

B BOLD IS BETTER THAN BASHFUL when it comes to the use of livebait to tempt big walleyes. I use a straightforward system that relies on large, lively chubs presented below tip-ups to tempt big fish. Big walleyes are finely tuned feeding machines that do their best to fill their bellies quickly, which is why they find it hard to resist a big chub. Retro system? Yes, but it works, especially when you fine tune the process.

First ice is one of the best times to catch big walleyes, because they typically haven't had any fishing pressure in at least a month. Classic locations include portions of large bars or sunken islands, with hard bottom in shallower water that transitions to softer bottom at the bottom of the drop-off. Often the best spots have a variety of depths for fish to use during different periods. I fish the sunset bite by cutting holes at least 30 minutes before prime time, as the sun nears the horizon.

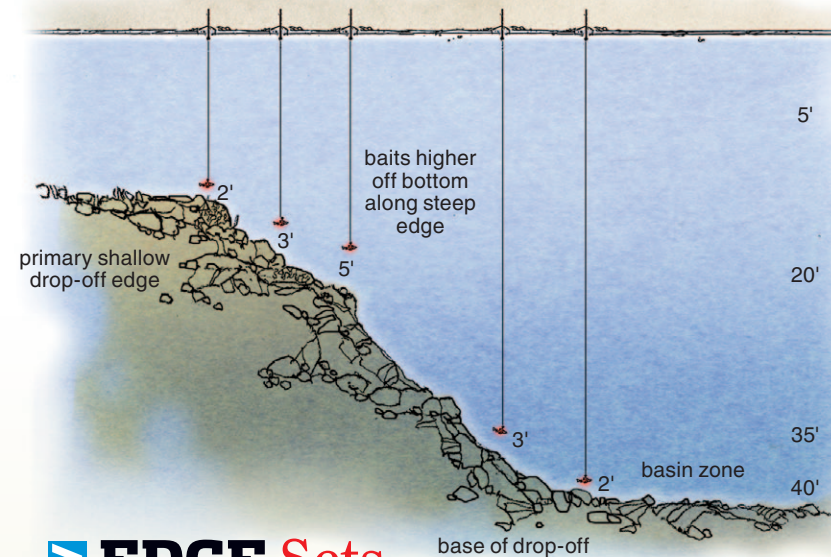
I fish classic areas as the season progresses past first ice. My favorite first-ice locations are shoreline-connected points at the mouth of large shallow bays. At first

ice, bullheads still often are moving in to spend the winter. Frogs have also burrowed into the soft bottom of the bay to hibernate and at times walleyes move in to root them out. On the other hand, panfish like bluegills, crappies, and perch are moving out of the bay or are using the deeper water at the mouth of the bay. These structural elements are high-traffic areas that offer big walleyes lots of feeding opportunities.

First ice often means clear, thin-ice conditions. This complicates things because fish often spook, especially in shallow water, as you run to get a flag. When possible I look for patches of snow in prime locations and make



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EDGE Sets

During early season, tip-ups are set along shallow edges and down the deep edge at the base of the drop-off. Fish often move from deep to shallow water as the sun sets. At that point, deep sets often are moved into shallow holes, concentrating sets in shallow water.

As the season progresses, most sets are made at the base of the drop-off. Spread sets to identify the best areas when you're fishing a spot for the first time, then concentrate sets in specific high-percentage spots along the deep edge when you know the best spots.

my sets there. I walk quickly but quietly to tend a flag, trying as much as possible to make my path over snow patches. Quiet counts at first ice.

Everything moves deeper during mid season, including the forage. Walleye activity also slows, so one must take care in choosing where to fish, because big fish usually don't move far. This is when I move to main-lake points, bars, and humps that drop off into deep water. Big fish may still move onto the shallower portions of the structures at times, but I catch most of my fish much deeper—typically at the base of drop-offs, where the bottom becomes soft.

Most flags are set from the base of the drop-off out into the nearby basin. Depth varies according to lake type. I fish shallow prairie lakes where the basin begins in 20 feet of water. But in classic deeper glacial lakes basin depth might be 30 to 40 feet.

I always have plenty of holes cut shallower in case some fish move there. Often I jig the shallow water, while watching the tip-ups work in deep water. Sometimes you get no more than a 15-minute feeding period, typically right after the sun sets—short, but it can still be sweet,

especially when fishing gets tough during mid season.

Two approaches work for deep-water sets and I experiment to see which is best. One approach is to concentrate sets at what seems to be the highest-percentage transition spot at the base of the drop-off. The other is to spread sets out in hopes of contacting fish. In fishing a new area, I typically start with a spread set and then if it seems that one spot is getting most of the action night after night, I concentrate sets in that area. Often, once you find a high-percentage spot it remains a high-percentage spot season after season.

In clear water a lively chub draws attention from long distance, especially if you get the bait up off the bottom more than what might be considered normal. Most anglers set baits 6 inches to a foot above the bottom, but I place baits at least 1.5 to 2 feet up and at times 3 to 5 feet above bottom. As is also the case in jigging, if you can get a big fish to commit to rising to a bait it often changes their attitude. They approach in a noncommittal mode, but things change along the way as they rise to get a look at the lively chub. During mid season they may eye a chub for 10 minutes before they commit.

