

Shallow Water Walleye Tactics

By Kenny Darwin

Believe it or not, you may be missing a lot of walleyes at this time of year by fishing too deep. Here are some tips to help you correct that angling error.

Most walleye anglers search for fish in the springtime by probing bottom with jigs and rigs, but there is a growing army of savvy fishermen who take limit catches using stealthy trolling tactics for fish that are hugging the surface. This hot walleye fishing begins after ice-out and remains steady until water temperatures rise above 60 degrees. What's amazing is the strategy works equally well on large bodies of water, reservoirs, ponds or rivers.

Some anglers even call it the hottest fishing tactic for coldwater walleyes. Here's why.

Ever have trouble marking spring walleyes? Studies have proved that when water temperatures are cold, walleyes will vacate preferred structure and move up the water column in search of baitfish. What happens is forage fish tend to congregate near the surface where the sun increases the water temperatures and where the microorganisms grow.

Look for baitfish in the upper 10 feet of water, feasting on zooplankton, algae and microorganisms found in warmer water. The slightly warmer water at the surface increases a fish's metabolism and so both baitfish and the predatory walleyes shake off the winter blues to become more active.

At times the warmest water temperature is found near shore where sandy bottoms tend to capture the sun's rays more rapidly and increase water temperature. Pockets of warm water can also be found near warm water discharges, stream inlets or locations where super-calm surface conditions allow the sun's rays to penetrate.

Perhaps the deadliest tactic for catching boatloads of walleyes on or near the top of the water is trolling. Because fish are close to the surface, a stealthy approach is required using in-line planer boards and an electric trolling motor. Bow or transom mounted electric motors can be used; savvy anglers use 36- or 24-volt systems with two or three batteries that allow them to troll all day. Combine silent trolling power with GPS and autopilot steering and you have a deadly fishing machine.

Smart anglers troll downwind, which provides consistent speed and boat control compared to trolling in upwind or side-wind directions. The trick is to use a precise trolling speed between 1.2 to 2 mph; slow speeds are matched to cold water and faster speeds are used when water temperatures rise above 60 degrees or when pulling stick baits. For most situations a 1.5 mph speed is ideal.

Start with a medium-light rod and level wind reel like Daiwa SG27 line counter that allows you to keep track of the amount of line you let out behind the board. Spool up with 10-pound mono, but if fish are in super-clear water, use a 4-foot leader of 8-pound fluorocarbon attached to the main line with an ant-sized 12 crane swivel made by Blackbird. Most trollers tie direct to a spinner or stickbait but I prefer to use a size 1 Duo-Lock snap that makes changing lures a breeze.

Begin by staggering lines varied distances from the in-line board. Once you catch fish, move other lines to the strike zone by duplicating the distance back indicated by the line counter. Walleyes often occupy a very narrow band of water and presentations must be precisely placed at specific target depths. A line counter reel makes this goal possible.

Savvy trollers use in-line boards that take crawler and stick bait presentations far from the boat. Boards allow you to troll several lures without line tangles. If waters are rolling, lines can be 50 to 70 feet boatside, but during calm weather and sunny days, run them way out. You can count on catching more fish on the boards farthest from the boat noise and shadow.

One deadly presentation is a crawler harness tipped with a juicy nightcrawler. Modern-day crawler harnesses have holographic designs, attractive paint schemes that shimmer and reflecting light, and each blade revolution produces the illusion of live bait. The added vibration of the rotating blade is the ticket to attracting walleyes. Trollers like the larger size 4 or 5 blades for slow trolling. If fish are in the upper 3 to 5 feet of water, set the crawler harness about 40 feet behind the board.

For walleyes down 5 to 7 feet, use a couple of size 7 split shot crimped 4 feet in front of the blade. More weight should be added if fish are deeper. For 'eyes 10 feet below the surface, try a 1/2-ounce XPS Extreme Performance System holographic keel sinker shaped like a fish. It's by Bass Pro Shops. A 1-ounce keel weight will take fish 15 feet down. Some anglers use bead chain keel sinkers.

There is a growing army of anglers who seek limit catches under the cover of darkness. It is well known that when the sun goes down, the walleyes turn on. How shallow is the bite? Many anglers troll stick baits along weedbeds, dropoffs, humps and sand bars as shallow as 5 feet of water. Most try running stick baits 3 to 5 feet down.

A hot night-trolling program includes running two lines on each side of the boat using in-line planer boards. Battery operated lights are glued to boards or lightsticks are attached to the flag using rubber bands or duct tape, so the board is easily visible in the darkness. Attach crankbaits to 10-pound line using locking snap swivels. At night you don't need a leader of fluorocarbon.

Top producing baits include: Reef Runner Rip Stick set 15 to 22 feet back; Rapala Husky Jerk placed 26 to 30 feet back; Smithwick Rattlin' Rouge 35 feet back; and Rapala placed 30 to 40 feet back. Hot colors include rainbow trout, mooneye, black/chrome, blue/chrome, clown and new prism colors.

A productive trolling speed with stick baits is 1.5 to 1.8 mph, adjusting speed as fish or water conditions dictate. Slower speeds produce in waves but when the water is flat calm and the moon reflects bright light off the calm surface like a city street light, kick speed up to 1.8 mph. There is something powerfully addictive about the savage strike and tug-of-war fight of a 10-pound walleye under the glow of the moon.

Sound like fun? Limit catches will quickly turn you into a skinny-water trolling nut, or maybe even into a night owl.

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