

Fishing Erie's Central Basin

Tips for Walleye and Steelhead

by
Bud Riser

If your nose is buried in this article, you're probably thinking in the back of your mind, "How much is gas going to cost me to find fish"? Can I catch 'em close in? Sure you can...it just depends on how many jet skiers you want to get buzzed off by.

My fishing day usually starts off like this. That chirping robin goes off at 4:15 AM next to the window. 45 minutes later, I'm creeping along the Lake Erie shoreline dropoffs in 17 to 27 foot depths anywhere from Huron to Conneaut.

I'm a die-hard lead chucker so I begin my morning a little shallower than I probably should...usually in 9 to 12 feet...just because I can. Bouncing bottom with jigs and minnows or

crawling a weight forward spinner generally produces a couple early AM fish in skinny water.

If that doesn't do it, I set up my next drift from 10 to 14 feet and maybe switch to a slip sinker and worm harness combo. Bango!—one or two more fish, including the world's largest sheephead.

This time of year, I still like silver, gold or chartreuse color combinations. No matter what your lure choice is, concentrate on using the lightest possible baits but still maintain contact with the bottom.

By this time, it's 9:00 and a boat or two has showed up. I usually slide into 17 to 27foot depths and try blade bait jigging or casting a worm harness in a sweeping arc pattern (casting the swing as charter captains call it).

One or two more fish, a couple of smallmouth bass and a perch or two...not bad for 3 or 4 drifts. 9:45 to 10:00AM and more boats show up



Albert Moll, of Avon Lake, OH, proudly displays a chunky 'eye that fell to a Northland Tackle "Rattlin' Rainbow Spinner" worm rig. Photo by Bud Riser.



Small spoons like the Fire-Eye minnow proved deadly on walleye & steelhead.

along with the first jet skier, churning up the shallows. Now it's time to make the offshore run.

Many mornings may find that you've already limited out on walleyes and you may want to play around with smallmouth bass in 18 to 30 foot depths or fish for perch in 45 to 55 feet instead.

I prefer to get out the heavy artillery and troll offshore for steelhead trout and walleyes. They are often found in the same area of the water column as June/July temps warm up and the summer thermocline sets up.

I generally turn the gain way up or to full on my fishfinder to show the

thermocline. It usually looks like a fuzzy, wavy band on your depthfinder and is about 5 or 6 feet thick, with 67-68 degree water on top. That's where the walleye are, above the thermocline.

I target my trolling baits for walleye to run from 32 to 42 feet deep while my steelhead baits are set to run the deeper part of the thermocline. Colder temperatures hold more steelies as it cools from about 65 to 58 degrees. It's easy to find with a temperature probe.

Right now, I'll bet you're still thinking, "20 miles out??" There's that gasoline question again.

In June and early July, walleye and steelhead action takes place within a reasonable distance from shore. 3 to 6 miles out can be a good early summer starting point and you can work your way out from there.

Last year anglers found schools of walleye and steelies

Northland Tacke's "Rock Runner" bottom bouncers account for many shore-line hugging 'eyes

off Huron, Lorain, Bay Village, Cleveland and points east early last year. Walleyes were spread more widely but those darn trout were everywhere! It was a steelhead bonanza!

My best day produced 30 steelies on line by 12:30 in the afternoon. Captain Bob MacFarland on the "Naughty Buoys" had about 45 on and one chinook as well.

My trip was with two pals who had never been trolling before. Here's how we chase open water walleyes and troutskiis. First, set up a communications hotline. I never hit the water without calling at least five friends to check action as well as internet fishing websites.

Charter Captain, Andy Emrisko, of "Wavewalker" charters uses his own unique formula. "If the TV weather says the lake temperature is 48 degrees, I start out in 48 feet of water. 55 degrees finds me looking



around 55 feet”, explains Emrisko. “I don’t know if it works everywhere, but off Cleveland, it’s been fairly reliable.

Captain John Solecki starts hitting walleyes off Rocky River and Bay Village, Ohio in mid-June when lake temps approach the mid 60’s. “I like to start shallow (45 feet) and work my way north from there”, says the skipper of the “Solucky” charter boat.

