



[BY DENNIS FOSTER*]

WALLEYES' AFFECTION FOR WOOD IS WELL KNOWN, BUT FEW ANGLERS ASSOCIATE STICKS, STUMPS, TRUNKS, AND BRUSH IN PALTRY DEPTHS OF 2 TO 8 FEET

Shallow Woo

Year-round plan for skinny water timber





**WITH DEPENDABLE FISHING. FEWER
STILL FULLY APPRECIATE HOW PRODUCTIVE
SUCH SHALLOW TIMBER CAN BE YEAR-ROUND
ON MANY BODIES OF WATER.**

d All Season

Granted, some time periods are better than others—such as late spring and early summer, when postspawn ’eyes invade the trees. Fall marks another pinnacle of activity. But even during midsummer, when sweltering days and soaring water temperatures slow the bite, more than a few resident wall-eyes watch from the wood.

GOOD WOOD

All wood is not created equal. Key physical characteristics and surrounding structural elements can elevate its fish-holding potential. For instance, I look for wood adjacent to deeper water. “Deep” is relative, of course. The bottom needn’t plunge into a lake’s central basin or, in the case of rivers, flowages, and reservoirs, drop directly into the main channel. A break of just a few feet gives the fish a sanctuary when heavy winds or major cold fronts blow in. The base also serves as a conveyor belt, funneling in new walleye arrivals.

As for the timber itself, standing trees or brush are good. Throw in a few blowdowns and fallen branches, and the spot is even better. If you find an area such as this with scattered rock or gravel, a bottom composition transition, and moderate weedgrowth, call me.

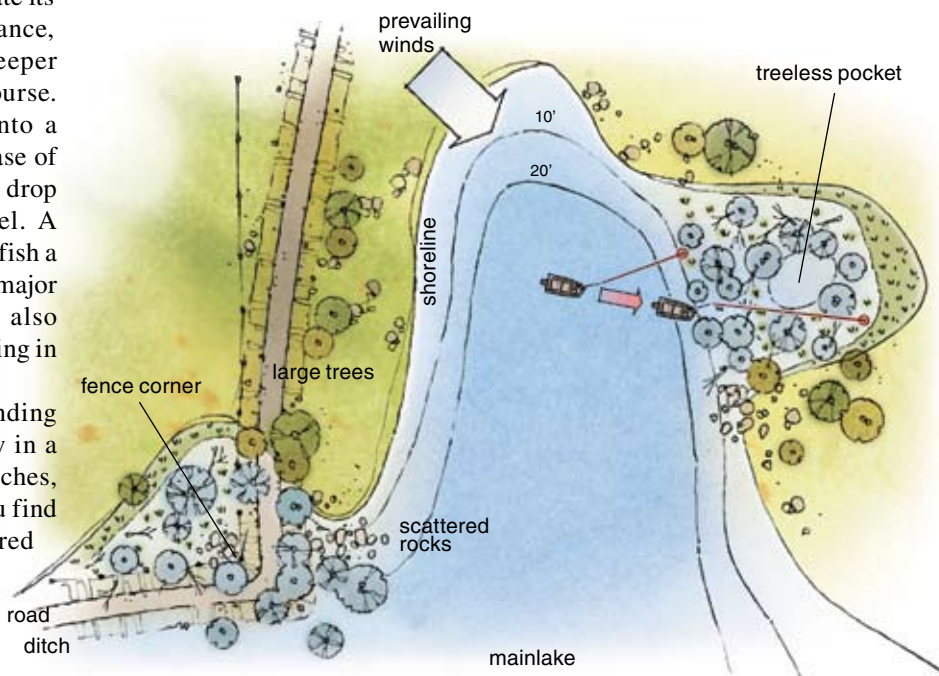
SEASONAL PATTERNS

Spring—Walleyes are either in tributaries or oriented to mainlake spawning shorelines because of the reproductive ritual, and thus are often found in close proximity to areas with shallow woody cover in one form or

another. Look for shoreline blow-downs, extensive stumpfields, and areas of seasonally flooded timber, including brush. Sunken wood on fast-warming, south-facing shorelines adjacent to known spawning areas can be particularly attractive.

