

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
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Getting Hooked on Crappie Fishing

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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Figure 1 You can get hooked on spring crappie fishing on Chautauqua Lake. (Photo by Howard Weaver.)

I've gone deep-sea fishing in the Atlantic Gulf Stream for red snapper, strawberry grouper and spiny triggerfish. I've trolled for lunker walleye in remote lakes in the Canadian wilderness and watched in wonder as my husband outsmarted toothy Northern Pike on meandering streams in the Adirondacks. Once, I even tried my hand at catching giant blue catfish in Virginia's Chickahominy River. All of those experiences were wonderful and I'd go again, but for the sheer "whooping" joy of fishing, give me Chautauqua Lake crappie anytime!

Crappie fishing is number one on my "Top Ten List of Fun Things to Do with a Fishing Pole." Crappies are a fisherman's friend. They are a fair weather fish and live in schools. If you find one, you are bound to find more. The excitement begins when the fishing pole jerks and the bobber goes underwater. When crappies are biting, you can catch fish for hours, cast after cast. And, not only are they fun to catch, they are one of the tastiest fresh-water fish I've ever eaten.

Crappies, which are sometimes referred to as Calico Bass, are not indigenous to Chautauqua Lake. They are not here naturally. Back in the late 1920's, crappies were introduced into our lake from Sodus Bay on Lake Ontario. The idea was to establish a recreational fishery, which appears to have been successful. Their numbers increased rapidly until the 1970's, when there was a drop. This decline was seemingly associated with the abundance of walleye. Walleye like to eat crappies as much as we do and when the walleye population increases, the crappie population decreases unless there are other fish, like yellow perch, sunfish and white perch, for the walleye to eat. (McKeown, Paul E. and Mooradain, Stephen R.: *North American Journal of Fisheries Management*; 2002:22: pp1385-1392.)

If you start catching crappie, you might notice that not all of them look alike. Being the largest of the sunfishes, two different species live in our area, Black Crappie and White Crappie. Look close and you'll see slight differences in the color patterns and the dorsal

spines. Black Crappie will also have a shorter, turned up snout. Crappie can grow to a length of 12 inches and weigh up to two pounds, but we've caught some a lot bigger than that. (Zim, Herbert S., Ph. D. and Shoemaker, Hurst, Ph. D.; *Fishes, A Guide to Fresh and Salt-Water Species*;1987).

This spring, during the first week of April, we had an absolute blast crappie fishing. Burtis Bay had opened up, but the ice was still on from Lakewood to the north when my husband noticed some fish close to shore. We sat on our break wall and cast a jig with a colored tail into the water. Suddenly, our bobbers went blupe! blupe! blupe! We caught fish after fish. Some had to be released, but most were at least nine inches and many were 12 inches or longer. To keep them, according to the New York State fishing regulations, crappies must be at least nine inches long, from the tip of their snout to the tip of their tail and you are allowed 25 per day per person. (NYS Freshwater Fishing Regulations, 2006-2008). We fished for a couple of hours several nights in a row. Then, just as suddenly as they started, they quit.

Now, as soon as we get our fishing boat in the water, we'll be at it again. We've been seeing clusters of boats sitting for hours along the southern tip of our bay near the outlet and out on Grass and Rock Islands. Those will probably be the places we'll head to first. So, if you hear someone "whooping" out on the lake, pay no attention because it's fun to be "hooked" on crappie fishing!

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake's shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its 2008 annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake's most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. It is the only local organization conserving lands in perpetuity for these purposes. Please contact the Conservancy at 664-2166 to join for 2008!