

“Summertime Heat! No Crappie, or Small Crappie? – Crankin Up The Slabs”

By Bernard Williams, Magnolia Crappie Club

Nothing, I mean nothing beats a skillet full of *fresh* crappie filets fried up in the late summer afternoon. Only problem, you've put up your crappie gear for cooler temperatures or the ones you're catching just aren't any size. I have a suggestion; go to the old bass tackle box and pull out the crankbaits. Yes, I said it, bass fisherman do not have exclusive rights on the crankbaits and manufactures are recognizing this fact.

Crappie fisherman are now buying as many if not more crankbaits than bass fisherman buy. While most bass fisherman may buy two or three at a time, we buy four or five of the same size and color. Bandit has introduced its Crappie Colors, Bass Pro has the Wally Marshall cranks, and Cabelas have their line of “Crappie Cranks”. So what I'm saying is if you're not familiar with this new phenomenal technique just keep reading.

Learning to pull or push crankbaits is really not that hard to learn, but in the beginning it requires a minimal purchase of cranks. These usually run from \$2.99 up to \$5.00. I suggest buying the [Specials from Bandit's website](#) and repainting them or buying the crappie catching colors from [Grizzly Jigs](#) saving the time and mess of trying to paint crankbaits.

The Initial Purchase – Ouch!

Ok, say we just got our couple dozen cranks in awesome pink, orange crush, chartreuse green back, chartreuse sparkle, and fire tiger, we're almost ready to get rolling. You could purchase Bandits in the 200 or 300 series, Storms Wiggle Warts, Brad's Wigglers, Wally's, Cabelas, Bomber, or any crank that runs in the 8' to 20' range, it doesn't matter. Make sure they're in the 3/8oz to 1/2oz weight and 2" to 3" length.



The Rods, Reels, and Line

My preference is B'n'M Trolling Rods in the 8', 10', 12' and 14' range. Many experience pullers use 16' and 18' rods, but I don't recommend this for the person just getting started.

However, rods of length 6' to 8' with a medium to fast action will work, but if you want to start out right, get the trolling rods designed for this technique.



Reels, many experienced pullers swear you don't need fancy line-counter reels but I think some kind of line distance measuring system or device is necessary. Some of my fellow Magnolia Crappie Club members use a line counter attached to the rod or they stretch out 200' and mark every 10'. This works until you break off too much line. My preference is the Okuma Magda Pro 15 Line counter Reel. They range from \$25 to \$40.



MAGDA PRO
Line Counters



We next need to spool our spinning or bait-casting reels with 10# hi-vis mono or 15# to 20# braid. Either will do, but the braid will save your cranks, plus it gets the baits down with less line out. My preference is 15# Vicious Braid with a 4# diameter. Spool the reels with a large amount of backing seeing that you only need about 150 yards at the most on each reel. Its very important calibrate your reels. Make sure 50' showing on the counter is



actually 50' of line.

Rod Holders

Rod holders are necessary for this technique. I recommend good quality rod holders like the ones Driftmaster offer. They offer a trolling system that can be used on any boat. They are strong, withstanding the ferocious hits from stripers and catfish. You don't want to risk your rod and reel investment to just any rod holder. Don't skimp on this one, it's very important that the rods are secure and they can be adjusted easily. These can be mounted at the back of the boat but I prefer to pull them on each side of the boat.



Depth Finders / GPS / Lake Maps

Again, I know plenty of experienced pullers that don't use GPS or Lake Maps, but they work. I started with a low-end Eagle and a hand-held GPS. The GPS eliminates the need for marker buoys and they save time. My preference is the Humminbird Side Imaging Systems, from the 797si to the 998si system. These systems allow you to mark waypoints of where you caught fish as well as side scan up to 420' and also use the down scan sonar. The ability to split the screen with the contours on one side and sonar on the other is phenomenal. It takes all the guess work out of fishing.

