

[ BY DENNIS FOSTER\* ]

ILLUSTRATIONS | PETER KOHLSAAT



# TREETOP

## T R O L L I N G

**SHAKE THE TREES AND WALLEYES COME OUT. FROM MID- TO LATE SUMMER, MATURE, WELL-FED, AND LARGELY OVERLOOKED BEAUTIES RESIDE IN SUBMERGED TREETOPS IN VIRTUALLY EVERY DEEPWATER RESERVOIR IN THE WALLEYE BELT.**

Tucked in the trees, they enjoy a life of ease where few anglers dare to troll. It's our loss, because as a rule, they're the largest fish in any given system. Smaller fish remain glued to shoreline habitat and don't move out into the treetops until reaching maturity. Having had little in the way of human contact, these wood walleyes are generally game to strike passing lures.

Before you can tap the timber, you need to identify potential areas and know when to target them. You'll also need the right presentation and a system to keep your lines in the water while working your way through such a formidable and snag-ridden environment.

## Tickle the Timber for Reservoir Walleyes All Summer

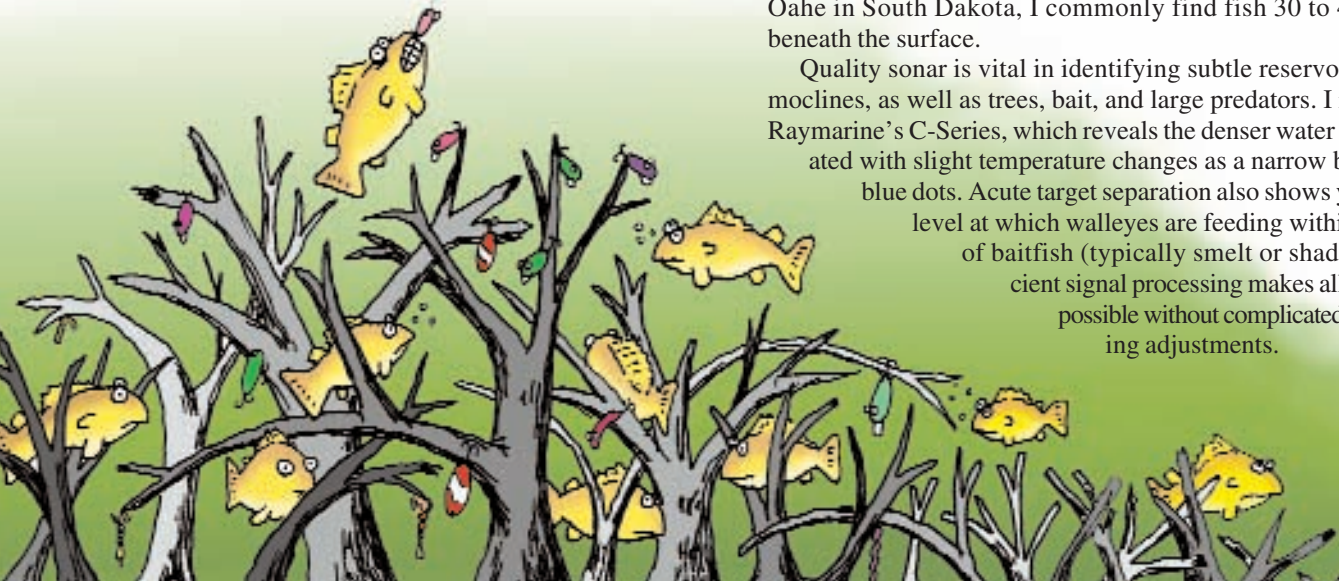
Be forewarned, treetop 'eyes can come with a price in the form of lost lures. It can add up in a hurry, too. For example, competitors at one In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail (PWT) event on Bull Shoals Lake, Arkansas, collectively lost 4,000 lures. But don't fret. With the right approach and some unique tools, you can find and catch these untapped trophies on a consistent basis.

### TOP TIMBER

Trolling aimlessly over any old submerged trees is invariably more miss than hit—not to mention a monumental waste of precious fishing time. Start your search for treetop success by pinpointing wood that coincides with walleyes' preferred water temperatures.

Studies such as John Williams' radio telemetry work on Laurel River Lake, Kentucky, indicate that wood-loving reservoir walleyes seek 72°F to 74°F water during the summer, typically in the upper portions of the thermocline. On Laurel, this ranged from just 10 feet down in June to 25 feet in September. But on the lakes I fish, like Oahe in South Dakota, I commonly find fish 30 to 40 feet beneath the surface.

Quality sonar is vital in identifying subtle reservoir thermoclines, as well as trees, bait, and large predators. I rely on Raymarine's C-Series, which reveals the denser water associated with slight temperature changes as a narrow band of blue dots. Acute target separation also shows you the level at which walleyes are feeding within balls of baitfish (typically smelt or shad). Efficient signal processing makes all of this possible without complicated, ongoing adjustments.