John is known for trolling worm harness rigs off Dipsy Divers and from his planer boards. “We’ll often run 12 and even 14 lines until we find what color and action they prefer. Then, we switch a couple more lines to that type of lure or color”.

A number of guys in our information network actually create a grid chart of the areas we fish. It’s unbelievably helpful at a quick glance. There’s a lot of water to cover and if you have 3 to 5 boats covering it, a lot of guesswork is removed.

The last 2 years found walleye in depths of 32 to 70 feet of water, both suspended and occasionally hugging bottom. From early to mid-June, don’t overlook those shoreline breaks for bottom-hugging walleyes.

Anglers have been extremely successful both day and night trolling. “eyes will suspend higher toward the surface as the sun goes down. It doesn’t take them long to become active feeders at dusk.

I’ve actually witnessed a gang of steelhead slashing the surface like

white bass as they chowed down on emerald shiner minnows. We could easily cast to them that evening with spoons or spinners.

Trolling baits for walleye vary greatly from small-bladed Northland Tackle worm rigs to #6 or #7 double willow leaf worm harnesses that “Solucky” charters likes to run. Many captains like crankbaits like Reef Runners, Bombers and Storm Thundersticks off side planers. Recently walleye have shown a preference for smaller stick baits over the larger 25A Bomber sizes.

Spoon sizes dropped into the mini and micro mini sizes for both walleye and trout but last year’s results showed NK-28’s, Wolverine Silver Streaks and Pro Kings in standard sizes working well again.

One thing we learned over the past three years was that if fish show a preference for smaller cranks and spoons, you better use them and not try to force feed ‘em. Sure, we all probably own a couple hundred dollars worth of lures, but if they’re too big or the wrong color or action, it doesn’t mean a thing.

I’m thrifty. It took me nearly half a fishing season to buy smaller spoons but once I did, my central basin success improved considerably. Apparently those walleyes were simply feeding on smaller fish.

Even the worm harness rigs went with small-bladed gold or silver spinners producing best. Try gold when the mayfly hatch is in full swing. Northland Tackle’s

Rattling Rainbow Spinner rigs have been a top favorite of mine for years. Their Rock Runner bottom bouncer and spinner combo has been especially deadly along Lake Erie shoreline breaks and dropoffs.

Buy bottom bouncers heavy enough to run you line as straight up-and-down as possible for maximum sensitivity and hookset. 2 to 3 ounceers are usually good to 30 feet, depending on water conditions. Slow trolling with a lift-and-bounce has worked best for me. Did I also mention that I prefer using Berkley Fireline or Spiderwire?? It really helps a lot with this technique.

Steelhead showed a consistent preference for smaller spoons but the occasional fish would still hit full-sized ones like Pro-Kings or NK-28’s. Any spoon with a copper back has been consistent for both ‘eyes and trout in Cleveland’s offshore waters. Rainbow trout, watermelon, clown, black and purple and green or blue with silver combos were still good colors.

The astounding new kids on the block were Northland Tackle’s Fire Eye spoons and the Michigan Stinger Scorpions along with my favorite Wolverine Silver Streak and micro streak patterns. Colors like “monkey puke, confusion, shrimp and boy/girl” became common to hear on the radio last season.

Trolling speeds are generally about 2-2 1/2 mph for walleye while steelies like baits running a little “hotter” up to about 2 3/4 mph consistently. I travel everywhere

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**Lake Erie Fishing Guide
2001
Available**

A free "Lake Erie Fishing Guide 2001" publication is available through the Ohio Division of Wildlife. The publication can be ordered by calling 1-800-945-3543 or by visiting the Division of Wildlife web site at www.dnr.state.oh.us/wildlife.

Included in the publication are the 2001 fishing regulations and licensing fees for the state of Ohio, information on fishing gear, a section on "Taking Kids Fishing", a good bit of information on the fish species you will expect to find in Lake Erie, fishing hotspots, public launch facilities including ramps and marinas for both the western and central basins of Lake Erie, basic methods for fishing Lake Erie and a section on handling your catch including some great recipes.

A must for those wanting to learn more about Lake Erie Fishing, and it's FREE!

