Rend Lake never had a shortage of small crappie, but a 2002 regulation change created a fishery where big crappie are king.

The Big Crappie Comeback

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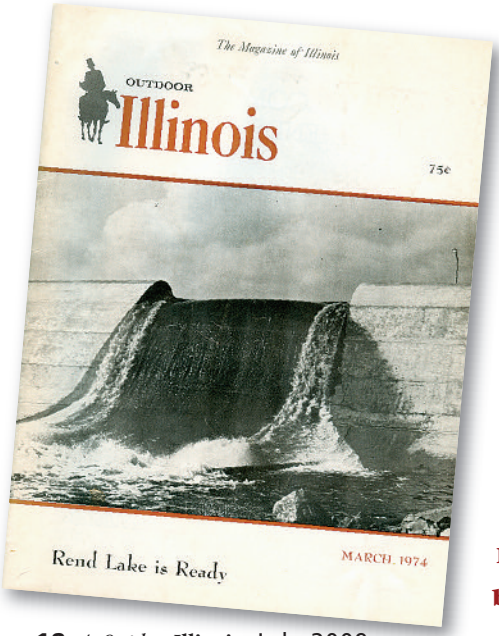
Rend Lake in south-central Illinois always had plenty of crappie—so many crappie, in fact, that soon after the 18,900 acre impoundment filled up in the 1970s, word quickly spread that anybody could visit the lake and catch boatloads of crappie. The supply seemed unlimited.



A 1974 issue of the original Oudoor Illinois magazine announces the opening of Rend Lake. By 1977, a local angler claimed the state-record black crappie.

When Rend Lake angler John Hampton of nearby Christopher registered his state-record 4 pound 8 ounce black crappie in 1977, the lake gained an even bigger reputation: Not only were there vast populations of white and black crappie at this massive lake, everybody believed huge fish were possible. For more than 25 years, anglers yanked crappie out of the seemingly endless supply until it became apparent something wasn't happening.

Plenty of crappie were being caught. But those big fish were few and far between. Eternally optimistic anglers would blame the whims of bad luck, as if those big fish simply weren't biting that day. But fisheries biologists knew otherwise.

Happy anglers find a mix of both black crappie and white crappie at Rend Lake in southern Illinois.

"In our surveys, larger crappie in the 10-inch range were vastly outnumbered by the smaller crappie," DNR biologist Mike Hooe reported. "As soon as crappie were getting big enough to filet, fishermen were taking them home."

The paradoxical idea that Rend lake's crappie population was a limitless resource proved somewhat self-limiting; plenty of fish were being spawned in the huge impoundment but few crappie

Once a rarity at Rend Lake, crappie weighing over a pound and measuring more than a foot are now a standard catch.

would grow large enough to be considered impressive keepers. No size or creel limits applied to crappie at Rend, but things were about to change.

Nearly a decade ago, lake managers decided to draft a regulation they realized would be a little unpopular with anglers, but good for crappie fishing. Since everybody was used to catching endless buckets of crappie—hoping to pull in a few nice fish along the way—the 25-crappie limit that went into effect on April 1, 2002 was met with a less-than-enthusiastic reception by anglers.

"At first it was a 25-crappie creel limit, with no more than five of those crappie being more than 10 inches," Hooe explained. The new restrictions were designed to increase the number of larger fish in the lake while limiting the massive hauls removed on a near-daily basis. "By October of 2002 we were already seeing a dramatic improvement," he added. "The percentage of fish that exceeded 10 inches more than doubled. I was very pleased. I didn't expect it to work that quickly."

Within a year, fisheries managers decided the improved crappie sizes could tolerate a slightly more liberal harvest of large fish.

"By 2003, the percentage of crappie exceeding 12 inches more than tripled," Hooe said. "And so in April 2004 the regulation was modified to allow 10 fish greater than 10 inches, and that's where we stand today."

During the past few years, the quality of crappie fishing at Rend Lake has continued to improve. Unlike the old days, when the lake was full of crappie—but only a few of those crappie were large—today Rend Lake boasts some of the best crappie fishing in the region.

Those unhappy anglers of 2002 have been transformed into believers of sound fisheries management.

"Fishermen were skeptical at first," Hooe admitted. "But they became more accepting as the fishing improved."

Today, a handful of anglers are pressing for even greater access to more of the lake's large crappie. Netting surveys reveal an all-time high number of crappie exceeding 12 inches. But Hooe is quick to dispel rumors that a regulation change is imminent.

"The current regulations have allowed anglers to harvest quality-size fish for seven consecutive years," he pointed out. "I want to maintain what we've accomplished for as long as possible."

Naturally, a few anglers have already forgotten the old days of poor crappie fishing at Rend Lake. After several seasons of great angling opportunities, some fishermen are badgering Hooe to ease the creel and size limits.

Although he wouldn't rule out the possibility of some form of regulation change in the years ahead, whatever regulation changes occur will only be in response to a negative change in the lake's fish population, not simply a desire to allow an increased harvest. And Hooe knows that, despite his best management efforts, things will change. Mother Nature might offer up a few consecutive years of poor spawning conditions, or tremendously successful spawns for several years could, theoretically produce an unsupportable megapopulation of crappie, prompting the need for higher harvests by anglers.

"I would like to credit the improvement in the crappie fishing soley to the influence of the regulation," Hooe said. "But, nature has played an important role as well. The stable growth rates and recruitment—combined with the regulations—have produced a quality crappie fishery for an extended period of time. Let's enjoy it while it lasts."

Who says panfish can't be trophy catches? The smile of this young angler says it all.