



Wall to Walleye *in Lake Erie*

By Dave Barus



Dust off your tackle box. According to DEC studies, these elusive fish have made a tremendous comeback.

Looking for some great summer fishing? Well, look no more. Walleye fishing on Lake Erie is prime, and anglers travel from all around to test their skills. For those who remember the poor walleye fishing of years ago, I say, try again. The Lake Erie fishery is back and better than ever. But don't take my word for it. Just ask any walleye angler. If you want more concrete proof, ask the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) which has been monitoring the fishery for years. They'll confirm that recent angler catch rates now equal the highest measured in the last 20 years.

The higher catch rates are indicative of Lake Erie's large

shallow, productive waters in Lake Erie's west basin as spawning grounds. But come summer, they seek the deeper waters located off New York's shoreline. Here they find the cooler water temperatures they require, as well as the food they need to thrive. With an average depth of 80 feet, the eastern waters off the ports of Dunkirk and Barcelona support a summer offshore fishery that is nothing short of stunning.

While fishing may be spectacular now, historically, Lake Erie's fishery has seen its share of problems. The incredible fishing enjoyed in the late 1980s, when stores sold out of anything that would catch an offshore walleye, gave way to a

Walleye populations fluctuated and decreased for many years as they adjusted to the new environs, and for a time, the fishing tanked. A few years later, however, things began to turn around. In 2006, DEC studies showed that walleye numbers had rebounded to equal the high numbers of the 1980s.

This rebound was largely aided by an exceptional spawning year in 2003. In fact, the abundant 2003 year-class, whose individuals now range between 22 and 24 inches in length, is still a major part of the Lake Erie fishery and should continue to support quality fishing. In addition, cooperative measures by the U.S. and Canada, including setting standardized fishing limits

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walleye population which numbers in the millions. And the eastern basin of Lake Erie, along the New York shoreline, is famous for its trophy-size (8- to 10-pound) fish. In fact, many anglers participating in the numerous tournaments at Lake Erie catch monster walleye that weigh 11 pounds or more.

In spring walleye prefer the

severe decline in the 1990s. Much of the decline was blamed on the introduction of the zebra mussel and other invasive species that altered the natural environment. The accidental introduction of zebra and quagga mussels in the late 1980s and early 1990s markedly increased the lake's water clarity, greatly affecting native organisms.

and size restrictions, contributed to the rebound. Recent research shows that spawning success is up, especially in the east end of the lake.

While studying the fishery, biologists learned that although most of Lake Erie's walleye population spawns in the shallow, warm, western basin, some also spawn in the eastern basin. Work conducted on lake reefs and rivers have substantiated the presence of spawning fish, an encouraging sign of the fishery's present and future good health.

Whatever the reason for the fishery's remarkable recovery, it can't be denied that today's fishing on Lake Erie is spectacular. And if you have never fished for walleye, you don't know what you're missing! Walleye are great fun to catch and taste delicious. In fact, many anglers will argue that of all the state's freshwater fish species, walleye make the best meal.

On Lake Erie, fishing for walleye means getting in a boat and heading offshore. Although some anglers



Fishing six or seven miles out pays dividends on Lake Erie.

Don Einhouse



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may catch an occasional walleye from shore during the months of July, August and September, the real action is out on the lake.

Knowing where fish live and what they eat will improve an angler's ability to locate and catch them. Walleye prefer the deep water sections of large lakes, streams, and rivers. They have large, light-sensitive eyes for feeding in poor light. To protect their eyes from the sun, walleye stay in sheltered or deep water during the day and move into shallower water at night. They are voracious predators and use their large teeth to catch a variety of minnows and young of other fishes. In Lake Erie, smelt or shiners are often a favorite meal.

During June and July, walleye occur in schools in Lake Erie's eastern basin. They are often found near the lake's bottom, in relatively shallow (from 40 to 52 feet deep) water. As summer progresses and the water warms, they move into deeper waters, following forage schools of emerald shiners and rainbow smelt. One hot spot for catching them at this time is Lake Erie off Buffalo

from the Departure Buoy (two miles southwest of the Buffalo Harbor North Gap) to the Seneca Shoal Buoy near Hamburg. Come July and early August, the big walleye move to deeper and cooler waters west of Sturgeon Point. Most are 10-30 feet off the bottom in 70-90 feet of water, near the descending thermocline (where the water temperature changes rapidly). Another walleye hot spot is off the Buffalo reefs and shoals at the head of the Niagara River.

Most anglers that launch from Sturgeon Point, Dunkirk, or the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek will agree that in mid-summer heat, the largest number of schooled walleye will be no less than six or seven miles out, especially in the offshore area straight out from Evangola Beach. The suspended fish can usually be found in a two-to-three square mile area.

Every angler has their own secret for success. Take veteran 76-year-old Cheektowaga angler Dick Sokolowski who caught his limit of walleye running a simple downrigger line and one Dipsy-Diver diving plane. He credits his success to fishing the

downrigger 75 feet back and 10 feet off the bottom, and deploying the diving plane 95 feet back. Soko (pronounced "Sock-O"), as his friends call him, prefers an old time standby spinner/worm rig that uses a clear stainless steel main line, a willow leaf blade, watermelon color beads and matching tape colors. He personalizes his set-up with a single thin stripe of orange-color tape on the backside of the blade, and says it makes a big difference on some days. If this sounds technical, it can be, but don't worry, novices can hire a licensed guide who'll teach you everything you need to know.

Like many anglers, Sokolowski ignores the arthritis that limits his movements and finger dexterity. "Fishing makes me get out and forget my aches," says Sokolowski. "It gets my blood moving and I feel like I'm about 35 years old when I get on the water. That's why I wanna fish!"

Like Soko, I feel it's a very good time to be walleye fishing on Lake Erie.

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