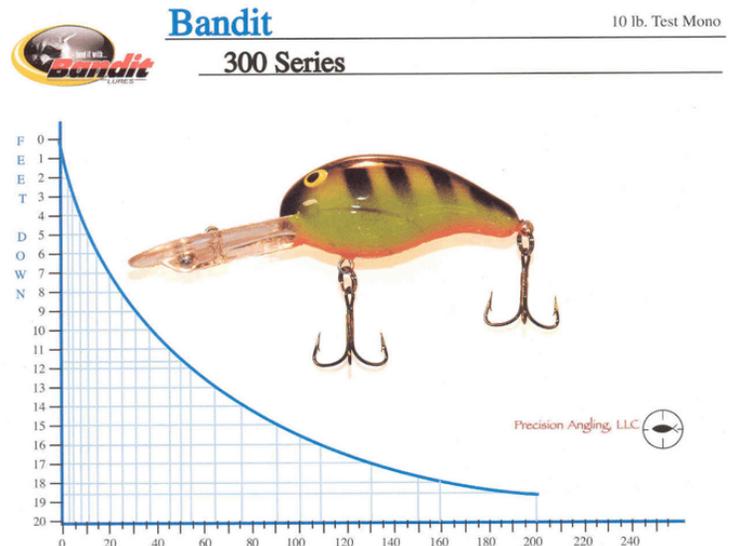
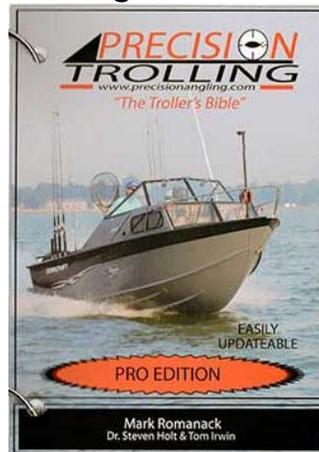


For a good lake map I prefer the Navionics Hot Maps in whatever region you fish. This 2GB SD card contains three-dimensional bottom-view and panoramic lake pictures. It includes over 1,000 of high-definition maps with 1-ft. contours and 15,000 lakes. Throw the paper maps out the window, it's nearly impossible to lineup on an area with a paper map. This is the way to go if you want to do it right the first time.



Dive Curves and Precision Trolling

Another tool I refer to a lot is the Precision Trollers Guide. It gives you an estimate of how deep your crankbait is running compared to how much line is out. The later versions have another curve showing the braided line results. I was amazed at how accurate these dive curve charts were. I actually ran across 12' water and let out the distance it stated and it did in fact bump the



bottom. This guide contains dive curves for over 200 different lures. At \$40, it well worth its value. These guys have eliminated all the guess work.

Trolling Speed

The common misconception that speed causes crankbaits to dive deeper is false. A speed of 1 MPH to 2.5 MPH does not change the dive depths no matter what lure you use. *Trolling speed do have a major effect on the action of the lure.* Some lures have no action at low speeds and others can't be trolled fast, they will roll. For a lure to obtain its best possible action you must observe it running close to the boat. This also helps to determine if the lure is properly tuned. A crankbait must run straight, if now you must tune your bait. You do this by bending the line tie in the opposite direction that the lure is running. That's why lots of pros prefer Bandits, the run true out the box.

There are several ways to measure trolling speed, GPS and manual speed counters. Both work, however at slow speeds, between 1.3 and 1.5 GPS seems to be the best choice. On windy days the manual speed counters may come out of the water if attached to the trolling motor; this causes false readings.

Trolling Motor, Kicker Motor, or Trolling Plate on the Big Motor

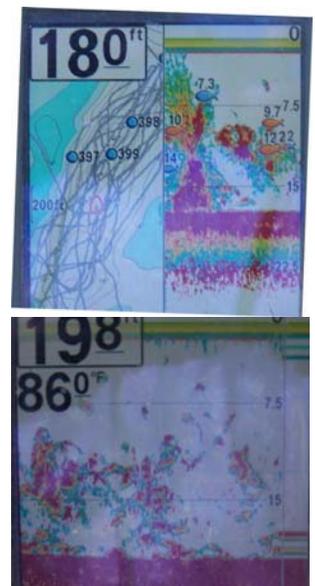
I discussed this topic with some of the best trollers in the country. The two that comes to mine are Kent Driscoll who makes his living trolling crankbaits in the summer with his 4-stroke Yamaha and Kenny Browning who competes professionally on both Crappie Masters and Crappie USA, using a Terrova 101. Both are very successful, but unless you have a quiet 4-stroke you will scare spooky crappie in shallow water. On windy days the trolling motor requires very good batteries to maintain that constant speed. I prefer the trolling motor with an auto pilot; this allows me to fish up to 10 poles by myself.

