



Packed bags to chase flags for pan-sized papermouths

# Trophy Crappie

on Lake of the Woods

By Sara Trampe



Sara drills holes.

What's it like taking a girl to an island in the middle of Lake of the Woods in March?! Spoiler: That woman is me, Sara Trampe, host of *Sportsman's Journal*, so we're likely catching big fish!

We spent four nights at Tamarack Island Wilderness Lodge – eight miles out of Morson, Ontario – in the middle of March last year. There is no running water – and all that goes with it, showers, toilets – there are no ice roads, there is no internet and low cell signals, but the fishing is just as unbelievably good as in the summer, and I mean it was incredible! We were planning on fishing action-oriented walleye and maybe some northern, but we found something different – trophy crappies, by the bucketful.

## To the woods

Our host and owner, Todd Hacault, and his son, Paul, usually spend a few days on the island every winter, hitting the ice, checking their property, and bringing out supplies. After many years of an invite, we were finally smart enough to take them up on their offer and join them for a few days of fishing. Our only regret is not going sooner.

The night before our trip, we drove North to the Minnesota/Ontario border and stayed in a hotel on the U.S. side. We did this so I would be able to shower as close to our trip as possible, knowing I would go days without while filming for *Sportsman's Journal*. I may be a little more “high maintenance” than the guys in that aspect, but by Tyler giving me that extra time, it makes for a happier team.

We crossed the lake using snowmobiles, which meant little space for gear. Being organized is a huge help for these types of trips. We travel with around 70 pounds of camera equipment alone, so there isn't a whole lot of extra space going out to the island. Therefore, I packed two bags; one for the hotel room with my shower stuff and one for fishing.

The next morning, I was up at four A.M., got ready, and we were on our way. After crossing the border, we drove the remaining 45 minutes to the launch to meet Todd and Paul. We shared hugs, started unpacking the truck, packing the sleds, and bundled up in our Striker suits. Todd jokes we even had room for the hairdryer, but I left that in the truck. After we finished securing our gear, we put our helmets on

and headed off on a 20-minute jaunt over Lake of the Woods. We dropped some stuff in the cabin, and out fishing, we went.

## Big water, big slabs

When you are on Lake of the Woods, the possibilities, spots, and fish are endless. Remember, we planned to fish walleye, which are abundant in the Tamarack area, so we weren't too concerned with where to start. We went about a 1/2 mile from the island and started unloading when Todd casually mentioned his buddies were out last weekend and caught a couple of crappies. If you have ever watched our show, you know Tyler loves crappies, so he was locked on to a different mission – finding those slabs!

We started dissecting the lake's structure and estimating the location of the deepest basin in the area. Let's talk about Lake of the Woods for a second. When you talk about breaking down a lake, Lake of the Woods is a beast. Lake of the Woods borders Minnesota, Ontario, and Manitoba Canada and is just shy of 1,000,000 acres with no shortage of habitat and structure. There are over 1,600 miles of surface area, 65,000 miles of shoreline, and over 14,000 islands. Lake of the Woods is a world-class fishery with varying degrees of water clarity, depths, and numerous species in different areas of the lake, so much so that other geographical areas are almost like small lakes within itself.

The Tamarack Island area is dense with islands, mid-lake underwater reefs, basins, and stained water rich in nutrients, which means the fish are thick.

We used our lake maps and plotted out the best place to start drilling holes - well, Paul and I drilled holes while Tyler and Todd filmed an intro. Paul has a Jiffy gas-powered auger that came in handy with the 30+ inches of ice. But my go-to is the ION electric auger; it's lightweight and easy to use (as long as you remember to charge the batteries!).

We did not drill a thousand holes for two reasons:

- 1.) it's Northwest Ontario, and it's cold and windy. Holes freeze quickly.
- 2.) it's Lake of the Woods, so we didn't need many before we were marking fish.

A prominent characteristic of crappies is suspending in the water column while roaming flats in deepwater basins



Sara with crappie.



searching for food sources. When we marked fish high versus tight to the bottom, we knew where to pop up the hub tent.

The hub was up, but before we were even fully set-up, we were fishing, knowing crappies were waiting for us. Fish are marking on the screen suspended 5-10 feet off the bottom, and Tyler is rigged up and ready to go using a Macho Minnow.

Jig. Jig. Boom! Tyler eased up the fish through the ice, and we both couldn't believe our eyes. A first glimpse showed a large gaping papermouth, and we realized it was a whopper. The first crappie up was 14 inches.

