

Tailrace Tactics

Ah, Springtime, Tailraces, and Walleyes. For those of us in the North Country, the first open water opportunity of the year. What a perfect combination of ingredients for a fun and productive outing. The level of your success can be largely determined by your ability to present baits effectively, right up tight to the Dam. This churning, strangely off colored and frothy water can be intimidating. Many anglers tend to shy away from it, subsequently reducing their prospects of catching fish, in large numbers and size.

It is common knowledge that in the Spring: Walleye's are programmed to move upstream with Dams halting the progression and they predictably stack up. We have to appreciate just how close these fish will get to the open gates and the tremendous amount of current they can endure. These opportunistic Walleye's are focusing on ground up or disoriented baitfish being churned out. A standard approach just isn't suited for this environment. We need to focus on presentation options that get our offerings down quickly and the boat control needed to keep them there.

The tactics that I'm going to share with you were gleaned from the Missouri River Impoundments, but will apply anywhere fast water and Walleye's are found. Fellow South Dakotan's Mike Kulm and Jim Randash will weigh in with some extremely important insights from their 1st and 2nd place finishes, respectively, at the Spring of 2004 PWT event at Chamberlain.

We can deal with the torrent by using heavy 3-way setups or bottom bouncers. By heavy, I'm talking 4 ounces and even up to 8 if the water is really boiling. It is imperative that we remain within close proximity of bottom. These fish are tucked in tightly behind rocks or depressions deflecting current and from this position, dart up and ambush anything looking like food.

According to Kulm, "Use 14 pound Fireline for your mainline and a 4 ounce Bottom Bouncer with a 6 foot leader of 10 pound Berkley XT back to a floating plug". Mike prefers Smithwick's Rattling Super Rogue and the Bouncer helps in avoiding snags. He stresses, "Working current seams is extremely important". Often those found along the edge of the current formed from the outermost releases. He inches slowly upstream trying to stay as near to the current break as he can. When the velocity of the current is extremely high, he has had success with the same setup, but taking a downstream approach. To do this, he motors up as close as possible and as he begins to drop his weight and lure, he will throttle the boat in reverse, keeping up with the bait, as it is swept downstream.

Randash, also likes the Super Rogue, but at times feels a different approach suits him better. He states, "It is important to get your lures up where no one else is fishing, particularly, beyond where boat traffic is prohibited." To accomplish this, he goes to a Torpedo shaped egg sinker, as he encounters fewer snags. This is placed above a snap and a 3 foot lead to his lure. He pitches this rig up while the engine is in gear.

Through experimentation; determining when to slip into neutral and let the current sweep the boat and thus his presentation downstream. Depending on current speed, this can anywhere from when it hits the water, to even while it is still in the air. Presenting his bait near bottom; not dragging and reducing snags.

On the subject on snags: You may want to try Ultimate Lure Saver's Titanium release system to replace your standard split rings. You can simply pull your lure free, leaving the hook behind. Not only saves plugs, but time and frustration, as instead of retying, all you need to do is snap in a new treble, and you're back in action.

I firmly agree with Mike and Jim on their proven tactics and I will throw in some observations of my own.

What I find to be effective is; 16 or 20 pound trolling wire attached to a 3-way. The wire cuts through the current without the bow associated with Mono or even Fireline, letting you get by with less weight. I employ a lift drop routine moving upstream with the big motor and adjusting the throttle to slowly slip back down under control.

For weight, a 1 foot 10 pound XT leader and a torpedo shaped sinker are attached. This allows me to easily break free should the sinker become lodged. On the lure end, I run 3 to 4 feet of 10 pound XL. By

keeping things somewhat short, we have a more easily manageable package when it comes to netting fish, as well as when retrieved and deployed. Another benefit is your lure being close to the weight, alerting the fish that something is coming by. These fish are actively feeding and spooking them isn't a factor.

Where lures are concerned: I veer off a little from the traditional stickbaits and slant towards more of a banana style bait. ReefRunner's Ripstick immediately comes to mind. This bent lure has a square lip versus the more common rounded version. The result is a much wider wobble, and when pulled through stiff current is even a bit erratic. This is good, as the Walleye's are looking for baitfish tumbling down and out of control. This more pronounced action stirs the rattles and gets the 3 trebles to moving around, creating yet more disturbance, and even offering a visual cue. Replacing the front treble with a red hook can prove deadly.

An overlooked option is going to a Spinner Rig and Plastics. Noise and disturbance continues to be a key element. This can be achieved with a couple of unique blades from JB Lures. Their Vibra Flash is an Indiana blade with a good sized hole punched in it, creating a fair amount of commotion. The Ventilator is their latest offering: A Colorado blade with two channels formed on the concave side which funnels water out small openings towards the tip. The effect is to generate a sort of "vapor trail" of bubbles behind it. Don't be afraid to use the larger sizes.

To further enhance these rigs, I tie my own on a 3 foot section of Mono with Rattle Beads. Their added size, buoyancy, and of course rattles, just help to make it easier for the fish to find and subsequently eat. On the hook end: I snell a #1 Gamakatsu Walleye Wide Bend. These hooks are incredibly sharp and offer plenty of gap to ensure good hookups. Finish it off by threading on a 3 inch Berkley Power Grub. The attraction the auger tail generates is astonishing and I have found the strikes to be more viscous than when using Minnows.

Match colors to local forage species with the lures. Spinners with red beads and Hammered Silver or Gold blades are hard to beat, tipped with White Plastics. At times, it can pay dividends by keeping the whole theme loud with wilder color combinations.

Keep an open mind, adjust your tactics as conditions warrant and you'll be on your way to more Dam fish.

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