

Overlooked but not Forgotten...

An aggressive strategy for early season perch

For a fish that draws so much attention during the ice fishing season, the yellow perch is largely ignored come early spring. Once the ice is off and the states with closed seasons open, walleye mania hits the north country hard and most anglers develop a laser focus on the perch's larger and at least this time of year...more sought after cousin.

Too bad, because for those of you with an open mind and penchant for something a little different than the jig and rig rodeo scene playing out all over lake...there are some awfully nice perch ready for the taking. An added benefit to targeting them is that you'll often times do as well or better on incidental walleyes, as those that are specifically aiming for them.

As we are focusing on early season, meaning from the time you can safely maneuver a boat up until the majority of perch have moved on to summer locales; location is quite simple and straightforward. Every perch in the lake is looking to do one thing and that is of course procreate. Knowing this, we can narrow our search to some key areas and concentrate our efforts there. Spawning locations are consistent from year to year and there are several ingredients you will want to look for: the more of these ingredients an area has-the better it becomes.

Our first priority will be to identify the high percentage areas on lakes that are known for good numbers of perch. A prime example would be a narrowed down portion of main lake as it leads into protected dark bottomed shallow bays, sloughs, or stretches connecting sister lakes. The presence of weeds is vital as the perch use them to attach their egg masses and also provides cover and or food in the form of emerging invertebrates. An influx of warmer water from feeder creeks or stained water from shoreline run off will sweeten the spot.

By doing our homework, we can break down an otherwise large body of water into distinct portions, devoting our attention to the high numbers of fish that are funneled through these smaller and more manageable areas. Doing so geometrically improves our odds of contacting numerous and consequently larger fish.

Perch will begin to show up in the aforementioned areas before ice out and stage until the water temps rise to around 50 degrees-becoming conducive for them to actually head back in and get down to the business at hand. Depending on the weather conditions, this can potentially give us a large window of opportunity to cash in. If fishing becomes spotty as the water warms, simply follow them back in and keep picking them off. Not all fish will be actually spawning at the same time and perch don't seem to be as affected by the ritual as walleyes, with at least some continuing to bite. Once done, they begin filtering out through the funnel areas we concentrated on earlier, giving us another crack at 'em as they migrate towards the adjoining shorelines. Many post spawn fish may linger near these shorelines for a couple of weeks, taking advantage of the shallows coming to life with multiple food sources and using the newly emerging weed growth as cover from cruising pike, walleyes, and bass. If conditions remain favorable, a fishable population may take up residence, thus extending the bite well into summer.

The last and often most critical factor to consider on location is depth. You may very well be in the right general spot-but if you're working too deep-you just as well be fishing in the parking lot. Very common mistake and a lot of folks can't get over their aversion of working very shallow water. This is a bad trait as this

is where you're going to find the vast majority of biters. If you're not contacting fish, your best bet is to look inward-not out. The boat may push them around a bit...but this can be overcome with the presentation options I will now outline.

Even though we have our location narrowed down to a manageable size, taking an aggressive search approach to quickly cover this water is the fastest way to determine not only where the perch are on a given day, but more importantly-where the pods of jumbos are. Once this is done, we can always slow down and thoroughly work them over with more traditional tactics...whole other topic too expansive to cover here. As we are looking for them in very shallow water, the cone angle of our electronics is quite small and of little use in marking fish. Thus, we need to actually get some baits down and fish the area to make contact. Straining the area is best accomplished using your electric trolling motor to silently present your leaders off of a planer board and heavy bottom bouncer combination. The use of bouncers in water that may only be two or three foot deep may sound somewhat alien to many of you, but let me explain the reasoning: what we are looking to achieve is not only covering a wide swath of water and keeping our baits away from the boat in the process...but to also remain as efficient as possible.

The use of a heavy bouncer given the depth (1 or 1.5 ounce works well) allows us to run the bait directly below the board. Clip the board tightly above the bouncer at roughly the same depth your boat is in. When you figure in the marginal angle of your line, this allows the wire to run just slightly above bottom and tickle any old or newly emerging weed growth. I feel the commotion this creates serves as a strong triggering mechanism by alerting the fish that something is up. Now that their attention is gained-here comes your bait-and viscous reaction strikes will follow. Planer boards equipped with flags help detect lighter bites or small fish getting towed along for the ride. The efficiency aspect comes in as we do not have to remove the board when landing fish, simply reel it up to the rod tip and swing your fish into the boat.

There are two distinct options on what to run for a leader off your bouncer. Plan A is a single hook spinner rig incorporating a JB Lures size 3 Ventilator Blade. This small colorado blade is unique in the fact that it has two vents running along the bottom, forcing water up and over it, producing more disturbance than a traditional spinner. I believe that fish can actually feel the changes created in water pressure (lateral line) at a distance much further than their ability see to what is causing it. Coupled with the bouncer stirring things up, we can now pull them in from long range to investigate, with the visual attraction (action of spinner and bait) sealing the deal. I prefer to tie my own with 12 pound XT in a three foot length (the heavier line prevents break offs from game fish) with a quick change clevis for facilitating blade changes and a number 4 Gamakatsu Walleye Wide Bend hook. This particular hook is fine wire, sticky sharp and has enough gap to make it a perfect choice for use with plastics. Speed can range from .8 up to 1.5 mph and beyond. Start out on the fast side and let the fish tell you what they prefer.

Should the fish prove too sluggish for spinners; we can now go to plan B and slow it down a bit, but still maintain an aggressive although slightly subdued presentation. Basic setup remains constant: bouncer, line, and hook; just swap out the spinners for a leader tied with Mack's Lures Smile Blades in the smaller .8 to 1.1 inch sizes. They are thin and flexible blades of mylar plastic in a delta wing shape offering many of the same attraction qualities as a traditional spinner-in a more subtle fashion. The real key is that they will turn at speeds as low as .25 mph, thus giving us the ability to reduce our speed while still offering the basic triggering cues. An interesting note is that the action can be easily changed by adjusting the blade angle from wide or narrow. Wide will produce a slow wobbly flip flop type of erratic movement while narrowing the angle will get you a tighter and faster rhythmic spinning action. Play with these adjustments and vary speed from .25 to .75 mph to dial in the most effective combination.

Color as always, depends on water clarity, cloud cover, and personal or local preferences. Silver and gold are

always good as are red and white. Color combos work well as they give us variety in one package. Live bait is really not necessary and can actually prove to be a detriment because of constantly re-baiting and the resulting cold hands. In keeping with an efficient theme; you will find plastics as or more effective due to ease of use and the added action they impart. Many options available, with a personal favorite being a 2 inch Berkley Powergrub threaded onto the number 4 Gamakatsu. The auguring tail following the movement of either the Ventilator or Smile Blade is intense and deadly. The use of plastics also gives us the ability to further experiment with different and contrasting colors, upping the odds of hitting on something productive and in the end more bites, and subsequently more fish in the boat.

This is a brief look at a very bold strategy to specifically target jumbo perch in well defined locations. Hopefully you will have the opportunity to put these ideas to work, gain some confidence, and work in a few wrinkles of your own. Besides, we're not the only ones looking to make a meal of the perch...the walleye's are intent on gobbling up some considerable post-spawn calories and you can be discreetly taking a few while "panfishing"...a very attractive windfall for a great spring day.

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