Minn Kota's new I-Pilot system, which automatically controls and steers your boat using GPS technology, allows you to record a path and retrace it later. It has cruise control for perfect bait presentation. Everything is wireless; allowing you to fish and not worry about directing this boat.

Let's Go Fishing – Finding the Right Spot

Try to pick an area of the lake that has the least amount of standing timber; a few deep stumps or brush piles is perfect. I like to fish the flats leading to a river channel or an old lake bed. I've found this combination to be very productive. It gives the fish several advantages, the shad school on these flats and lake beds, and they're very close to deep, cool, and oxygenated water. When I find this type area I fish it thoroughly. I mark the spots where I catch fish and I try to develop a pattern. Are they on the ledges and drop-offs or they're in the deeper spots?

You should look for school of bait fish. They show-up as tight balls this time of the year. When you find the big long schools of shad on your sonar they will have crappie underneath. The screen shots to the right show how the shad and crappie school appear on the sonar. You can see the underwater structure where the crappie are holding. Spots like these produce numerous fish. Be sure to set a waypoint for future references or buoy this area.



Color Selection

When I begin a day I check the weather conditions; is it a bright blue-sky day or is it overcast and cloudy? If it's a bright none cloudy day, I start with mostly bright color crankbaits, however I will mix in a few dark baits if it's early morning. Kent's motto is "Bright Day, Bright Bait, Dark Overcast Day, and Dark Bait". I generally stick to this but sometimes the fish will force you to vary somewhat. Bright days sometimes call for lures with some chrome. Chrome gives a lot of flash; flash causes reaction strikes. I choose to use baits that have the lip painted. By having the lip painted it give a longer silhouette coming thru the water. Remember the summertime motto, "Big Bait, Big Fish".



Summertime is generally bright and clear; I begin with my bright colors and run them shallow. This gives me the ability to fish the shallow flats; flats where the shad congregate in the early morning. As the water warms up, I move to the deeper areas and stretch the baits out.

Developing a Pattern - Figuring Out the Fish

My crankbait pulling mentor, Kenny Browning of Alabama, is the person most responsible for me developing the crankbait pulling skills. Kenny learned his skills from several tournament circuit fisherman as well as paid guide trips. Kenny's motto is "Find the unmolested fish – Fish where other people don't fish. Go out and develop a pattern, it may be a pattern for early morning, mid-morning and early afternoon. You got to figure out the fish". Kenny and I fish MCC and Crappie Masters Tournaments. It's not uncommon for Kenny to pre-fish for 5 to 7 days, checking different spots, different depths, and different colors.

Keeping a Fishing Log

I truly believe that in order for you to become a great fisherman, you must keep a detail log. I've included a sample log form at the end of this article. Feel free to use it each time you fish. It may take a complete fishing cycle (year) for the information to become useful; I can assure you that this will become invaluable. Kenny keeps detail notes on every lake he fishes; he reviews his notes before and after a tournament and makes adjustments.

Tips and Tricks

- When pulling cranks, we're looking for a reaction strike. You've got to make your lure do something odd. I sometimes make a slight turn to the left and back to the right. This tells me if I need to speed up or slow down.
- Sometimes I grab the line and pull it out maybe a foot or two, this causes that lure to speed up and stop. Believe me, it works.
- I take bright glow fingernail polish and stripe the belly of my baits. I like to have one with a glow orange belly, glow pink, and glow lime or chartreuse. You can pick the polish up at many of the beauty supply stores.
- I like to use the clear with the metal flakes mixed in to give my baits a scale like feature. Sometimes little subtle changes like the ones mentioned above are all you need to fill your limit.
- If you're getting short strike, take the back hook off, connect a swivel to the split-ring, and then connect the back hook to the swivel. I've even speeded up; this makes the crappie hit the bait a little harder thereby catching itself.

