

More Great Fishing Expected in 2002

by

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Lake Erie anglers in 2002 will be rewarded with more of the same world class fishing experienced last year.

Anglers who traveled to the state's number one fishing destination during 2001 tapped in on excellent angling action for walleye, yellow perch, smallmouth bass and steelhead trout.

"Lake Erie anglers saw some of the best fishing in recent history," said Roger Knight, Lake Erie Fisheries Program Manager for the Division of Wildlife. "Mother Nature's cooperation throughout much of the year and good numbers of key sport fish provided anglers a mixed bag of popular angling opportunities that rival any lake in the country."

Walleye

Walleye fishing was excellent throughout the summer. Limit catches of walleyes ranging in size from 14 to 27 inches were common in July and August across the Western Basin. The walleye harvest for 2002 on the Ohio waters of Lake Erie was 1.2 million fish, slightly higher than the two previous years. Despite favorable weather conditions and fast action, angler pressure at 2.5 million angler hours was only slightly higher than in 2002 at 2.2 million angler hours.

"That may be because of after

two years of slow walleye fishing in 1999 and 2000, and high fuel prices early in the season, anglers were not as anxious to travel to Lake Erie in 2001," Knight said. "Fishing pressure will most likely pick up during 2002 once word spreads across the Midwest about how great the fishing was last year."

Walleye catch rates during 2001 were the highest since 1998. Overall private boat harvest in 2001 was 32 percent greater than in 2000. Western Basin anglers saw a harvest increase of 53 percent of 2000.

About 35 percent of the walleyes that filled anglers coolers were fish from a strong hatch in 1999. These two-year-old fish average 14 to 16 inches. A reduced bag limit, which took effect in March 2001, will help conserve these young fish. Ohio's reduced bag limit was part of measures taken in a walleye management agreement with the Lake Erie states and Ontario to help rebuild Lake Erie walleye stocks from lows in the late 1990s.

The 1996 year class of fish also made a big showing at 20-22 inches. Other year classes of fish that made up the harvest included fish from hatches in 1997 and 1998, which measured 16 to 22 inches.

For 2002, anglers will continue to reel in many of the 1999 walleyes (now 17-18 inches). Anglers can also expect to land fish from the 1996 hatch, which will average 22 to 26 inches. Other catches will include fish from the 1998 hatch measuring 18 to 20 inches, as well as some lunker fish from older year classes now in the Fish Ohio Category at over 28 inches. The current state record walleye was caught off Cleveland in November 1999 and weight 16.19 pounds, a remnant of the large 1986 year class. (Walleyes can live to be more than 20 years of age.) There will be few fish measuring 13 to 15 inches to add to the fishable population resulting from a poor hatch in 2000.

The reduced bag limit for Ohio anglers remains in effect at four walleyes during March and April and six walleyes the remainder of the year.

Yellow Perch

Limit catches of exceptionally large yellow perch were common across the lake throughout 2001. Many were in the 9 to 12 inch range and longer.

"Perch fishing was great throughout the Western and Central Basins. If anglers weren't doing well, all they had to do was move to another location on most days," said Knight.

Ohio perch anglers caught 5.5 million yellow perch, similar to the 2000 harvest. Angler pressure also remained about the same as in 2000 at just under 2 million angler hours.

Excellent perch fishing should continue through 2002 and beyond. Conservative regulations for sport and commercial fishermen and improved spawns have helped Lake Erie's yellow perch stocks to gradually recover after low levels in the early 1990s.

In 2002, anglers can expect many fine catches of perch from a large 1996 year class, the largest hatch in 10 years. These fish will measure 10 to 12 inches. Added to the catch will be perch from the 1998 year class, in the 8 to 10 inch range, and 1999 spawned perch that will be 8 to 9 inches. Catch rates should peak in September and October and rival those of 2001. Ohio's daily bag limit for yellow perch remains at 30 fish per angler per day.

Smallmouth Bass

Smallmouth bass anglers continued to reel in Erie's lunker smallmouth bass. Typical catches were in the 14 to 18 inch range and weigh 1.5 to 3.5 pounds. Fishing was good at many of the traditional haunts especially in the spring and fall.

Successful spawns over the past decade have provided excellent smallmouth bass fishing opportunities across Lake Erie. Angler pressure remained high with anglers spending over 400,000 angler hours in pursuit of Lake Erie's famous smallmouth.

Creel interviews reveal that most bass anglers practice catch and release with six out of seven smallmouth bass released after being landed.

Fishing for smallmouth bass should remain good to excellent during 2002. Bass anglers can expect to land smallies from spawns of 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 now ranging in size from 14 to 18 inches. If recent trends continue, anglers will see catch rates similar to that of 2001. Hot spots should include the Bass and Kellys islands areas, western basin reef complex, Sandusky Bas, Ruggles Reef, and harbor break walls from Cleveland to Conneaut.

"Ongoing research coupled with recent regulations changes should help ensure that the lake's smallmouth fishery continues to be among the best anywhere in the country," Knight said.

The daily bag limit for smallmouth bass is five fish with a minimum size length of 14 inches.

Steelhead Trout

Central Basin anglers experienced a steelhead bonanza on the open lake during August and September. Five-fish limits were the norm when wave conditions were favorable. The total harvest was similar to the previous year at 28,000 steelhead trout.

"The Division's steelhead stocking program adds yet another angling option for Lake Erie anglers," said Kevin Kayle, supervisor of the Fairport Fisheries Research Unit. "Steelhead fishing on the lake and Central Basin streams has become

top notch and continues to lure anglers from near and far as word spreads about this fantastic fishery."

