

Spring into Gear

I'm referring to putting the trolling motor into gear from the get go this season.

What I am going to relate to you will go against the grain of what we all have been conditioned to believe for our early season outings while pursuing Walleyes. I'm going to advocate trolling from very first time we launch the boat in Spring. Yes, I am talking about Pre-Spawn fish and water temps that may very well be below 40 degrees. Contrary to conventional wisdom: Walleyes will enthusiastically strike a properly presented crank bait or spinner in cold water.

Please, before you stop reading this and go back to organizing your jig collection. I ask you to keep an open mind and allow your horizons to be expanded a bit. I will readily agree that the time honored tradition of bouncing a jig and minnow combo is a classic springtime presentation. Rightly so, as it is extremely effective; most of the time. But...by properly employing trolling techniques in your arsenal, you open yourself up to a whole new world of largely untapped fish.

The first thing we must understand is that this is not a traditional summertime trolling pattern. Where we troll and the actual presentation need to be adjusted. This is due to the seasonal location of the fish and their reduced activity levels, which can be attributed to lower water temps.

As many early season outings take place on river systems, we can begin our search directly adjacent to where the cadre of jig fisherman gather. Simply go just outside of them and troll the breaks dropping into the channel and the actual channel itself. We will be targeting fish that are either using the channel to travel or are utilizing the current deflection caused by bumps and depressions in the bottom. It is from this position that they can dart up and ambush anything that resembles prey, namely our lures.

I rely on two presentation options when targeting these fish. The most heavily used is lead core line in conjunction with small lures and the secondary presentation involves the same lead core set up, only incorporating spinners and plastics. For those of you who are not familiar with or have not become proficient with lead core, don't despair. It is not as difficult as it appears.

I have found that the easiest way to use it is by spooling an entire roll onto an oversize line counter, such as a Diawa 47LC. This will eliminate all of the guesswork out of splicing in colors, let back from there, etc. Splice in a 6 to 8 foot section of 10lb Crystal Fireline attached to a snap for your cranks or a snap swivel for the spinners and your all set. Unless you're dealing with extremely clear water combined with ultra spooky fish, I feel the 50 foot leader idea becomes overkill and just serves to complicate the situation.

As we are dealing with fish that are belly tight to bottom and accustomed to picking off meals rolling by them within an inch or so from their noses, we must place our baits precisely. It is critical that our lures remain in this very slim window at all times. We will want to let out enough line to maintain a fairly steady bottom bumping rhythm. Make note of the line out on your counter for both up and downstream passes (it will change due to current) and this becomes easily repeatable. Many hits come immediately after a bait momentarily hangs on bottom then surges ahead. An important note is that we will want to maintain just fast enough to give our lures a good wiggle.

A tool I have found to be invaluable in dealing with the unavoidable snags we encounter is the Ultimate SmartLink. It replaces the standard split rings on your lures and will open up under steady pressure when your hung up. This leaves the offending hook behind and all you have to do is reel up and snap in a new hook and your back in business. All the while your other lines continue to fish for you. This keeps the frustration factor to a minimum and makes us much more efficient by days end, not to mention money saved in lost lures.

Lure choice should be kept on the small side. Shad body types in the 3 inch range such as number 5 Shad Raps and Walleye Divers are proven producers. Jointed models in the same size class have their place as

well. A lure I have gained particular confidence in for this application is ReefRunner's Ripshad in the 200 series. At times the larger 400 can elicit a vicious reaction bite. I feel this is due to it's nose down, hard shaking action and the subsequent noise created by the internal rattles. In the turbulent underwater world associated with current, this can be key. As far as colors are concerned, anything with white is very hard to beat and I generally have at least a couple rods rigged this way. At times going with louder color schemes can pay big dividends. Clown patterns and bright oranges and even purple or black might be the ticket. It's a good idea to start with a base concept on a couple of rods and play with alternate color selection on the others.

The secondary option to consider using is a spinner and plastic combo. A great set up for this is JB Lures Ventilator Spinner with a single hook. This is a unique blade with an internal vent that forces water through the blade, creating a large amount of turbulence. This really gets the fish's attention. No live bait needed here. Run a 3 inch PowerGrub onto the hook with the tail facing upwards and its augering action coupled with the commotion of the blade, provides an irresistible target early season Walleyes find hard to resist.

Step out of familiar territory this spring and give this system an honest try. I think you'll be pleased with the results. Besides, you won't have to numb your hands fumbling for minnows.

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