

Getting Aggressive for Early-Season Perch

For a fish that draws so much attention on ice, the yellow perch is largely ignored during early spring. Once the ice is off and the states with closed seasons open, walleye mania hits the North Country. Most anglers set a laser focus on the perch's larger cousin.

For those of you with a penchant for something a little different from the jig-and-rig rodeo scene playing out all over the lake, nice perch are ready for the taking. You can expect to catch plenty of incidental walleyes, to boot.

Perch location is at this time dependent on where they're going to spawn, with a few patterns primary in most lakes and reservoirs. They run into marshes and sloughs often connected to the main lake via narrow tube areas, or through

a tube area into a shallower, darker lake connected to a clearer one. These areas can be as narrow as a culvert or a bridge area.

If these options aren't available, they gather in marshes and shallow bays connected to the main lake. Some perch also spawn on shoals in the main lake. The quicker the water warms into the upper 40°F to 50°F range, the quicker the perch spawn. Obviously, the last fish to spawn do so in the main lake.

In each case, weedgrowth is a vital habitat component, as perch attach their long, flowing egg strings to weeds to keep them oxygenated. Weeds also

BY **DENNIS FOSTER***



TYPICAL Perch Location

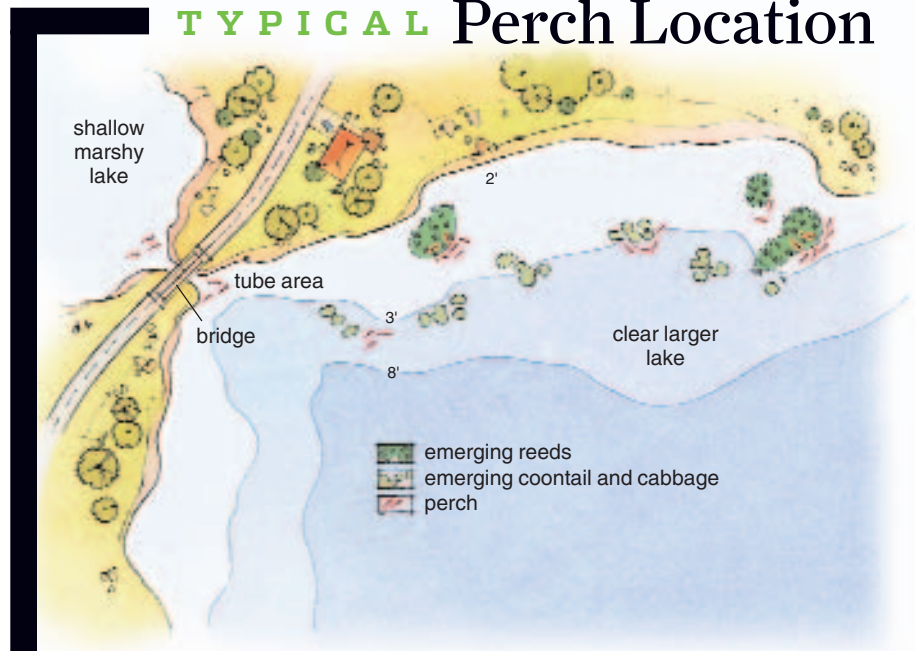
provide cover and harbor minnows and zooplankton for them to feed on. An influx of warmer water from feeder creeks or stained water from shoreline run-off sweetens these spots.

In marshes and shallow bays, the weedgrowth may not look all that lush, while in the main lake anglers can find early emerging areas of coontail and cabbage. In a lake or reservoir with clear water, perch often spawn as deep as 10 feet, although their egg strands usually are laid at the tops of weeds. Whatever depth the weeds are is where the perch are going to spend time as they're spawning.

Perch begin to show up in and near spawning areas before ice-out and remain there even after they spawn. They may move in and out of specific spawning areas based on weather conditions. This gives us at least three weeks and often up to five or six weeks to pick off perch in various areas, starting in the shallowest ones, or in current areas near those kinds of staging areas. Eventually, we end up fishing in the main lake, which is where the aggressive tactics I'm going to talk about come into play.

Perch generally bite all through the spawning cycle—at least, they don't totally shut down, and they don't all spawn at the same time. Once the early spawners finish, they filter out through funnel areas, giving us a crack at them as they move to adjoining shorelines. Many fish linger along these shorelines for weeks, taking advantage of the shallows coming to life with multiple food sources. They use the emerging weedgrowth as cover from cruising pike, walleyes, and bass. At times, a fishable population takes up residence, extending the bite well into summer.

A lot of the perch that spawn deeper in the main lake move into shallower water instead of dropping deeper after they spawn. So the fish that move out of marshes into the main lake often end up in the same feeding areas as the main-lake fish. This shallow concentration usually is the biggest thing that anglers overlook. You may be in the right general area, but if you're too deep you could just as well be fishing



PERCH SPAWN FIRST in the shallow, marshy lake. To get there, they move through the tube area, making them vulnerable to anglers coming and going. Moving water also attracts minnows that perch feed on. Perch also can be caught in select areas in the shallow marshy lake, often from shore.

