

StarTribune

Walleye

A fishing primer



An excerpt from "Ron Schara's
Minnesota Fishing Guide"
(Fristan Outdoors, 276 pages, \$19.95)

Without walleyes, Minnesota would be a cold Iowa. * Walleyes are us. * Outside of Canada, no other spot on earth has as many walleyes swimming around as Minnesota does. Nobody stocks more walleyes from more hatcheries in more lakes. * Panfish may attract more state anglers if you're counting numbers. But no fish in Minnesota is more intensively sought or more highly prized than a walleye. * The walleye may be the state's official fish, but I've never known a walleye to swim voluntarily into a frying pan.

Finding walleye hangouts

So where do you start fishing? That depends on the time of year. Walleyes spawn in shallow water during April and early May in Minnesota. After spawning and as the weeks pass on into summer, the general rule is the walleyes gradually drop into deeper water.

There are exceptions, of course. Under the cover of darkness, walleyes may move back into shallow water, say 6 feet or less, even on the hottest days of July and August.

You will find walleyes hanging out in weedbeds in less than 12 feet of water spring, summer or fall.

Walleyes tend to be structure fish. A point. A reef. A sunken island. A pile of boulders. A sand flat. Any and all of these places may harbor walleyes on any given day in any given lake.

Walleyes love wind

When the wind blows, the walleyes bite. There's no guarantee in fishing, but the wind and walleye connection is as close as it gets.

While walleyes tend to be nocturnal creatures, it's very possible to catch them in daylight, saving your nocturnal hours for more normal pursuits.

You can have the luxury of sunlight and catch walleyes, if you've got wind or dark water (tannic stained) or a feeding movement. A hungry walleye is very capable of ignoring bright sunlight while it feeds.

Fishin' the flats

Walleyes tend to be clean-bottom fish. That is, they prefer sand, rock or gravel sites or at least hard bottom. Again, there are exceptions. The so-called "mud flats" of Mille Lacs are famed walleye hangouts in midsummer. But the flats are actually clay humps and they are quite hard, although covered with silt. At times during the summer, the Mille Lacs walleyes will go off the humps into truly pure, unadulterated soft mucky bottom. But their forays over mud are the exception, not the rule.

Walleyes by the season

Opening day and the first two or three weeks of walleye fishing is typically a shoreline affair. Having completed spawning in the shallows, walleyes tend to hang around the rock, sand or gravel shores in water seldom deeper than 15 feet. Usually less. If warming spring weather arrives early, this shallow period will be short.

SCHARA continues on C21

Mark Levinson/Star Tribune file photo

FIELD REPORT / WALLEYE

Prospects?

"The walleye populations are looking pretty good and conditions are set up for a real good opener, if the weather cooperates," said Ron Payer, Department of Natural Resources fisheries chief. "Statewide, we have some really nice-sized fish." Ice-out was seven to 10 days early this year. "The spawn was done about a week earlier than normal," Payer said. That could benefit anglers.

Warm weather

Weather, of course, is a major factor for fishing success or failure. Northern Minnesota hasn't had the warm temperatures that the Twin Cities has had this spring, meaning water temperatures may be on the cool side. Some warm weather before the opener could help make fish more active.

Water levels

Water levels on many northern lakes are low, and anglers could have trouble launching boats at some accesses, said Sam Johnson, DNR trails and waterways supervisor in Grand Rapids. "I'd suggest they bring wadders," he said. "And I'd tell them to call ahead to a resort or the DNR before hauling their boat to a certain site and having trouble launching it."

Fire danger

Much of the state is very dry. "People should be very careful with campfires," said Johnson. Precipitation is well below normal for all but the northeast and far northwest parts of the state.

Transporting fish

If you do catch fish this weekend, remember there are specific regulations for transporting them. Among them:

• Fish must be packaged in such a way that they can be readily unwrapped, prepared, identified and counted.

• Fish cannot be reduced to more than two filets.

• All dressed fish and filets must have a 1-inch patch of skin with scales intact from a portion of the body other than the belly. Exceptions are for head, sunfish and crappies.

• Fish taken from experimental or special regulation waters or fish with statewide length limits must be transported intact so they can be measured.

Mille Lacs regulations

The walleye season on Mille Lacs opens Saturday with a 20-to-28-inch protected slot — fish within that range must be released. Anglers will be able to keep walleyes up to 20 inches, with one trophy over 28. The bag limit remains four. Starting July 15, the protected slot will be loosened to 22 to 28 inches, with one trophy over 28.



Mark Levinson/Star Tribune photo

Governor's opener

The 56th Minnesota Governor's Fishing Opener will take place on Sunday. This year, Gov. Tim Walle (above) does the honors on Lake of the Woods near Ausable. His guide will be Tim Lyon.

Doug Smith

OPENING DAY

WHAT: 2004 MINNESOTA FISHING OPENER (WALLEYES AND NORTHERNS) • WHEN: 12:01 A.M. SATURDAY • WALLEYE LIMIT: SIX*
* WITH EXCEPTIONS

Ron Schara: An excerpt from Schara's 'Minnesota Fishing Guide'

Ron Schara

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Concentrations of male walleyes in early season can be spectacular, particularly where spawning rivers enter a lake. Seldom are the big mamas around.

