

Steelhead Madness on Lake Erie

by
Jeff Frischkorn

Steelhead trout are expected to again give Lake Erie's walleye a run for their rainbow smelt. No one knows this likelihood better than does Ron Johnson, a charter captain from Painesville and whose base of operations is the Grand River. "I bet we caught between 600 and 800 steelhead last year," said Johnson. "It was, by far, the best steelhead fishing that we've ever seen. It was phenomenal."

Officially last year Ohio's Lake Erie boat fishermen caught a projected 33,524 steelhead. That figure is the second highest ever recorded; the highest being in 1993 when an estimated 34,000 steelhead were taken.

Though Johnson said he and his customers still took more walleye than steelhead last fishing season, on more than one occasion it was the steelhead that saved the day.

"I'd say the ratio was something

like three walleye for every steelhead but that is impressive since we targeted walleye and

catches would have been much, much higher."



Captain Ron Johnson of Thumper Charters with a prized steelie. The action really heats up in summer.

not trout," Johnson said. "Had we gone after steelhead exclusively I know that our

Johnson typically fishes the summer months north of the Grand River, shunting his boat's position west to off Euclid or east off Geneva depending on the migration pattern of the fish.

Last summer the largest steelhead netted by Johnson for his customers was a 16 1/2-pound fish with a 17 1/4-pound trout being reeled in the year before. Most of the trout caught by Johnson's clients average 5 to 8 pounds, and his best day last summer saw 21 steelhead being poured into the boat's cooler.

Such keeping is not discouraged by the Ohio Division of Wildlife. It is

that agency's belief that trout taken from the lake's deep waters will probably die anyway so it's

better to keep them than it is to waste the resource.

These catches began appearing the second week in June and didn't ease back on the throttle until nearly the end of August. That is when the fish moved closer to shore in anticipation of the trout making their annual genetically disposed mating run up Northeast Ohio's Lake Erie tributaries.

"It wasn't unusual to find the steelhead schooled up with the walleye," Johnson also said. In most cases, however, the trout would hang out in the lake's cooler and more clear waters while the walleye preferred slightly more tinted and warmer water.

"There'd be days when we actually saw the steelhead near the surface, beating up the water and feeding on bait fish," Johnson said. Johnson said that when he sought steelhead either as his trip's main target or else for a change of pace he'd stay with the ammunition used to hoodwink walleye. Small spoons like Stingers worked especially well when finished in copper and orange coloring, Johnson said.

"Silver was good too if it had a strip of blue tape," Johnson said. "And the steelhead even would hit night crawler harnesses, which I found surprising." What steelhead do prefer is a slightly faster trolling speed, says Johnson.

By upping one's boat speed to 2.2 to 2.5 miles per hour, an angler can expect more strikes from trout. For walleye the best trolling speed is from 1.8 to 2.0 miles per hour, says Johnson. "And you definitely want

to use Dipsy Divers, and both sizes do work," Johnson said.

These directional divers are adjusted to a number 3 setting, says Johnson, and allowed to trail as short as 25 feet back from a planer board or 75 feet back from the boat's stern. "Steelhead are much less boat shy than are walleye so you can get away with the shorter distances," Johnson said.

It is important that an angler maintain proper leader length and strength of line. Initially in the fishing season Johnson employs a leader of from 5 to 6 feet, lengthening the line to 6 to 8 feet as the fishing season progresses.

Johnson also prefers using 17-pound test Power Pro line < a strength made necessary because of a steelhead's often chaotic attack. "A steelhead will trip a Dipsy so you don't have to worry about that at all. What you do need to be concerned about is the drag," Johnson said. "Most fishermen keep their drags set too tight and they lose both the fish and the lure; sometimes the diver too."

When fighting steelhead, Johnson recommends keeping the rod held at the 11 o'clock position and keeping up with the fish. Trout will often charge toward the back of the boat so reeling quickly to pick up line slack is essential, Johnson says.