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Precision Jigging

by
Ted Takasaki with Scott Richardson

Trolling is usually the ticket when it comes to catching walleyes on the Great Lakes. Spreading your lines and sifting through large areas of water fast will often connect you with active fish. But, trolling is not always the answer. Sometimes the situation calls for a presentation that lends itself to pinpoint accuracy. That's when it's time to turn to a jig.

The decision on which presentation to choose – jigging vs. trolling - is dictated by how the walleyes are relating to structure on any given day. Using electronics will tell you all you need to know before you ever wet a line. Just ask yourself one question as you watch the fish marks move across the sonar screen. Are walleyes dispersed over huge areas or are they tightly schooled and holding close to reefs, points, rock piles or weeds?

Then picture which method, trolling

or jigging, will keep your bait in front of the most fish for the longest period of time.



Jigging is an effective technique when precision is required to reach walleyes held in structure or when hugging the bottom.

Using this simple analysis, it

becomes clear that trolling does the trick for walleyes that are scattered or suspended. This is normally true in the warm, summer months when walleyes are on the move in search of suspended baitfish. Vary the choice of crankbaits and the amount of line out or use a combination of snap weights and Lindy X-Change bottom bouncers with Hatchet Harnesses and live bait to cover the water column from top to bottom. In-line planer boards can spread your lines to cover a wide path.

Experience has taught us that walleyes will often hold tight to the bottom in small groups on the largest bodies of water. Rock piles, humps and reefs act like magnets in spring and fall or when cold fronts strike in places like Lake Erie's Western Basin or Little Bay de Noc. At other times, walleyes will hold in dense cover, like the weed beds of Saginaw Bay. In all

of these cases, trolling would put baits in the fish zone for only brief moments. You'd spend more time turning the boat around to make another trolling pass than you would actually fishing. On the other hand, specific spots can be worked precisely with a jig. Your bait will stay in front of a walleye for longer periods of time.

Here's how

Doing your homework before you launch is an important ingredient to success on any fishing trip. But on the Great Lakes, information gathering is absolutely critical. There's just too much water to have to search by yourself when armed only with sonar and a rod and reel. Ask clerks at bait shops what areas and tactics are producing. Have them mark your maps. Get the scoop on where the largest concentrations of fish are and get GPS coordinates, if possible.

Once on the water, run from spot to spot, then cruise each location slowly. Watch your sonar carefully to see how fish are relating to the available structure and cover. Note the depth when you find a concentration of walleyes. If they are suspended 3 to 5 feet or more off the bottom, break out the trolling gear. If you are marking fish tight to structure, you'll be using a jig and live bait. When jigging, I like to use a 6-1/2 foot medium-heavy spinning rod with a fast tip like Pinnacle's Tri-Wing TI66SPMH. Your reel should be spooled with 8 or 10 pound monofilament line, like Stren Super Tough, that can withstand abrasions from zebra mussels and haul in the big fish typical of the Great

Lakes. Use a casting combination like the Pinnacle TI66CAMH for heavier jigs and deeper water.

Mark the locations where you see fish on your GPS so you can return easily. Check out the rest of the area and zig-zag slowly along structure contours and weed edges at the depth where you first noticed fish. You might discover the infamous spot-on-a-spot that holds an even larger school. When you do, enter the GPS coordinates or toss out a marker buoy. In addition, listen to your marine radio. Charter captains often exchange information and you might find a pattern or another spot that can help you.

Successful jigging often demands a precise presentation well below the surface. Your ability to accomplish that task depends on the conditions you face above. Are the waves small or large? Can you hold your boat still with an electric trolling motor? If so, you can literally drop a jig on a walleye's nose. A transducer on your trolling motor enables you to work your boat with precision on the edges of the structure.

Golden Rule of Jigging

Here's the number one Golden Rule of Jigging - your jig must always be on or near the bottom for it to be effective. You aren't fishing high percentage, structure-oriented unless it is.

Common sense dictates that the shallower the fish or the slower the wind or current, the lighter the jig can be. An eighth or quarter ounce Fuzz-E-Grub jig can be cast

to the top of a reef or hump topping out in a foot or two of water and retrieved slowly along the bottom back to the boat. For more finicky fish, dangle a smaller jig below a Thill Float so it rides just off the bottom. Let the waves impart the action. Jigs of three-eighths, a half or three-quarters of an ounce handle medium depths. A Jumbo Fuzz-E-Grub weighing five-eighths or an ounce can get down to 50 feet and more. (Ted once led the Professional Walleye Trail tournament on Lake Erie by using his trolling motor to thump big Fuzz E Grubs on humps that rose 5 feet from the bottom in 50 feet of water. His five fish weighed about 37 pounds.)