Some perch also spawn in main-lake weedbeds, after which they join perch that have moved out of the marsh back into the main lake, along and inside shallow weed edges or on sand and gravel flats. Many lakes also have emerging reedbeds that attract feeding perch.

The typical angler tactic to catch fish once they're in the main lake is to anchor and cast, or to move along with a trolling motor and cast. In this article, Guide Dennis Foster suggests a more aggressive system to find these fish.

in the parking lot. If you're not on fish, look shallower, not deeper.

Most of the perch I'm targeting at this point have already spawned. I'm looking for pods of jumbos that roam the shallows. They're too shallow to spot on electronics. Most of the time they're so shallow you can't get over them with a boat. Time to get baits down to find fish.

I move silently but steadily along with my electric trolling motor while I use in-line planer boards to get my bottom-bouncer presentations away from the boat and to search a lot of water. The bouncers weigh 1 or 1.5 ounces and I clip them tightly onto the board. When I catch a fish I just swing

the board in with the fish attached and get right back at it again. The objective is to pinpoint where fish are, then bring the boards in and start casting. I might also use slipfloats at this point. Slow-down tactics aren't the subject of this article.

If I'm running the boards in 3 feet of water, that's how deep I set the bouncer, take a few inches. The moving board lifts the bouncer just enough to have it tickle along the bottom and through emerging weedgrowth. Meanwhile the spinner rig is running off the back of the bouncer arm, which is already suspended just a bit above bottom.

While the perch tend to be boat-shy, they usually don't spook from the

A SIMPLE BUT EFFICIENT, EFFECTIVE, AND ECONOMICAL WAY TO FIND FISH FAST

Early-Season Perch

RIGS



bouncer-rig combo. In fact, the combination seems to attract them to the commotion and then gets them to bite. Planer boards equipped with flags help to identify smaller fish getting towed along for the ride.

Plan A for a leader is a single-hook spinner rig with a JB Lures #3 Ventilator Blade. This small Colorado blade has two vents that force water over it, producing more disturbance than a traditional spinner. I think fish can feel the changes in water pressure with their lateral line, at a distance and before they even see it.

I tie my own 3-foot leaders with 12-pound Berkley Trilene XT. The heavier line lets me deal with bigger fish like pike. I've experimented—it doesn't make any difference in the number of perch caught. I use a quick-change clevis for fast blade changes and a #4 Gamakatsu Walleye Wide Gap hook. This hook has fine wire and is sticky-sharp. It also offers enough gap to make it the perfect choice for use with plastics.

When I'm searching for fish, my speeds range from about 0.8 to 1.5 mph. I move as fast as I think I can get away with. At times, additional speed seems to trigger fish. As you might imagine, speed becomes a more prominent factor as the water continues to warm.

If fish seem tentative, I move to Plan B, which is the same line, leader length, and hook, but with a Mack's Lures Smile Blade in a 0.8 to 1.1-inch size. Smile blades are made of mylar plastic in a delta-wing shape. They spin

Option A

12-pound Berkley Trilene XT line, #3 JB Lures Ventilator Blade, #4 Gamakatsu Wall-eye Wide Gap Hook with 2-inch Berkley PowerBait Grub—rig length 36 inches.



Option B

Same setup with a 0.8- to 1.1-inch Mack's Lures Smile Blade.



more easily than regular blades and work at speeds down to 0.25 mph.

You can change the vibration pitch on a Smile Blade by bending the propeller props out wider (more pitch and thump), or bending them in (less pitch and thump). The wider blade angle produces a wobbly, flip-flop type of movement, while the narrow angle provides a faster and tighter action. I toy with these adjustments as I search at speeds from, 0.25 to 0.75 mph.

Livebait is in every way detrimental to this system. We're searching aggressively to find fish, and no one wants to stop and rebait time after time with fragile bait. I keep it simple by using a 2-inch Berkley PowerBait Grub threaded onto a #4 hook. The auguring tail moving behind the Ventilator or Smile Blade usually is deadly. The

system's economical, and it's easy to experiment with color—I usually use silver, gold, chartreuse, or orange blades and then vary grub colors from white to yellow and chartreuse. Later, black also becomes a good option.

I could make suggestions about other plastics, but most days it doesn't have to be any more complicated than this. It's a starkly simple and economical way to find perch during early season. Surprising too is how many incidental walleyes and pike you catch. Many a spring day, not only do I have a nice mess of perch, I've caught as many walleyes as most of those in the rig-and-jig rodeo crowd. ■

*Dennis Foster, Mellette, South Dakota, is a fishing guide in the Glacial Lakes region in the northeast near Roy Lake, eyetimepromotions.com.