"We caught a lot of walleye last year but the steelhead added numbers to the cooler," Johnson said.

New Book is First to Follow Official Lake Erie Circle Tour

Some of the most popular tourist attractions in four states and a Canadian province can be found on the Lake Erie shore. A new book by Ohio writer Scott Carpenter captures the natural, historic and cultural significance of the lakeshore, and all the region has to offer as a travel destination. Titled "Lake Erie Journal: Guide to the Official Lake Erie Circle Tour," the book is the first travel guide to the designated Circle Tour, a 700-mile marked driving route along the lakeshore in Ohio, Michigan, Ontario, New York and Pennsylvania.

The 308-page book is indexed and illustrated with nearly 200 maps and photos. It describes historic sites, parks and natural areas, large cities and major tourist attractions, small towns and lesser-known destinations.

"A lot of travel guides these days are about as interesting to read as the phone book — not much more than lists and phone numbers," Carpenter said. "I wanted to write a book that gave the reader a feel for the character of the lakeshore in its entirety and its many parts."

The Great Lakes Commission established the Lake Erie Circle Tour as part of the 6,500-mile Great Lakes Circle Tour in the late 1980s. Green and white signs mark the route in Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania, while in New York the tour overlaps about 75 miles of the larger New York

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Erie Innovation for Walleyes

by
Mark Martin

Right now, as hard-core trolling tactics are in full swing every place on Erie, I'm armed with a selection of dependable lures that are excellent alternatives. For simplicity's sake, and to offer a straightforward strategy for success, I've come up with three of the most effective lure and bait styles that will do the trick around the reefs and river mouths when the trolling bite isn't working out. Or even if it is, these tips and tricks can serve as backup plans when the wind blows or if you're in a smaller boat without the full assortment of trolling gear. Whenever you're around walleyes, it pays to break out the jigs, body baits and a dead rod. Now is the time to adapt them to Erie.

Jigs

Of all the jigs on the market, none is more effective or versatile than the Northland Fire-Ball. They come in sizes from miniature to magnum, giving you the ability

to cover all depths and drop speeds. And they're perfect for snap-jigging, vertical jigging in rivers and lakes, casting and dragging, any

way you want to fish them. Though they are round jigheads, they excel even in current because of the slight keel shape of the head, which makes them track straight in running water. Fire-Balls are large

for their weight, too meaning a 1/16th-ounce specimen is bigger than a lot of regular 1/8th-ouncers, and have bigger, more dramatic profile fish like.

More than anything, the Fire-Ball is a live-bait jig, since it comes without a keeper collar to hold on plastics. I use them with minnows, leeches and half night crawlers. In springtime, I turn to a few tricks to catch more fish. When I know a bunch are beneath me, I often bait up with two small minnows, one hooked upside down, the other right side up. This gives you a pair of minnows in the shape of a V for a more enticing profile. And if walleyes are striking short, if one does rob you of one of the



The author with a good size walleye.

minnows, it will often turn around and grab the remaining bait. Something to remember.

I've seen the technique work time and again on the reefs of Erie's Western Basin. You might feel the first hit and miss, but often the same fish, or maybe a different one, will pounce on it harder the next time. For an added trick, every once in a while I hook a single minnow upside down. I do it when I'm fishing very slowly and giving the jig little action; instead, I depend on the minnow to do it for me. Upside down, the minnow is prone to extra antics.

Another jig from Northland that has an important place in my tackle box is the Whistler. It has a streamlined head and a small propeller for added sound and flash. If normally I'd fish a 1/4-ounce round jig, I boost up to a 3/8ths with the Whistler because of the added lift you get with the propeller. Whistlers are great for casting the shallows, around creeks, rivers and shorelines. When I pitch it out, I often work it almost like a crankbait. When it gets to bottom, I lift it and stop, lift and stop, perhaps a little faster than with a standard jig. With a Whistler I like to turn to plastics as well. Since the Whistlers have a curvature to their hooks, they'll hold plastics in place without tearing off. Try small tubes or Berkley Power Jigworms or Minnows. Sometimes I add an extra squirt of Berkley Walleye Scent. In case you're having trouble keeping near bottom with river current, try cutting the Whistler's prop off the jig. This way, you'll lose the lift of the

propeller and have the keel-shaped head to slice water with better hydrodynamics.