## Fooler flags

Ok – we know the crappies are here! Back out we go to drill holes 20 – 40 yards surrounding the shack for our Finicky Foolers.

If you haven't a Finicky Fooler yet and enjoy ice fishing, I highly recommend having at least one in your arsenal. These bad boys are similar to the tip-down you would use for panfish, yet you use a rod and reel set-up with an open bail. When the flag flies, you run, flip the bail, set the hook, catch the fish. These are versatile and easy to use tools to replace tip-downs or tip-ups.

We rigged ours up with a Northland Fishing Tackle eyeball spoon tipped with a dorsal-fin hooked live fathead, which turned out to be an irresistible presentation.

While Tyler was finishing the Fooler set-ups (in Ontario, we are allowed two lines per angler on the ice), I managed to find

The advertisement features a background image of a lush green field with a path leading into the distance. On the left, there is a logo for 'CREEK BOTTOM LAND MANAGEMENT' with a stylized deer head and antlers. Below the logo is the website 'www.creekbottomlandmgmt.com'. In the center, the text reads 'IF YOU PLAN IT... THEY WILL COME.' On the right, there is a smaller image of a man in camouflage gear holding a large deer with impressive antlers. Above this image is the text 'Schedule Your Consult Today!'. Below the deer image is a map showing various land parcels in different colors (red, green, yellow, grey) with small white squares indicating specific locations.



myself back in the tent jigging with a 1/16-ounce perch color Forage Minnow Spoon tipped with a minnow head.

Ok, I confess. I snuck back in to fish.

There are fish all over my screen. As I drop my spoon down, a fish chases up to inspect; I snap the bail and entice the fish to follow me up, a little further, a bit further, and BAM! Fish on! We aren't fishing very deep, but the fish are not shooting up through the water column, so I know there is some weight to this fish.

Once it's up into the hole, we realize it's another giant crappie! Our first two crappies are proper slabs! Prior to this trip, we were completely unaware that big crappies were this close to camp.

Flags were flying, we caught walleye and crappie all day, and we went through minnows like crazy. But the bite slowed around dusk (4:30 – 5:00 P.M.). Due to water clarity, the sunlight penetration faded, and it was harder to see our baits. We packed up for the evening and arrived back at our fully powered, toasty warm cabin to the delicious smells of our steak dinner with hand-cut fries.

After eating, we visited for a bit, and then off to bed we went, with dreams of more slab crappies swimming in our heads.

## Day Two

We landed back in our spot on the morning of the second day, redrilled necessary holes, and were right back pulling slabs through the ice. The old saying "never leave fish to find fish" applied here. We knew the crappies were using the mudflats and were hitting our baits, so why move?

We marked fish as soon as our electronics were on, and after playing the fish up and down for about a minute, I felt a sharp tug and a lot of drag pulling from my reel. If this was a crappie, it was a real slab!

I always get nervous with the thick ice because I like to see the bottom of my hole to pull the fish in without getting stuck on the ice. It's important to remember to keep your line tight and guide the fish into the hole; if you reel too aggressively, you may end up getting the fish stuck on the bottom of the ice where the hook can easily pop out. After guiding the head through and up the hole and seeing my hook secure in the fish's mouth, I realize it's a large cisco.

Not what I was expecting but still a fun fight. Cisco are a high protein forage base and a popular item on the musky menu.

These fish might explain why the musky surrounding Tamarack are all fat and so much fun to catch, but that's a different article.

I re-rigged my Forage Spoon with a minnow head and dropped back down. We marked fish off and on throughout the morning, and typically when a fish followed up and down chasing baits for a minute or longer, it was a cisco.

While the slabs were not underneath us continually, they consistently swam through, searching for food. So, when I hooked up with a fish that had chased my spoon for a little



Tyler with crappie.

while, I assumed it was another cisco. As it pulled drag and bull-dogged, I was relaxed and had fun with it. But when the fish came up the hole, and I comprehended that it was a whopper calico, I became laser-focused.

That crappie hit the top of the hole and out popped my spoon; the fish is lying unhooked in the hole while Tyler made a mad leap and grabbed it before it was able to turn around and swim away. This slab was a 15-inch trophy - a mounter for sure!

Tyler and I significantly practice catch and release. We are conservationists and want to protect these resources to share these experiences with our daughter and grandchildren. When we plan to release fish, we fight them carefully and methodically because the fish need to acclimate on the way up and not be exhausted to the point of no return.

We only keep the fish out of the water for minimal time frames and dip, if necessary, to keep the fish fresh.