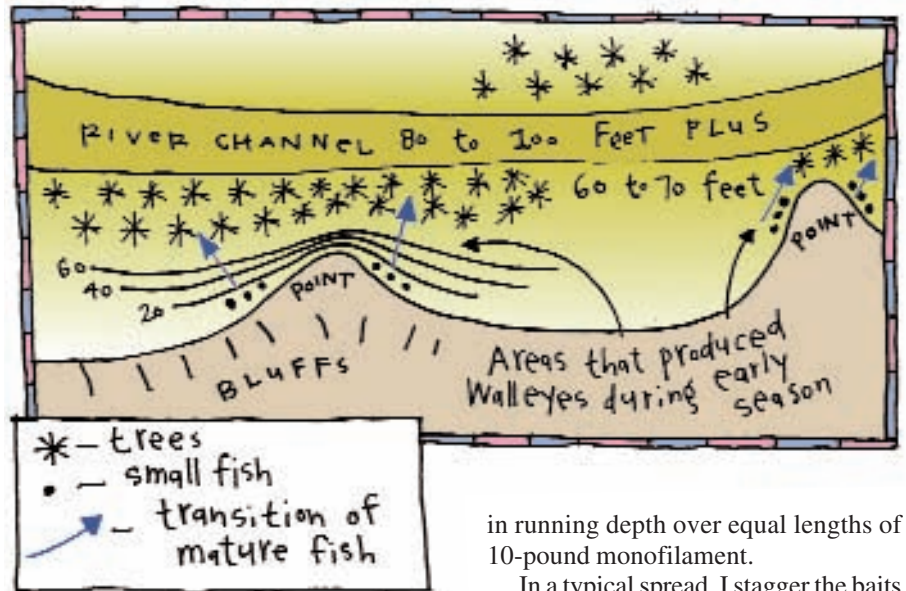
Focus on flooded timber adjacent to shorelines that produced walleyes earlier in the season, particularly spots where the main channel swings in close to several pieces of prominent structure. Examples include areas where a number of points reach out to meet an otherwise fairly straight section of channel, and where a series of steep banks drops quickly into the old river shoreline.

Key depths vary on different bodies of water, but I generally look for depths of 60 to 70 feet on bottom, with the trees topping out at 30 or 40 below the surface, and the nearby main channel at 80 to 100 feet plus.

### LOOK LOUD

Because I want my lures to stand out in the abundance of baitfish, I troll the biggest, gaudiest, loudest, hardest-shakin' baits possible. Forget dainty, finesse styles with a wimpy little wiggle. I prefer the 800 Series Reef Runner Deep Diver and am looking forward to experimenting with the company's new larger 900 Series (which stretches a full 7.5 inches). The Bomber 25A Deep Long A and Rapala's Deep Tail Dancer are a couple other proven options. Run 'em from just under 2 mph to a little beyond 3, varying speeds to add surges and help dial in a preference for the day.

On the hardware end of things, a simple yet effective arrangement is running two 7- to 8-foot rods at 45-degree angles directly off the stern, and a 10- to 12-footer pointing straight out just ahead of these. They should



have enough backbone to handle the strain of deep-diving plugs, yet remain flexible enough to absorb the shock of hard-hitting fish, especially with low-stretch superline.

Such a setup spreads your lines without the use of planer boards. These deep-timber fish aren't boat-shy, and straight-lining also lets you sweep the rods forward now and then, to give your lures even more irregular and antagonizing actions.

Line-counting reels are a must. Spool up with 10/4 FireLine to enhance lure action and get your baits to the strike zone without the aid of additional weight or leadcore. Studies by the creators of *Precision Trolling*, Dr. Steven Holt, Mark Romanack, and Tom Irwin, show 10/4 FireLine offers a 25 percent gain

in running depth over equal lengths of 10-pound monofilament.

In a typical spread, I stagger the baits slightly until I dial in the hot depth. For example, I may run 200 feet of letback on the stern rods and 150 feet on the outside lines. Often, the key depth is just below the tops of the upper limbs. No guts, no glory.