By late ice, big fish are on the move again, spending a lot more time shallower in areas near where they're going to eventually spawn. The shallow edge of bars near necked-down lake areas can be good, so too spots near incoming rivers or feeder creeks. Most of my best areas are along the edge of major hard-bottom bars, some of which may also have been prime areas for most of the winter. Overall, some of my best spots are the drop-off edges out from south-facing gravel and rock-rubble shorelines. Spread sets work best at this time. The fish are moving.

PRESENTATION

I still use the classic HT Polar Tip-ups at times, but in recent years I have mostly switched to the HT Polar Pop-up Magnetic, which is a vertical-standing model with an easily adjustable magnetic tripping device and a spring-tensioned spool that's ultra smooth. The snow rarely drifts over them and you seldom have wind trips. They're also easy to roll up to move or to put away at the end of the day.

Spool on 10-pound mono backing to prevent spool slippage, then transition to 50-pound braid as mainline. Braid offers zero stretch and no coiling for instant hook-ups and the added diameter and rough feel aid in handling the line as you fight fish.

Terminally, I use a snap-swivel and tie on a 4-foot leader of 12-pound monofilament. If I were interested in landing pike, I'd switch to fluorocarbon, which is harder for pike to bite through; but with this system I just pull hard on pike once they're at the hole and they break off or cut off. This saves me having to deal with them on the ice. I have leaders on hand and quickly replace the leader and get back to walleye fishing.

The baitfish I use are from 6 to 8 inches long and it works best to fish them on a single wide-gap octopus hook in a #2 or #1 size. I usually add a tiny bead and a .8-inch Mack's Lure Smile Blade as an attractor right above the hook. Another option is to anchor the bait with a JB Lures #2 Lunar Grub. This adds color to the offering—or go with a bit of glow. With the octopus hook I anchor the rig with a #4 lead shot about 12 inches above the bait. Hook the bait just lightly under the

Retro **WALLEYES**



skin right at the dorsal fin, but with the hook riding parallel to the fin with the hook point forward.

By far my favorite baitfish are either creek chubs or redbail chubs, preferably ranging from 6 to 8 inches, although I also use suckers and shiners at times. When I can't find big bait I get the biggest minnows I can find and place two of them on the same hook, one through the lips, the other through the tail. The struggling pair often gets fish to take. I drill 10-inch holes, because they don't freeze up as quickly as 8-inch holes and make landing big fish much easier. At times it helps to slightly trim the tail of bigger baits, so they don't swim so aggressively.

When a flag pops, don't be in a hurry to react; especially later in the season when it often takes a fish over a minute to fully engulf a bait.

Usually there's an initial run, followed by a pause and then a second run. That's when I set. Some fish are hooked deeply, but rarely do they swallow the bait. For deeply hooked fish, go in through the gills and pop the hook free, then release big fish after a picture or two.

I have experimented with quick-strike rigging, where tandem treble hooks are about 3 inches apart, placed in the back of the bait. It works, but I prefer my own single-hook system after years of experimentation. First and foremost, I rarely miss big fish when I give them time to eat the bait.



▶ **MAGNETIC** Magic

More and more anglers are discovering how easy and effective it is to use the HT Polar Pop-up Magnetic Tip-up. Guide Dennis Foster talks about basic rigging within in this article, but further modifies his by adding a strip of red glow tape at the top of the tip-up, while wrapping the top of the pop-up flag with a strip of standard glow tape. With a flashlight it's easy to monitor tip-up sets at a distance and also see if a fish has tripped the pop-up arm.

Foster: "The Pop-ups are part of a simple yet highly effective system. They're foolproof in icy, snowy conditions, the spool mechanism is smooth as can be, and they're easy to set out and pick up, fitting neatly into an HT Tackle Tote or an HT Tip-up Tote."



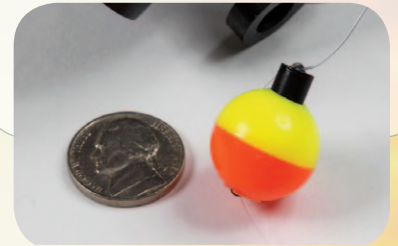
▶ **TERMINAL** Rigging

Foster keeps rigging simple by using either a #1 or #2 Octopus hook. He adds a small bead and a .8 Mack's Smile Blade above the hook, as an attracting mechanism. Anchor the rig with a #4 lead shot about 12 inches above the hook.

> THE FLOAT Indicator

Foster uses a small pinch-on float to monitor the depth of his sets and how fish are taking the bait. Initially, he uses a pinch-on weight (depth finder) to determine the depth at which to set the bait. At that point, place the float on the line right below the base of the tip-up. Now you can easily check baits and return them immediately to the right depth.

Foster: "A lot of times a big fish takes the bait and pulls the float down a foot or so and just sets there. You can tell what's happening by watching the float. In a bit the fish moves off steadily (the float moves away), then typically the fish stops again and repositions the bait in its mouth. At this point, when the fish moves away again, set the hook."



The single hooks are so easy to work with. They're easy to set out and easy to put away. They roll right up to the spool on the HT Pop-up. I can pack 10 Pop-ups in an HT Tip-up Tote in about 5 minutes when it's time to head home. Just have someone walk with you with the bag open as you quickly roll up the tip-ups and place them in the bag.

The number of flags that can be set varies by state and province. I think that anywhere you can use at least two lines per person the odds are in your favor for catching big fish with this simple system. In South Dakota we can set four lines a piece, so we typically set three flags per man and then also jig in open holes. We catch some bigger fish while jigging, but especially as the season rolls on, by far our best catches of big fish are on the chubs. Retro perhaps. Absolutely effective, for sure. ■

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