One of the more offbeat offerings depends on nothing but plastic—in fact, it's a double-barrel plastic presentation. On a standard jighead with a keeper to hold the plastic, I put a Berkley Power Minnow and then cut an inch or so off the back of the hook, as if I were tipping it with live bait.

This unusual combination is great in deep water and in times of poor boat control, when you can drag the fake baits over flats or the edge of structure.

I've extended the twin rig's use to deep water, running a heavy jig where I might otherwise want to fish a crankbait but am unsure I can reach bottom in 30 feet and beyond.

Shad Raps

Ever since their debut in the '80s, Rapala's Shad Raps have been catching fish of all species from coast to coast. For me, they're go-to baits in walleye country, especially in spring, when I start with a No. 5 in water six feet and less. Because you can work them faster than a jig, they help eliminate water, and suspended fish will come up several feet to strike them. But I like them to tick and nick bottom on the way in. Now, I don't exactly pound them off the bottom, but a little light touch of bottom is perfect. When you do feel it hit, stop it. Start it up again and when it ticks again, stop it.

Every now and then I will plow it

into bottom just to see what happens. Sometimes it's the ticket. If the water's a little deeper, go with the slightly larger No. 7.

A new weapon in my arsenal is the Shad Rap RS, a rattling, suspending bait. Once, while doing a Bass Pro Shops seminar and casting into one of the fish tanks, I had walleyes, which, as we all know, ignore almost every bait or lure in such captivity, racing after the suspender. Like all crankbaits, don't just cast them out and reel them in. Rather, reel it down, tick bottom and pause. The lure will just hover there, not float up, and walleyes will grab it. There's something about a lure stopping in a walleye's face that it can't resist. You get much the same action when trolling them behind boards, a prime technique for suspended fish on Erie. (Okay, I had to mention trolling on Erie.) As the board shoots forward and then stalls on a turn, the bait will sit there, and the walleyes nail it.

With either type of Shad Rap, I like to add a little extra flash with thin strips of Witchcraft holoform tape. I also experiment with the company's adhesive eyes you can stick to the bait. Sometimes it makes a difference. On certain waters, I've found the walleyes have a definite preference for yellow eyes and black pupils. I don't know why, but I do know they work.

But there's a lot more to a Shad Rap than just casting. Raps are excellent trolling baits, and I have the depths they track almost down to a science. Without weight and with Berkley 20-pound FireLine

(the diameter of eight-pound monofilament), I can get a No. 5 down six feet with 63 to 73 feet of line, a No. 7 down seven to 10 feet with 100 to 110 feet of line, a No. 9 down nine, 10, even 12 or 13 feet with 140 to 150 feet of line. Trolling speed is important, and I almost always run 1 mph to 1.3 mph. If you do go faster, your lures are going to dig deeper. Try trolling Shad Raps around tight contours when you want to get a bait into small places on a short line or when you want to get out and over bottom on lake basins. They also excel for trolling around river mouths, where you need a shorter line because of boat traffic or to get a bait into tight places.

And, lest I forget, when casting add an extra rod, where legal, with live bait to pick up another fish or two or three. More on that in a moment.

The Dead Rod

A dead rod, or one that's basically unattended, will liven up the action many days. When I'm moving along a contour jigging or tossing a Shad Rap, I'll put another rod out with a Northland Rock-Runner bottom bouncer and a Northland Gum-Drop Floater with bait.

