for crappie fisheries has led to their introduction in all suitable areas throughout the United States.

People Interactions

Crappies are most encountered by anglers. Fishing for crappies is very popular in North Carolina, and they are considered excellent sportfish by fishermen using bait and artificial lures. Crappies can be caught on a variety of fishing equipment including cane poles, spinning and bait-casting outfits, fly rods and ice fishing gear. Anglers usually try to locate a school of crappies and fish for

them using minnows, small jigs or a combination of the two. Care is required when setting the hook or when landing the fish because their soft “papermouth” tears easily, allowing hooks to pull out. Crappies are most active and easily caught at night and in the early morning.

References

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Credits

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BLACK CRAPPIE

Classification

Class: Osteichthyes (bony fishes)

Order: Perciformes

Size

Length: Up to 15 inches.
Typical catches from 8 to 10 inches.

Weight: Up to 3 pounds are common. Typical weight from one-quarter to one-half pound.

Food

Strictly carnivorous; zooplankton, crustaceans, insects and fish. Young feed primarily on zooplankton and insects. Adults feed primarily on fish, but also feed on insects.

Breeding

Spawning season begins in March and continues through June. Adults sexually mature within 2 to 3 years. Female produces between 11,000 to 188,000 eggs. Eggs hatch within 3 to 5 days.

Young

Called fry. Feed on yolk sac for 3 to 5 days and then they leave the nest.

Life Expectancy

Up to 13 years; however they rarely exceed 7 years.