These fish then need to swim back down the 30+ inch ice column before reacclimating and safely return to the bottom. A dead fish under the ice isn't a valid release. While crappie are prolific spawners, trophy fish are a treasure to be shared, and proper handling is required.

Our final day was beautiful. We continued to catch slabs, eater walleye, and cisco the entire trip. It was truly unforgettable and may even be considered a fish tale, except it was all caught on camera and will be airing on January 9th, 2021, on Fox Sports.



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### Until next time

We enjoyed a delicious fish fry the last night of our trip despite news that the U.S. - Canada border would close, and we all needed to return home quickly. The U.S.-Canada border has only closed once before, immediately following the 9/11 attacks, for a brief time frame.

Due to the COVID situation, the U.S.-Canada border remains closed, but we will be reserving our spot again once it opens.

Tamarack Island Wilderness Lodge plans on accepting reservations for ice fishing as soon as the border opens for limited groups, and it is a must on any fisherman's bucket list. A March ice fishing trip to the middle of Lake of the Woods, in a toasty warm cabin, real bed, great company, and catching trophy crappies. Now that's a trip to remember and return to!



*Sara Trampe is an avid outdoor enthusiast and co-host of Sportsman's Journal television series. She has always loved outdoor life, but when she met her husband, Tyler, she really developed a passion for fishing and hunting. Together they have been all over the Midwest and NW Ontario, targeting various species, honing their skills, and dedicating their life to the outdoors. Their adventures are chronicled on Sportsman's Journal – which airs Saturday mornings on Fox Sports North at 11:30.*



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## Tips, Tactics, & Trends

Tyler and I are excited to introduce *Trampe Talk*, a sidebar included in my articles going forward. A collaboration between Tyler and Sara Trampe's knowledge, experiences, opinions, and insight on various fishing industry topics. These are a more in-depth breakdown of something from the article to help further educate you on a specific topic.

There are thousands of lures out there, and it can easily be overwhelming choosing what to use and when to use them. There are obvious differences and baits designated for individual species, and then there are baits that seem similar, designated for the same species, but have distinct differences and purposes.

On our crappie trip, Tyler used a Macho Minnow, and I used a Forage Spoon right next to each other. Frequently we are asked why we use a particular bait. We use different baits to dial in a pattern, and if one of us is getting bites more, we'll often switch, but not every fish's mood is the same, and sometimes having two similar baits can trigger more strikes. Having both lures in your ice arsenal is your safest bet. But how do you know when to use one versus the other?



Let's break down each spoon to find out!

First, the similarities are that they are both used for casting open water for aggressive panfish but more popularly used for vertical jigging on the ice. Both are vertical spoon presentations and come in the same colors.

Now, let's break down the differences: as its name suggests, the Macho Minnow is the larger profile bait designed for larger panfish, walleye, pike, or trout. The Macho Minnow has a split ring for tying line and a larger treble hook for a higher percentage of hook-sets. Its beveled edge causes it to slice through the water column in erratic darting actions mimicking crippled baitfish. The additional kicker tail on the Macho creates clacking and more flash to attract fish.

The side by side comparison picture shows both baits in the 1/8-ounce size, and you can visibly see the Macho is longer, thicker, and broader. The reasons for a larger profile are to attract bigger, more aggressive fish, for use as a useful search bait, or attracting fish from further in dirty water.

To use the Macho as a search bait, pound it off the bottom, creating dirt puffs that coax the fish to inspect for food in the dirt cloud. Or, aggressive jigging generates more clacking, and in turn, sound vibration, enticing fish from further away. You can fish tipped with live bait or a bare hook.

In contrast, the Forage Spoon is a smaller, thinner profile design for picky or lethargic panfish, walleye, bass, or trout. The Forage Spoon also comes in a smaller size, perfect for those early ice bluegill, perch, or crappie. The line is tied directly to the Forage Spoon to create a fluttering, wavering fall imitating an injured minnow. Overall, it's a predictable, less aggressive presentation.

The Forage Spoon is the more versatile, **proven** spoon that can be jigged aggressively, causing flashing and fluttering to attract fish, or jigged and twitched for the less aggressive fish to inspect without spooking.

I tip either with a minnow head or wax worm most times unless the bite is ferocious. It is vital to make sure the minnow head is pushed far enough back to give a sufficient gap between the bait's hook and edge to gain better hook-sets.

Sometimes there is a clear-cut reason for which bait to use, and sometimes it could go either way. Confidence in a lure is huge. When a situation is in between, or you are unsure, always go with the bait you have more confidence in. Either way, the Forage Spoon or Macho Minnow will catch fish, and each is a great bait!