For best results, I put a fast-action rod in a holder with a bouncer, a leader up to three feet and a Gum-Drop in small, medium or large. If fish are tentative I'll use a smaller one. If they're more active, I'll boost up in size, or if I'm around bigger fish. The spongy material of the floater keeps the bait just above the tops of emergent weeds. It also helps to keep the bouncer a

few inches from bottom. When you get a strike, the rod will start to bend; pick it up and set the hook.

Any bait, a leech, crawler or minnow, will do the trick, but I prefer minnows around Erie's big fish. Some Gum-Drops come with stinger hooks, but I don't put the stinger into the bait. Since the stinger is tied on stiff mono, it will lie right next to the minnow and help you nail short-strikers. Or, as happens with big, Great Lakes-fed fish accustomed to inhaling high-profile baits, they might very well hold on and not let go. If only walleyes everywhere were that way.



Try This Recipe

Recipe: Cajun Fried Walleye

Ingredients: ½ cup bisquick, 1/ cup milk, 1 egg, 1 cup cornmeal, 2 tsp. Cajun seasoning, 1/ tsp. Salt, 1 ½ lbs walleye fillets, Oil for frying

Preparation Instructions: Whisk together the Bisquick, milk and egg in a medium bowl. Mix the cornmeal, Cajun seasoning and salt in a shallow dish. Dip the fillets into the wet batter first, then dredge in the cornmeal mixture.

Fry the fillets in hot oil until golden brown, turning once. Drain on paper towels and serve. Ranch dressing makes a great dipping sauce for this.

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Seaway Trail, a National Scenic Byway that continues to the Atlantic coast. Blue and white signs identify the Lake Erie North Shore Tour in Ontario, which meanders from the Ambassador Bridge over the Detroit River to the Peace Bridge spanning the mighty Niagara.

For generations, families have vacationed at places like Niagara Falls, Cedar Point and Put-in-Bay. Today, tourists also flock to new attractions such as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, casinos in Windsor and Detroit, and Bicentennial Tower overlooking Presque Isle in Erie, Pa.

Recent magazine articles have touted the lake as one of the best places in North America for fishing and birding. The Ohio Division of Travel and Tourism just this year named the state's entire lakeshore as a Heritage Corridor because of its significant historic and natural features.

Carpenter has nearly 20 years experience as an editor, reporter and freelance writer in Northwest Ohio. For much of that time, he has written a column about Lake Erie, which has received more than a dozen awards for outdoor, travel and environmental writing.

Lake Erie Journal will be available in bookstores and other outlets this spring, and may be ordered from the publisher, Big River Press, P.O. Box 130 Millfield, OH 45761. Phone: 800-447-8238. The cover price is \$14.95, plus \$3 shipping. (Ohio residents add \$0.93 state tax.)



Smallmouth on the Rocks

by
Melissa Hathaway

It's "Smallmouth on the Rocks" for bass anglers on the Ohio waters of Lake Erie. Mid-to-Late Spring and early Summer bass anglers on this southern-most Great Lake know that where there is rocky structure there are lunker smallmouth bass ready to turn on.

It is no coincidence that the "Bass Islands" of western Lake Erie are so-named. The rocky shorelines and drop-offs around the islands were historically known for quality smallmouth fishing, but the 1990's exploded with a whole new wave of smallmouth mania, says the ODNR Division of Wildlife. Lake Erie's entire waters are teaming with smallmouth bass.

Smallies are taken around all the Western Basin islands, Western Basin reefs, along rocky shorelines across the entire mainland, nearshore areas and breakwalls from Huron to Conneaut, and the open water.

The third most sought after species in Lake Erie, smallmouth bass is gaining ground on walleye and yellow perch as more and more anglers discover the joys of pursuing these high-jumping, feisty fish. Last year the popular In-Fisherman Magazine named Lake Erie "the World's Best Smallmouth Bite."