If the the waves make it too rough to control the boat with an electric motor, toss out an anchor or drift with the wind to cover large areas. Control boat speed with a drift sock, if needed. But whatever the situation, be sure to use a jig heavy enough to maintain bottom contact at all times. Keep no more than a 45-degree angle between your line and the water's surface when drifting to avoid slack in your line and missed fish.

Minnows are great a bait for the Great Lakes anytime. Emerald shiners are the most common. Ask at the bait shops for what's hot. Don't be afraid to experiment, though. Try two minnows on the same hook. There are times when big walleyes seem to want big baits especially in fall and very early spring. Try larger minnows and longer plastic tails. Try a five-eighths or 1-ounce jig dressed with a 4 inch or 6 inch plastic lizard like the ones bass fishermen use. It

works. Nightcrawlers and leeches work well as the water starts to warm up to above 50 degrees.

Sharpen hooks and bend out the hook gaps slightly to improve hook sets. Use stinger hooks, but sometimes allow it to remain free. Inserting the stinger's barb into small emerald shiners can make it appear unnatural.

Jig action is crucial. That was made crystal clear one frigid day when Ted was fishing with walleye/muskie expert Jim Saric on Lake Erie. No one was catching anything, including the charter boats anchored nearby. But that changed when a chilly Saric cast a three-eighth-ounce Fuzz-E-Grub to the top of a 12-foot reef and let it fall to the bottom. As he reached for a cup of coffee, his shivering hand sent vibrations down his rod, through the line and to the jig. When he finally lifted the rod tip, a walleye was on. We took fish after fish during the next several minutes by duplicating the quivering motion. This proved that the first fish was no fluke.

What was the lesson? Match the action of a jig to fit the mood of the walleyes. The most common presentation is lift-drop, lift-drop. But try dragging it, popping it and letting it fall or holding it still just off the bottom. When casting to shallow reefs, let the jig drop until you feel the bottom or see slack in the line. Then slowly lift your rod tip 2 or 3 inches. Pause, drop your rod tip, reel up slack and let the jig touch bottom again. Repeat. Concentrate and remember what action you were giving the jig when you get your first strike. A common mistake by most jiggers is that

they over jig. Use very subtle motions the majority of the time.

Color matters. As a general rule of thumb, brighter colors like chartreuse, lime-green or orange, are good in dirty or stained water. Try subtle, more natural colors like white, black, blue or purple for clearer water. Change up often until you find the color that the walleyes want.

Aggressive walleyes will really "thunk" a jig. If so, set the hook right away. But sometimes they will gently suck the bait in their mouth and just swim away. Get in the habit of watching your line. A few missed fish will alert you about whether you should "feed" them the jig and pause a little longer before driving home the point.

The Great Lakes are big - there's no doubt about it. But, when the walleyes are concentrated and relating to structure, it time to jig with precision.

**Fish Ohio's
Lake Erie
Artificial Reefs!**

**Updated Locations of All
Lake Erie Artificial Reefs
Based on ODNR/GEO Survey
Side-Scan Sonar Data
Updated August, 2000**

Lorain
Polish Fisherman's Club Reef
41 28 .076 N
82 12 .758 W

The Mountain Reef
41 28 .150 N
82 12 .750 W

Lakewood
Cuyahoga County
Commissioners Reef
41 30 .175 N
81 47 .266 W

1984 Experimental Reef Site "A"
41 30 .271 N
81 47 .533 W

1984 Experimental Reef Site "B"
41 30 .256 N
81 47 .041 W

Cleveland Stadium Artificial Reefs

Edgewater
Cleveland Stadium Reef West #1
(north)
41 30 .148 N
81 45 .575 W

Cleveland Stadium Reef West #2
(south)
41 29 .970 N
81 45 .416 W

Euclid
Cleveland Stadium Reef East
(Euclid)
41 35 .933 N
81 33 .804 W

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