- Sometimes I add a teaser above the crankbait; this teaser can be a roadrunner or regular jig. When you pull this thru a school of crappie, the teaser gets their attention, now they're ready for the crankbait.
- During summertime early mornings, fish shallow water. I'm referring to water that's 8' to 10'. The baitfish are shallow, so are the crappie.
- Learn to use planner boards. This works great when fishing clear and shallow water. Planners get your lures away from the boat, especially if you're using your engine or a kicker motor.

Advantages to Pulling Crankbaits

- *Cover lots of water* – pulling cranks at 1.4 MPH in 8 hours allow you to cover over 11 miles of water. Now if you can't find them in 10 or 11 miles you are in the wrong area, wrong lake or wrong time of year.
- *Target suspended and scattered fish* – Good sonar allows you see the baitfish schools and the fish underneath. By setting your line length just above the fish allows you to stay in the strike zone all the time.
- *Catch Bigger Fish* – It's no myth that big fish want a big bait. Crankbaits provide that big bite for larger fish. I've pulled cranks by guys that were slow trolling minnows, catching small fish and I come thru and catch pound and a half crappie.
- *Reaction Strikes* – Cranks can trigger reaction strikes where live baits or jigs will not.
- *Catch lots of fish* – Cranks offer you the ability to find schools of feeding crappie and stay with them by circling them back and forth.
- *Catch Un-Molested Fish* – Pulling cranks allow you to fish areas that others don't. You can hit those areas such as flats and find the most active fish in a hurry.
- *Perfect from Summer Guiding Trips* - I take clients out during the summer, they want to catch fish. We can put up several umbrellas and pull cranks all day and not get that beaming sun.

Disadvantages

- *Expensive, Expensive, and Expensive* – My dad told me "You can't drive a Cadillac with Volkswagen Money". If you can't afford to drop a couple hundred dollars on a box of crankbaits, then this technique is not for you. But if you want to go for the gusto, then give it a try.
- *Crank Baits are Dangerous* – I would not suggest you use this technique with small kids. Cranks can easily catch an eye, hand, or ear. I know, I get stuck all the time.
- *Hang-ups* – I know guys that will stop when a crankbait hangs, roll up all rods and backup and un-hang the crank. I will at times do this if it's a hot crank and I only have a few.
- *No Timber* – Cranks are designed to fish open water, ledges and flats with little or no structure. Do not try to fish them around timber unless you are ready to loose your cranks.
- *Trash Fish* – You catch lots of catfish, stripers, gars and other fish. But I look at it like this, "One Man's Trash is Another Man's Treasure".

Conclusion

I don't profess to be an expert at this technique, I learn something new each time I employ this technique. I do say if you want to add another tournament winning, hot summer catching technique to your repertoire, then give this a try. It will take a while to perfect, but once you have it down you will love to pull cranks. It will expand your crappie catching season from end of spring to beginning of winter. And as my friend Paul Johnson, president of Magnolia Crappie Club says "It'll catch'um as Big as They Grow".

Fishing Log

GENERAL

DATE	LAKE NAME	SPECIFIC LOCATIONS
HOURS FISHED		BEST HOURS
FISHING PARTNERS		WAYPOINTS

FISH CATCH INFORMATION

NUMBER	AVG SIZE	CAUGHT ON	NOTES

WEATHER & WATER

AIR TEMP	WATER TEMP	WATER LEVEL	CLARITY	BAROMETER

SKIES	M	A	E	PRECIPITATION	M	A	E	WIND	M	A	E
SUNNY				NONE				NONE			
PARTLY CLOUDY				RAIN - LIGHT				VERY LIGHT (< 5 knots)			
MOSTLY CLOUDY				RAIN - HEAVY				LIGHT (5-10 knots)			
CLOUDY				SNOW				MEDIUM (
FOGGY				SLEET / HAIL				HEAVY (

M = Morning A = Afternoon E = Evening

MISCELLANEOUS

BAITFISH	LOCATION	NOTES