As Lake Erie's water temperatures exceed 50 degrees Fahrenheit in spring, bass anglers from

across the country travel to Ohio to get a piece of the action. The procession of vehicles towing bass boats continues through October with the peak smallmouth fishing in May, June, August, and September. One or more bass tournaments, many on the national level, are held on the lake and Sandusky Bay almost any given weekend throughout the season.

It is ironic that these feisty fish are often nicknamed "smallies" because on Lake Erie they are not only plentiful, they are big! Catches currently average 14 to 17 inches, with many larger fish in the 18- to 20-inch range also caught. Ohio's state record for smallmouth bass caught in the Bass Islands area in June 1993 weighed in at 9.5 pounds and was 23.5 inches in length.

Good spawning success in the 1990s, good numbers of forage fish eaten by bass, and catch-and-release practices by bass anglers have helped Lake Erie's smallmouth population to thrive. (Angler interviews indicate that more than 80 percent of the bass caught on Lake Erie are released back into the lake.) Still, angling pressure for these fun-to-catch fighters increased five-fold during the 1990s. To help conserve the smallmouth bass population, the Division last year decreased the legal daily bag limit for smallmouth bass from eight to five with a

minimum size length of 14 inches.

To get a better handle on Lake Erie's smallmouth bass population, the Division of Wildlife is conducting studies to better determine harvest, smallmouth bass movements, habitat use, stock composition, spawning habitats, early life history, and biological factors that are affecting the bass population. This, in turn, will help determine appropriate management strategies and regulations for this popular species.

Division biologists have been tagging smallmouth bass in areas off Middle Bass, South Bass, and North Bass islands. Lake Erie anglers who catch a smallmouth bass bearing a metal jaw tag, are encouraged to report it to the Ohio Division of Wildlife at (419) 625-8062.

Besides the tagging studies, the Division is sponsoring research being conducted by The Ohio State University. Researchers are using scuba gear for underwater observations to document spawning habits and interactions between smallmouth bass and exotic species, particularly round gobies. Gobies, those plentiful, little, bait-stealing invader species that entered the Great Lakes in 1990, have been observed preying on eggs and fry of smallmouth bass.

The Division of Wildlife predicts that fishing for smallmouth bass on Lake Erie should remain good to excellent during 2001 and beyond. Bass anglers can expect to land smallies from spawns of 1995, 1996, and 1997 now ranging in size from 14 to 17 inches. Hot spots should include the Bass and Kelleys islands areas, Western Basin reef complex, Sandusky Bay, Ruggles Reef, artificial reefs in the Lorain/Cleveland area, and harbor breakwalls from Cleveland to Conneaut.

Anglers can find out more about smallmouth bass fishing on Lake Erie by requesting a Lake Erie Fishing Guide by calling 1-800-WILDLIFE (1-800-945-3543). The guide also includes information on launching facilities and who to contact for lodging and charter fishing information. A recorded Lake Erie fishing report is available by calling 1-888-HOOK FISH (1-888-466-5347).

Where and How to Fish for Lake Erie Smallmouth Bass

Knowing the habits of smallmouth bass is important to maximizing your fishing efforts. Smallmouth bass have relatively small home ranges and do not move great distances in Lake Erie like walleye. Smallmouth bass associate with bottom structure, preferring rock, rubble, gravel and sand substrates.

As water temperatures exceed 50 degrees Fahrenheit in the spring, adult smallmouth move from deep water wintering sites to shallow spawning areas. Spawning occurs at depths of 4 to 20 feet at water temperatures between 55

and 65 degrees Fahrenheit, usually in May. After spawning, adult smallmouth move to summer foraging areas at water temperatures of 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit, usually by July. The depth of their summering area depends on water clarity, available forage, and weather. As water temperatures drop below 50 degrees Fahrenheit, they move to deeper waters in their home zone, where they remain in a semidormant condition during the winter months.

