

# Secrets for Springtime River Walleye

by

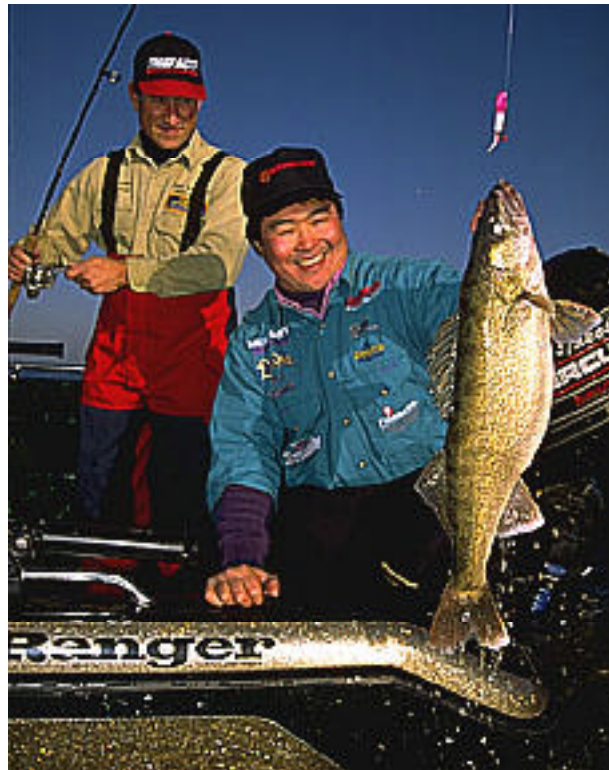
Scott Richardson and Ted Takasaki

Springtime is a great time for river walleyes and sauger. The spawning mood strikes, and that means large schools are easy to find using a few basic facts about moving water and its effect on game fish.

Ask any first-time river fisherman what his biggest challenge is and odds are he'll say current. True enough. All that moving water can be big trouble for novice boat handlers unaccustomed to it. But ask a seasoned river angler what his greatest ally is, and guess what? "Current," he'll say. The curse becomes a blessing with a little insight into the behavior of river walleye.

Here's why; Current concentrates fish. If walleye or sauger burned as many calories catching dinner as they get from eating it, there would be nothing left to fuel the growth process. They could eat and eat and still starve. So to save energy, walleyes attack from ambush. They spend time in predictable slack-water areas next to current to wait for food to drift by. Then they pounce. During the spawning season, walleyes can be found where current slows near the type

of bottom they need to lay eggs such as hard bottom areas consisting of rock, rubble or sand. The search can be narrowed even further by recalling that the tendency for spawning walleyes



**It's hard to beat a simple jig & minnow combination for springtime river walleyes.**

and saugers is to move upriver as far as they can before a dam or rapids stops their progress. The largest numbers could be right at the base of the dam or within a few miles downstream.

Armed with that information, a map quickly reveals likely fish-holding hideouts.

Natural current breaks include:

- \* Inside turns of river bends, Flats created where water slows enough to drop sediment to the bottom
- \* Places where current from feeder streams collide with the main river or where two rivers meet, creating slack water at their junction

- \* Areas near dams where eddies form behind rock points jutting into the fast-moving water

- \* Slight depressions or holes on the bottom

Manmade current breaks include :

- \* Wingdams on some waterways like the Mississippi to direct water from shore to the main channel. Eddies form on both the upstream and downstream sides

- \* Bridge abutments

- \* Barge tiedowns

- \* Navigational channel markers

- \* Barge propellers can scour deep holes where the craft have to increase power to turn one way or the other Check out

anything that deflects moving water.

### **Springtime tactics**

Basic techniques work best in spring. It's hard to beat a simple jig and a minnow combination. But boat control is the whole ballgame. Anchoring over likely fish holding spots can be effective at times, but is an inefficient presentation overall. It takes precious time to position your boat with anchors and then wait for a fish to swim by. So why not show your bait to as many fish as possible by using a boat control method known as slipping. With this method, you are actually learning to chase your line.

Here's how; Tie on a jig heavy enough to stay in contact with the bottom. A quarter or three-eighths ounce is good to start off with. Conditions may require you to go heavier or allow you to go lighter. Dress it with a Fuzz-E-Grub and a minnow, while experimenting with color. Or, try just the minnow by itself. Use a stinger hook if plagued by short strikes. Position your boat by motoring upstream from the targeted stretch of river and lower your bow-mounted trolling motor. Let your bait down until you are sure you feel the jig ticking bottom. Line watching helps - look for a telltale slight bend at the tip as you raise and lower the rod. Simply lift and drop the jig. Try dragging the jig, too. Vary presentation and jig color until the fish let you know what they want. The trolling motor comes into play to control the drift to match the speed of the current. Point the bow in the wind and the current and use short bursts of

speed in whatever direction is necessary to keep slack out of your line. The jig stays directly below you so you can feel every strike and set the hook hard. Detecting strikes or setting the hook can be extremely difficult with slack in your line. Use 6 pound test Magna-Thin line for vertical jigging; the thinner diameter cuts the water and offers less water resistance. Some pros use braided line to decrease line diameter even more without sacrificing line strength. Super braided line's lack of stretch increases sensitivity, but the fish can detect you as quickly as you can.

### **Against the flow**

Jigs can also be trolled against the current effectively with a double jig rig. Tie a short dropper line about a foot long to one eye of a three-way swivel on the main line. Add a heavy jig. For most current conditions, a 5/8ths or 1oz. Lindy Jumbo Fuzz-E-Grub. Dress it with a minnow. Then tie a longer piece of mono, 18 inches to two feet to the third eye. This is called the "Trailer". There are many options for the "Trailer". Try a floating jig head dressed with a minnow; a plain hook and a minnow, leech or crawler; a hook dressed with a small curlytail and live bait; or a floating crankbait. Drop the entire rig to the bottom. Using your electric bow-mounted trolling motor, move upstream at the pace of a slow troll. Maintain bottom contact while keeping your line entering the water at about a 45 degree angle. Lift and drop or drag the rig. On any given day, walleyes and sauger may prefer upstream presentations to downstream. If current is very strong,

use a gasoline kicker motor at low speed to match current speed and the trolling motor to steer. Check it out.

### **Cover More Water with Crankbaits**

Trolling crankbaits was once thought of as a tactic that only worked in warm water. Wrong.

It's been proven time and again that trolling crankbaits can be a great way to cover large areas in a short period of time even when water is cold. Experience has shown speeds up to 2-1/2 mph, both up and downstream, can trigger strikes in spring. Use deep diving baits like Shad Raps, Bomber 24As, Storm Thunderstick Jr. Deep divers, or Lindy Bait Fish. All of these crankbaits will run between 10 to 17 feet deep by themselves. Using leadcore line or snap weights will take them deeper. Make sure they are running right within 2 inches of the bottom in order to stay in the strike zone. Troll the edges of flats or on top of the flats themselves. You can even use planer boards to cover a wider path. But right behind the boat may be best for proper depth control.

River walleye and sauger in spring are a great way to chase away the winter blues.

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