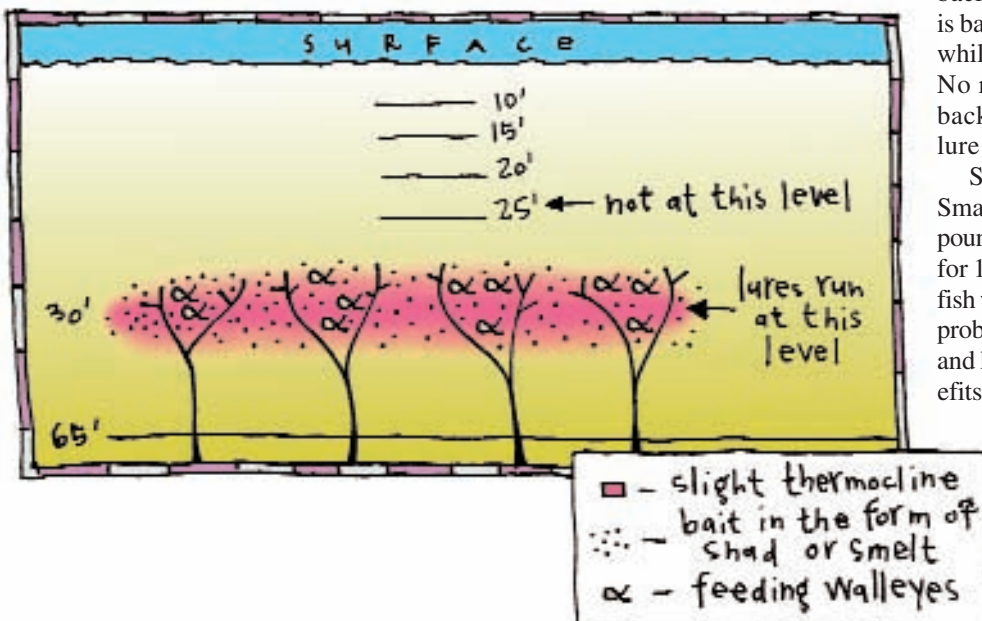
### MISSING LINK

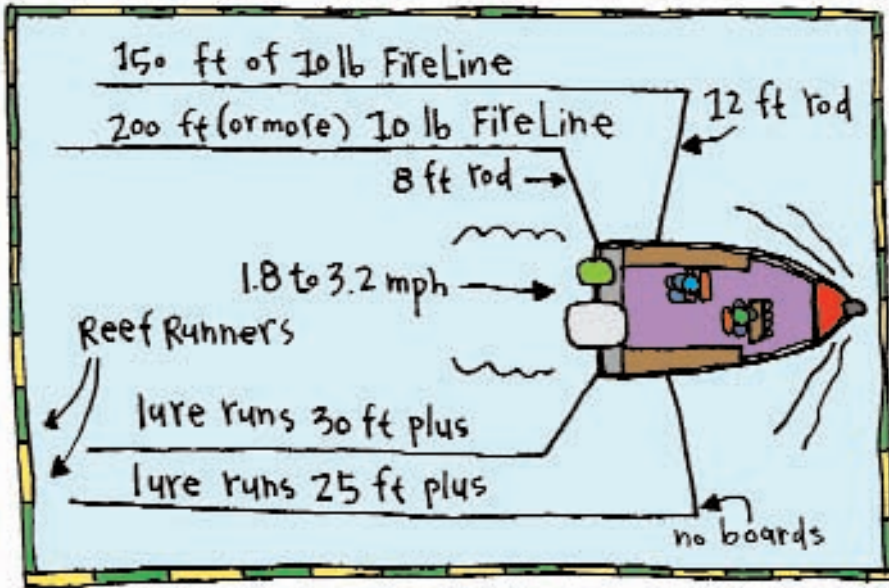
Now, you may be thinking this all looks good on paper, but you don't want to decorate the trees and sacrifice your entire selection of deep divers attempting it. Relax. My solution to snags is a SmartLink—a nickel-titanium replacement for standard split rings.

When you hang up, point your rod directly at the snag and apply steady pressure. The SmartLink opens up, leaving the troubled treble in the timber, and springs back to its original shape. You get your lure and the SmartLink back. Snap in a new hook and the rod is back in business in less than a minute, while your other lines continue fishing. No reeling everything up and going back to try and wrench the offending lure free.

So far, I've yet to lose a walleye on a SmartLink and have determined the 10-pound Large model to be a perfect match for 10/4 FireLine. I've caught countless fish with this system, retrieved hundreds, probably thousands of lures at this point, and have yet to see a failure. These benefits aside, I believe their teardrop shape

allows hooks to swing freely, adding action to the lure itself, and even makes contrasting hook colors (such as red) stand out more. This freedom of movement





also lets the hooks easily find a home in the fish's mouth, resulting in a higher percentage of hooked and ultimately landed fish.

### TAKE CONTROL

A few fish-fighting tips are in order. Hooked walleyes tend to dart into the timber and wrap themselves in the

branches, so it's key to get them up and away from the wood as fast as possible. A superline's lack of stretch gives us the control needed, but if you horse the fish, you may rip the hooks free.

Reel fast, keep your rod tip high, and apply steady pressure (with absolutely no rod pumping) to prevent headshakes and dives, until you're confident the fish has cleared the trees. Then back off and bring it home with a lighter hand.

Armed with this system, you can fearlessly enter the gnarliest treetops and quite literally tickle the top branches, resulting in far more fish at the end of good days and at least a few on the tough ones. With a few adjustments, you can apply it to a variety of situations, opening up a whole new world of wood. ■

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