Structure is the key. Look for rocky structures: gravel bottoms, rocky ledges, shelves, drop-offs, humps, shoals, reefs, breakwalls, piers, rocky and rip rap shorelines, and rocky bottoms in open water areas. Boat anglers have more of an advantage by drifting and moving from spot to spot, but shore anglers catch their share of smallies from rocky shorelines, piers, breakwalls and docks, all popular haunts of smallmouth.

Many anglers use jigs, plastic worms, or scented baits fished over rocky bottoms in 8 to 20 feet of water. Live baits generally provide the best success with crayfish and shiner minnows the preferred live baits. A traditional presentation still successful today is a lead headed jig tipped with a piece of nightcrawler, or plastic worm, grub, or tube bait. Anglers also cast artificial baits, including crankbaits, spinners, and blades. Baits and lures are worked along shallow reef bottoms, shoals and ledges, and near bottom along rocky shorelines in the spring and fall. Anglers generally find better success in mid-summer by fishing along rocky bottoms in open water and nearshore areas.

Most bass anglers practice catch-and-release. But for those who prefer to keep their catch, Ohio law requires that smallmouth bass caught in Lake Erie be released back into the lake if they are less than 14 inches long. There is a daily bag limit of eight fish per angler.

Some smallmouth hot spots in the Western Basin include the Bass Islands, Kelleys Island, and as well as the other small islands, near shore reef complex west of Port Clinton, Sandusky Bay, and nearshore areas, shorelines, and piers along Marblehead, Catawba and Sandusky. Excellent Central Basin smallmouth territory include Ruggles Reef off Vermilion, the artificial reefs off Lorain and Cleveland, breakwalls at Huron, Vermilion, Lorain, Fairport Harbor, Conneaut and Ashtabula, Perry Nuclear Plant east of Fairport Harbor, and nearshore areas from Fairport Harbor to Conneaut. Contact: Melissa Hathaway, ODNR Division of Wildlife (419) 625-8062.

Looking to Charter On Lake Erie?

See the Captains listed in our Charter Directory on page 39 in this issue or at

www.walleye.com

All captains licensed, insured and with years of Lake Erie Experience!

The Eastern Lake Erie Fishery Report

by
Joe Fischer

The big news for 2001 to most veteran Eastern Lake Erie walleye fishermen is the International Lake Erie committee's recent proposal regarding walleye creel limits. The committee, which has representatives from 4 states and Canada, recognized that walleye stocks throughout the take have diminished by as much as 70% in the last ten years and that decisive steps must be taken to reverse this downward trend before a walleye population crisis appears. All stakeholders are being asked to share in a significant reduction of the sportfishing and commercial walleye catch (TAC) for the next three years. The eastern basin (New York) is considering a daily creel reduction from 5 to 4 walleyes while Pennsylvania is proposing to keep their daily limit at 6 but will close the spring spawning season for walleye fishing. Canada's eastern basin sportfishermen will reduce their daily limit from 6 to 4 with Canada's commercial fleet reducing their catch from 3.3 million fish to 1.47 million, which is a reduction of 56%.

The Ontario ministry of Natural Resources (OUNR) is taking considerable "heat" because of their drastic reduction in the commercial walleye harvest. The commercial fishermen have fully recognized the need for walleye restrictions but had hoped that a significant increase in the TAC for

Lake Perch might help them survive the next three years. The perch population is forecasted as being on the increase but didn't justify the large increase that the commercials hoped for. Rumors persist that many of the commercial fishermen are being laid off and some of the smaller operations are closing down. If all of the proposed changes do take place the yearly Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of walleye for Lake Erie will be reduced from 7.7 million fish to 3.4 million. This will be in place for a period of 3 years upon which time the status of the walleye fishery will be reevaluated. If the stakeholders feel that a significant improvement has taken place the quotas will obviously be increased.

