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CHRISTMAS TREE CRAPPIE

By Freshwater Editor Matt Williams

BUILDING AND SINKING BRUSH piles to attract crappie is definitely no piece of cake. It's hard work. The type that will make brows sweat, muscles ache and consume vast amounts of spare time. But rest assured, the fruits to be reaped from the drill can be well worth it for anglers who are willing to put forth the effort to do it right.

Brush piles are to crappie what 24-hour Mexican food joints are to after hours honkey tonk crowds. Build one at a favorable location and chances are pretty good you'll pack the house.

Perhaps no one is more familiar with this alluring labor of love than Stephen Johnston of Hemphill. Johnston works full-time as a fishing guide on Toledo Bend Reservoir. He is also a crackerjack bass pro with a passel of Top 10 tournament finishes wins under his belt.

The 40-year old guide has been building "fish hotels" on his home lake for more than two decades now. Like many in his profession, he was quick to admit that brush piles play a huge role in his ability to consistently keep his crappie fishing clientele happy.

"Brush piles are a big part of my business, mainly because it helps concentrate the fish to one specific spot," he said. "Without it the fish would really scatter out and you would have to hunt and peck to find them. Brush helps take the guesswork out of it. It is pretty much a guaranteed catch so long as the weather is right."

The crappie's attraction to brush comes natural. In addition to providing the fish with cover, brush serves as a foundation for the formation of zooplankton and other microorganisms on which shad, minnows and other bait fish feed. Once the bait shows up, the crappie usually won't be far behind.

Toledo Bend crappie guide Stephen Johnston is an expert on the placement and construction of brushpiles.

Photo: Matt Williams



As earlier mentioned, constructing fish hotels is a demanding chore that means hard work and dirty hands. It also calls for a little ingenuity on the builder's part when it comes to selecting materials, putting them together, choosing a location and securing the goods to bottom in a way that they will last for the long haul.

In the segments that follow, Johnston takes TF&G readers step-by-step through the process of building and sinking a brush pile for crappie:

Material Selection

Johnston says crappie will gravitate to just about any type of brush, provided it's not cedar or pine. The guide believes those trees displace a funk into the water that actually repels fish instead of attracting them.

Christmas trees are an excellent choice. These should be readily available on street corners everywhere after Dec. 25. Check the ritzy neighborhoods first. Often times that's where the taller trees will be. It might be wise to check with retail outlets, too. Unsold surplus can usually be purchased for next to nothing.

"The only problem I have with Christmas trees is the limbs are so thick the fish can't get in them good," Johnston said. "Be sure to prune some limbs to create some cavities so the crappie can get inside."

Johnston's favorite trees include willows and sweet gums. When using willows, he will pluck a few limbs off several individual trees and bond them together as opposed to axing an entire tree. That way he doesn't exhaust his stock. Sweet gums can be be diced into sections or utilized whole if the water depth is sufficient.

The guide said it is important to check with local authorities and/or property owners before cutting any trees along the shores of a public reservoir. In many cases it is illegal. "I get all my trees off of a friend's private property and haul them to the lake," Johnston said. "That's the neat thing about Christmas trees. In a few weeks they will be laying around everywhere."

Store bought or homemade fish trees constructed from scrap plastic and PVC are viable alternative for those who may not be physically able cut and sink cumbersome brush.

Size Matters

Johnston likes small piles over big ones. Anything larger than 8-10 feet in diameter can cause the fish scatter out too much.

The ideal height hinges on the depth of the water. The best depth range can vary from one lake to the next, according to the season of the year and water level. On Toledo Bend, Johnston likes his piles situated at depth ranges from 20-32 feet. He usually prefers to have 10-15 foot window between the top of the brush and the surface.

"For springtime fishing you'll want brush in shallower water, say 10 feet deep," he said. "I'd use a five-foot tall tree for that, so the fish can get on top of it."

Crappie are naturally drawn to submerged brush, for the cover and for the bait that is also attracted to the structure.

photo: Kjeld Friis, dreamstime

Erecting A Home

The best brush piles for crappie are those that stand vertical. Trees must be weighted at the bottom and equipped with some type of float on top to accomplish this stance. Christmas tree sets or willow limbs should be snugged tight at the base using nylon rope.

When weighting trees, use something heavy enough to sink it and hold it in



place in turbulent conditions. It takes about 100 pounds to secure an 8X15 tree.

Cinder blocks and buckets of concrete will work, but this can get expensive when sinking multiple brush piles. Johnson says woven polypropylene sandbags equipped with ties are a much cheaper alternative.

He fills the bags for free using sand from the shoreline, then cuts a hole in both sides before tying them shut. He loops a secondary rope through the holes, which is used for securing the bag to tree base.

Johnston uses one-liter Coke bottles or milk jugs to float the top. He attaches them to the crown using zip ties.

"Ideally, you should have everything except the weight attached before the boat ever leaves the bank," Johnston said. "It's a lot easier that way."

Pulling Maintenance

Brush will rot in time. For that reason, Johnston will re-brush his most productive spots once a year. "I'm always careful to drop the new brush right in the middle of the old stuff," he explained. "Otherwise, the brush it will spread out too far and the fish won't group up as well."

Location, Location, Location

Submerged points, humps and ridges are great places to sink brush. However, they also are among the most obvious, which means they probably won't be secret for very long. Johnston likes to sink his piles in creeksbeds, usually in S-bends, in areas where hydrilla is not overly abundant. Each spot is marked GPS for future reference.

It is interesting to note that just because a spot looks good does not mean it will attract fish. On average, Johnston said about one in four brush piles will become a reliable fishing hole.

"Sinking brush piles is trial and error," he said. "It's sort of like street corner convenience stores. One store might not see much traffic at all, whereas another one located a mile down the road might stay covered up with business all the time."