As the days go and the water warms, walleyes become more predictable. This happens in June.

If you're a lunker hunter, June fishing is more promising as walleyes can be found rather consistently in their usual hangouts -- deep shoreline points, sunken islands, sandbars, rockbars. The fish-producing depths range from about 15 to 30 feet. Remember, however, that not every walleye has moved. Shorelines with sharp drops of gravel or rock will continue to be productive, especially at dawn and dusk.

At that time of year, about mid-June, a practical depth to start fishing is about 20 feet. If that fails, move up or down in increments of 5 feet in trial-and-error fashion.

Sooner or later, if you're fishing typical summer hangouts, you should get a bite.

Live bait for walleyes

When a fish hits an artificial lure, something made out of lead and feathers or molded in plastic or carved from wood, there's something special about the occasion. And every angler feels it.

Walleyes are quite catchable on artificial lures, particularly in shallow water. But once walleyes move deeper, the purist, the one who wouldn't stoop so low as to touch live bait, is apt to starve to death.

If you really want to catch walleyes, learn how to fish live bait. It's your No. 1 weapon. Actually, you have three big guns -- minnows, nightcrawlers and leeches.

About minnows

If you want one bait to master, make it the minnow.

But which ones?

Let's keep it simple. Two choices: fatheads and spottail shiners.

The fatheads commonly found in bait shops will take walleyes from opening day to ice-over. An old secret that's not so well kept anymore is the advantage of choosing female fatheads over the darker male fatheads. I've experimented enough to believe walleyes prefer the female fatheads. Why? I haven't a clue.

Shiners can perform magic in early season. A walleye that'll pass up fatheads will absolutely gorge itself on a spottail shiner, so named for the black spot at the base of the tail.

Sometimes you learn that the hard way.

About nightcrawlers

Called "garden hackle" by trout fishermen, the nightcrawler has become a walleye fooler supreme. Don't ask me why a walleye miles from shore would be looking for a nightcrawler in the middle of a lake. But they are and that's all we need to know.

Chose plump, healthy nightcrawlers. Skinny, half-dead crawlers are less effective as are the regular earthworm, the smaller relative of the nightcrawler.

Slow trolling or drifting with a live bait rig are the best nightcrawler fishing methods, although a "piece" of

nightcrawler added to a lead-headed jig often works well. Spinners also are designed with a hook harness to use on nightcrawlers.

About leeches

The name of the angler who discovered that leeches were a deadly walleye bait has been lost to the waves of time.

For sure, he or she must have been the gutsy sort, being the first to reach into a slithering ball of leeches. Some people would rather read their own obituary than touch a leech.

Now guess what?

The pointed end of the leech is its head and it swims in that direction. The rear of the leech has a sucker or suction end capable of attaching or clinging to your skin. But a leech is not a bloodsucker. Leeches do not feed on blood, and bloodsuckers are not leeches.

Leeches may be hooked at either end, although most anglers slip the hook through the sucker end.

Speed and the strike

These are the two most common mistakes made by novice walleye-seekers. They troll or drift too fast and cannot recognize the walleyes soft "nonstrike."

Generally I don't think you can hurt your success by trolling too slowly. The need to move slow and still control the boat has led to the popular technique called "backtrolling." It looks just like it sounds. The outboard is placed in reverse and the boat moves stern first instead of bow first. Fishermen who practice backtrolling are easy to spot: their boats have large plastic flaps affixed above the transom on each side of the outboard.

Detecting a strike

When bobber fishing, a walleye bite is easily detected. Yesiree, the bobber goes down.

With conventional live bait rigs, the walleye's soft attack on minnows, nightcrawlers and leeches is often missed by beginners.

It's a nonstrike really. You'll seldom feel a "jerk" so don't wait for one. Instead, the walleye strike is more like a light snag. You'll detect a gradually increasing tension on the line as if the bait had hooked on a soft tree branch. Sometimes it's a branch, usually it's a walleye.

For that reason, most anglers fish walleyes with an open spinning reel while the bail is open to give line instantly. Your line then should be held by one or two fingers, which helps detect the growing line tension. Once the tension is felt, quickly drop your finger, giving line and adding slack. Let the walleye run with the bait.

How long should you wait? When you've had a strike, seconds seem like minutes. Count to 10 slowly and set the hook firmly. If you miss the fish, you might count to 20 on the next bite. If you counted to 10 and the walleye is landed with the hook already buried in its stomach, you know you can probably set the hook sooner on the next fish.

Detecting a jig strike

The walleye, like the bass, tends to hit the jig when it is falling or immediately after it settles to the bottom. Knowing that, the trick is to detect the strike.

The key to detecting the strike is to make sure you maintain some tension on the line as the jig falls. If the jig falls on complete slack line, a strike may go unnoticed.

A perfect day?

Any time you land enough walleyes to fill a frying pan is cause for celebration. Day or night.

Veteran walleye hunters often look for gray, overcast skies with westerly winds. Typically, that's walleye-catching weather. But don't be discouraged by bright, sunny days with calm waters. It might not be easy, but walleyes are catchable then, too.

But whatever the weather, don't give up. If you've ever tasted fresh a walleye fillet, that's all you need to know.

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