As previously reported many veteran New York fishermen feel that they are being asked to once again take a cut in the daily creel limit when New York State has been a leader in walleye conservation with closed spring seasons, a ban on gill nets and a daily creel limit of 5 walleyes. They feel that if the rest of the lake's stakeholders would have followed these conservative regulations the walleye population downward spiral might have been averted. Their major concern however is for the conservation and preservation of the walleye resource in the future. New York does have the advantage of being on a 2 year program in regards to regulation changes

which means that they will not be able to institute their proposed walleye creel reduction until October of 2002. By this time the other stakeholders will be well into their new regulations and New York will have a preliminary indication on how well the new regulations are working or if any of the other stakeholders are deviating from the lakewide walleye regulation agreement. I certainly hope these regulations work and the walleye doesn't go the way of the blue pike!

The spring to early summer fishery in the eastern basin should be somewhat improved by the presence of a good mature 1998 class year of walleye. Most of these fish should be legal size and will make excellent table fare. These fish will be closer to shore and in shallower water and will probably respond to standard daytime shallow water walleye tactics such as worm harnesses, jigs and stick baits. Long line trolling after dark with stick baits in relatively shallow water can be very productive until the water warms up to summer temperatures. These fish generally are structure oriented but the extreme water clarity.

I drive them deeper in the daytime but they will feed in shallow water after dark. The Lake Erie water level is projected as being lower than normal so be careful when trolling in shallow water especially if your boat is relatively large.

The summer walleye fishery, as stated in previous columns, is totally dependent on the arrival of the suspended nomadic large female walleyes from the western basin. This proved to be later than usual last year, as these fish didn't arrive until late July. This year will undoubtedly be very similar unless we have very warm early summer temperatures, which will drive the western basin bait and walleyes to the cooler deeper water of the eastern basin earlier than usual.

Summertime deep-water walleye tactics on Lake Erie are based on finding the suspended deep-water walleyes and getting the proper bait down to their depth. These fish can be sometimes be found in water exceeding 100 feet and will suspend at depths of 40-80 feet in tight schools. Dipsy Divers, Wire line and Jet Planers are some of the tackle employed by veteran offshore summer walleye fishermen to get the lures at the proper depth. "The extreme water clarity requires the use of the new thin super lines such as Fireline to get your lures deeper without detection" stated veteran Eastern Lake Erie Charter Captain Jerry May at a recent Southtowns Walleye Association seminar. Once again the baits of choice will be spinner and worm combinations of various colors, body baits like the Renosky plug and spoons of various colors. In the morning hours colors such as purple, firetiger and black seem to work well but as the sun rises fishermen change to blue, green and silver. Watermelon and various shades of pink also have produced walleye strikes. A rule of thumb is if you are over fish and do not get a strike in 30 minutes pull your

lures in and change colors. This takes a lot of work but most veteran offshore fishermen employ a variation of this tactic.

The fall perch fishing should be improved, as 1998 was a strong class year for perch. This is indeed good news as next to walleye this is the most desirable and best eating fish in Lake Erie. These fish will be found in water 40-60 feet deep and the best way to catch them is with Lake Minnows. The area from Sturgeon Point to the Cattaraugus Creek is usually where these fish school up in the fall. Be sure to check the local weather forecast before you venture out in the fall as Lake Erie is noted for its fall windstorms, which can come up in a matter of minutes!

Smallmouth Bass fishing will continue to be world class in the summer of 2001. The amount and size of these fish are incredible with many people catching and releasing 20 to 40 smallmouths during one outing! Jigs continue to be the top choice of most bass anglers but crank baits also work quite well. This should be a good year for most fishermen as long as the capricious Eastern Lake Erie weather doesn't interfere. Good luck!

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with a GPS and a compass. They're invaluable when searching for open water hotspots. In June, patterns have found fish offshore in 35 to 45 foot depths. They may be suspended up high so look for 'em.

