

Late Ice equals Large Walleyes

As we near the end of the Hardwater Season, (from late February till Ice Out) we've typically experienced: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly. The good being at first ice when Walleye's are generally conducive to biting and are results are favorable for numbers, with a few good fish mixed in. The bad refers to the Mid-Winter doldrums when it becomes tough to scratch out a decent limit, on a consistent basis. The ugly is the terrible nasty cold and wind a few of us diehards will endure right in the middle of winter, for mixed returns.

The good news is that we are now heading into the Great. In my opinion, this is the best time for both numbers *and* size. If you've done your homework and are armed with a good presentation; it is not uncommon to do battle with more than one over 8 pounds in a good evening.

The real beauty of this is that most anglers will have put the auger in the shed by now and are anticipating the open water season. Thus, you will have these fish largely to yourself and most likely will enjoy some of the nicest weather of the ice fishing season.

Walleye's can be elusive and frustrating much of the year. But...right now they can be easily predicted. Their continued existence as a species depends on one thing; spawning. Knowing this, we simply need to be fishing in areas where they traditionally perform this annual rite. If you're not confident you can find these areas on your own, a few questions posed to knowledgeable locals will get you in the ballpark.

Now that you've arrived in your chosen fishing hole, we need to get busy and put together a system for catching them. We do not need classic structure options here, any shoreline that we know the fish spawn on will do. All that is needed is fairly quick access to deep water. This provides a comfort zone for them to lounge in during the daylight hours. You can expect an early run of males and as the evening progress you will see more of the big girls sliding up and becoming active.

The key to success is to have enough holes pre-drilled to cover all depths. I will have a few tip ups and jigging holes out into the basin with the majority of open holes and tip ups in the shallows. By shallow, it is often in 3 or 4 foot of water, directly off the shore. We can actually watch the progression of fish, as we get flags. Simply move along with them while jigging your open holes.

The meat (literally) of the presentation system is jumbo chubs. Do not be afraid to use big baits. The fish certainly aren't intimidated by them and you shouldn't be either. We can be talking chubs up to 10 inches, if you can get them. Trimming their tails down a little will prevent false flags.

We now need to address the terminal rigging of your tip ups. I spool up with a heavy mainline consisting of 30 to 50 pound super-braid, (to withstand abuse and ease of handling), tied directly to a snap swivel. To this we attach a 4 to 6 foot leader of 10 or 12 pound monofilament. The mono serves to aid in stealth and act as a shock absorber for hard shaking fish. Keep a spool of extra leaders handy (by keeping them a consistent length, no depth adjustment is needed) for quick replacements, should the line become nicked or if you get snake bit (Pike).

Using an ultra sharp, premium hook is the most critical part of the whole set up. Unfortunately, this is where most folks totally miss the boat and skim to save a few pennies. We are only blessed with so many bites per day and we just as well reward our efforts with hooked and landed fish. I have been using Gamakatsu's Walleye Wide Bend in a size 1 or 2 for the last couple seasons with extremely good results. This is strong, fine wire hook with a unique angle that provides the additional hook gap needed when using large chubs.

You will want to reverse hook your chubs to provide the best action and hooking percentage. This amounts to lightly nicking the hook through the chubs skin along the dorsal fin with the point facing towards the head. The chub will now struggle to swim upward and away like a pendulum and then fall back. This

action is extremely enticing and Walleye's find it hard to resist. Place a number 4 split shot 12 to 18 inches above, depending on the size and friskiness of your bait. Excessive movement can actually become a negative and neutral or inactive fish will ignore it.

Once we have our well rigged tip ups in place, it's time to get busy jigging. Start out in the deeper water and let your tip ups serve as an indicator of where the fish are. If you're jigging in 15 foot of water and haven't had a hit in some time while the tip ups are going off in 10 foot, it doesn't take genius to figure out where your efforts should be concentrated. Get your butt up there and get after 'em while their hot. This window of opportunity can be short and you need to take full advantage of it.

I have prefer a slow falling, fluttering lure such as JB Lures Holie Angel or Jig Eye with a whole, head hooked minnow. Others will swear by horizontal swimming lures. It pays to experiment and use what works best on each given day.

By not giving up on the ice season and giving it a couple of last shots, you can reasonably expect to be richly rewarded with some very nice fish. Please remember to use common sense when looking for a meal. Keep a few smaller males and release ALL of the females. This will help to ensure that we all have the opportunity to enjoy the resource for years to come.

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