» FOCAL POINTS

Key areas concentrate walleyes. Watch for scattered weeds, weed pockets, and manmade objects such as fence line corners, roads, and ditches. Start outside and work your way in.



» WOODEN SOLDIERS



Tip: In lakes lacking classic spawning habitat, walleyes may spawn in wood, cattails, or emerging weeds. Males arrive early and stay late, and can be consistently picked off these spots throughout the day, starting around ice-out. Females appear shortly thereafter.

In general, the big girls are a bit warier and tend to favor heavier cover than their suitors. And unlike the smaller males, which commonly bite all day long, females tend to be most vulnerable during low-light periods, though it's worth noting that in extensive stumpfields, I've seen a steady (but not heavy) wind add enough color to the water for large females to bite during the day.

A fair number of walleyes leave woody cover soon after spawning to set up classic late-spring/early summer patterns on other portions of the lake, but many remain in shallow timber, particularly where emerging weeds are present. Under the right

conditions, such as incoming wind or an abundance of baitfish, fish holding in nearby deeper water move back in the wood.

Summer—The bite can be sporadic, but good catches are possible if you know what to look for and have your timing down. As in spring, scattered weeds within the wood are a huge plus. So, too, are large weedpockets in clearings and weedbeds adjacent to timber. Close proximity to a sharp break into deeper water is extremely important now; it lets non-timber-dwelling fish slide in when a moderate breeze pushes in, and during low-light periods.

Fall—Falling water temperatures and an abundance of eating-size young-of-the-year baitfish lure walleyes into shallow wood. No need to focus on low light levels now. Walleyes remain active throughout the day. As water temps continue to drop, midday proves best, especially on balmy, sunny days.

WOODWORKING

Be forewarned, separating walleyes from wood is seldom easy. Tangling with timber can be frustrating and downright expensive, as lures are lost to hook-grabbing trees. Still, with the right approach, the rewards are worth the effort.

Forget tickling the edges or dabbling in isolated pockets. Forge into the thick stuff with quick and efficient tactics. I prefer casting subsurface crankbaits, which allow me to quickly sort through areas and pull out the most active walleyes—and often the largest—in short order. Slower, more traditional timber tactics such as pitching jigs and slipbobbering work, but to me are last resorts.

In extensive areas of flooded timber, start at the outer edge and work in as far as possible, casting all the way. Watch for mini-environments such as isolated rockpiles and dish-shaped weedy openings slightly deeper than the surrounding timber. In former

farm country, submerged machinery, grain bins, buildings, foundations, fence corners, stock ponds, roads, and ditches can be hotspots.

A variety of shallow-running floating baits work well; Reef Runner Ripsticks are among my favorites. Smaller shad-bodied lures such as Reef Runner's Ripshad 400 series or a #5 Rapala Shad Rap in original and jointed versions also have their place. No need to add twitches or pauses. Toss into a likely spot and retrieve steadily, letting the bait bump into and careen off everything in its path.

Note that higher action and deeper-diving lures—which are great options in stained or murky water—need to be presented at a slower pace, with the rod tip held high to limit running depth. Flash-type offerings like the Mack's Lure HummBait are another option for added vibration and sound. Panfish-mimicking softbaits such as Storm's WildEye Live Crappie are good when walleyes are keying on juvenile bluegills and crappies. With all baits, using SmartLink titanium split ring replacements reduces lure losses to timber.

A general note on lure color: Natural, neutral patterns are typically the best, and those incorporating small dots darker than the background color often outproduce similar but dot-free color schemes. I select lures with dots or doctor bland baits with a black Sharpie marker.

TIMBER PARADISE

Shallow-wood patterns shine in rising waters such as Devils Lake, North Dakota, and the entire Glacial Lakes region of South Dakota, but they also excel in other systems. Southern impoundments with heavily timbered shorelines like Bull Shoals Lake, Arkansas, come to mind, as do Wisconsin's fertile flowages located throughout the state. In truth, the possibilities are nearly endless. Wherever you find wood, walleyes, and water, let the fun begin. ■

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