In July, walleye and steelhead are chased in 45 to 65 feet of water and both species can be located high as well as down into the thermocline. Last year, many anglers trolled Dipsy Divers 50 to 80 feet out on 1, 2 and 3 settings respectively for trout. Walleye hit deeper with setting farther back at 145, 165 and 185 feet of line out on 1,2 and 3 Dipsys. Fluorescent colors like Chartreuse and Fire Tiger took most of the 'eyes while copper and rainbow trout patterns caught most of my steelies.

By mid-July, lake temps are usually at 70-72 degrees down deep. Going into late July and August, water temps peak and motoring out 25 miles or more is not unusual to locate good action. By mid-August, many anglers shift over to yellow perch or smallies instead of spending all the time and gas money chasing distant fish.

Nearshore (4 to 7 miles out) walleye activity usually picks up off Lorain, Vermilion and Huron but that's another article for the fall issue. See you on the water!

Lake Erie's Walleye Under the Microscope

by
Jeff Frischkorn

Lake Erie's fisheries managers are feverishly applying brick and mortar to the state's fishing laws, implementing greater restrictions on the harvesting of walleye.

These rules apply lakewide to both classes of anglers: Commercial as well as sport fishermen.

Had the fisheries biologists from the lake's four slaveholding states and one Canadian province not undertaken halving the lakewide take of walleye, then at some point the species could easily have been spoken of in the past tense.

For this year Ohio's quota of Lake Erie walleye is 1.7 million, all allocated to sport fishermen. That statistic is out of the lakewide quota of 3.4 million fish. Last year the lakewide quota was 7.7 million walleye with Ohio receiving 3.8 million fish.

By comparison, Ontario's commercial fishermen are being allocated roughly 1.5 million walleye - down from their 2000 allocation of 3.3 million fish.

Distilling the rhetoric, fisheries managers agree they miscalculated the status of Lake Erie's walleye stock.

"Heck, we never said we were perfect. Our mistake was that we were being too liberal with our harvest policies. We used the same

harvest policies that we did in the 1980s but the ecological factors changed in the 1990s and I have no doubt that they will continue to change," said Mike Costello, the Ohio Division of Wildlife's biologist in charge of the state's Lake Erie fisheries program.

The real story, says Costello, is that had this year's walleye quota followed the traditional path of exploiting recent good hatches then the lakewide allocation would have risen to between 9 million and 10 million fish.

Instead the lake's stakeholders are placing harvest restrictions in an effort to rebuild a walleye fisheries that managers now admit is static, if not in decline.

"I believe that biologists and administrators are concerned enough to take these stopgap measures to give us time to evaluate the situation in order to see what long-term management options may be available," said Gary Isbell, the wildlife division's chief fisheries biologist. "In that way we may be able to restore the walleye's population to what it was in the past."

It is fundamentally wrong, Costello says however, to simply tie Ontario commercial fishermen to the stake and reach for the Butane lighter.

"That's an easy out. The reality is that Canada lived within the quota agreement," Costello said.

In truth, various unforeseen factors were what led to the walleye's current sluggish status. The unattended introduction of zebra mussels into Lake Erie years ago followed by the appearance of the round goby in the late 1990s were believed contributors to the walleye's present morose state.

Another negative factor in the equation was the ban on phosphates entering Lake Erie, allowing for the departure of nutrient-loving algae. All three of these conditions led to dramatically altered lake dynamics, both Isbell and Costello said.

"But we also believe that fishing had an impact, and that's why we believe a reduction in the harvest is necessary," Isbell said. Simply put, Costello says, a fisheries cannot sustain itself with the resulting surplus yielding sustainable dividends, Costello said. "What we've been doing is hammering those 15-inch fish before they had much of an opportunity to spawn," Costello said.

As a result, the management of Lake Erie's fisheries is only going to become even more blurred and more difficult, Costello says.

"It's a moving target, and it's moving a heck of a lot faster than it ever did before," Costello said.