Steelhead continue to entertain anglers fishing shore areas and lower stream reaches as these cold water fish prepared to make annual fall spawning runs. Once steelhead moved into streams, these feisty fish provided more great angling opportunities for wading anglers.

The Division maintains this popular fishery by releasing approximately 400,000 steelhead trout each spring in the Rocky, Chagrin and Grand rivers and Conneaut Creek. The Vermilion River will be added to the stocking program beginning this spring. These stocked fish migrate out into Lake Erie and spend the summer in the cooler part of Lake Erie's Central Basin. Adult steelhead then return to stocking streams from falls through spring.

On the open lake, steelhead trout are landed by anglers targeting steelhead, as well as anglers trolling for walleyes. Peak action occurs in July and August off Lorain to Conneaut. Catches measure 19 to 28 inches and longer and weigh up to 12 pounds. Many charter guides now offer steelhead charters as an alternative to traditional walleye charters.

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Lake Erie Walleye
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LINDY FISH HANDLING GLOVE NAMED “BEST OF THE BEST” BY “FIELD & STREAM”

The Lindy Little Joe, Inc. (Lindy) new Fish Handling Glove won Field & Stream’s “The Best of the Best Award” for the New Fishing Product of the Year 2001.

The Lindy “Glove” was one of just 19 fishing, hunting, automotive and camping products selected by the editors of Field & Stream magazine for the prestigious Best Of The Best Award. The actual award will be presented to Lindy at the 2002 ICAST Show in July 2002.

The Lindy Fish Handling Glove is up to 800% more puncture-proof and cut-resistant than other popular fish handling gloves. Made from HDM’s flexible, puncture and cut-resistant Super Fabric brand material, the glove delivers more protection against cuts and punctures from knives, fish teeth, gill plates and hooks than any other glove on the market.

“Lindy prides itself on delivering revolutionary products that greatly impact their users. The Fish Handling Glove is an excellent example,

and addition, to our tradition of innovation,” Ted Takasaki, Lindy’s President, said.

The editorial staff at Field & Stream featured the “Glove” in their December 2001 issue. Field & Stream magazine has more than 10 million US and Canada readers each month, making it the best read magazine in the fishing and hunting industry.

For more information about the award winning Lindy Fish Handling Glove other exciting products from Lindy, visit www.lindylittlejoe.com. Visit www.fteld&stream.com to view the complete roster of the Best Of The Best Award winners.

Known as the walleye tackle company, Lindy -Little Joe, Inc. is credited with developing many of the walleye lures and methods that dominate the industry today. The company also offers a complete line of market-leading fishing tackle, jigs, rigs, floats, equipment and accessories, including name brands such as Thill and System Tackle.

Try this Walleye Recipe

Honey Fried Walleye

- 8 large walleye fillets
- 2/3 c oil
- 1 egg slightly beaten
- 1 tsp. honey
- 1/4 c flour
- 1/2 tsp.salt
- 1/4 tsp.pepper
- 1/8 tsp.nutmeg (opt.)

Dry fillets on paper towel
Heat oil in 10 in. skillet to 380
Mix the honey and eggs together
Combine crackers crumbs, flour, salt, pepper, and nutmeg
Dip fillets in egg mixture and then coat with cracker mixture
Fry until golden brown about 3 minutes on each side.

Serves 6-8

Proven Lures & Presentations for Smallmouths

Part II. Jigging Spoons, Jerkbait, Spinner Baits, Crankbaits and Topwaters

by
Mark Hicks

Michigan angler Randy VanDam caught the Ohio record smallmouth bass from Lake Erie on a jigging spoon in June of 1993. The 9-pound, 8-ounce fish shattered the previous record of 7 pounds and change and underscored the effectiveness of jigging spoons for Erie's smallmouth bass.

Vandal's primary spoon jigging technique could be called swim-jigging, because he dances the spoon above bottom with only occasional bottom contact. As he twitches the spoon with the rod tip held high, VanDam lifts and lowers the lure with a slow pumping motion. Many strikes come as VanDam shakes the spoon down after working it up.

The swim-jigging presentation produces smallmouths for VanDam when he fishes vertically, casts and retrieves or drifts over likely structures. It was the drifting method that accounted for Ohio's record smallmouth. His rule of thumb is to jig vertically in water deeper than 18 feet and to cast or drift in anything shallower. The exception is murky water.

"If there's a little color to the water," says VanDam, "say 4 feet of visibility, it breaks up the shadow of the boat and you can get away with vertical jigging in shallower water."

The Rattle Snakie Jigging Spoon that produced VanDam's Ohio state record smallmouth features a molded-in glass rattle. Every time he twitches the rod tip, the spoon sounds off and calls to bass.

"I mostly use the 1 1/2 and 3/4 ounce sizes," says VanDam. "I fish them with a stiff, 6 1/2-foot baitcasting rod matched with 10 to 14 pound monofilament."

Though smallmouths may be taken on jigging spoons in late spring and summer, early spring and fall are the key periods. I learned just how effective spoon jigging can be during a November outing with Frank Scalish of Cleveland, Ohio, a successful tournament bass angler and a frequent Lake Erie fisherman.

We launched in Lorain, Ohio. Before long, Scalish spotted a massive school of baitfish on the screen of his liquid crystal graph. They were located on the edge of a drop-off that slid abruptly from 22 to 30 feet.

"We're going to get into them now," said Scalish. "The smallies just have to be under that bait."

Scalish dropped a 3/4-ounce Hopkins Shorty jigging spoon straight down through the baitfish to the bottom. He snapped the lure

up and down once or twice and set the hook into a respectable smallmouth. He immediately tossed out a marker buoy.

Over the next 30 minutes, we spooned up one smallmouth after another without moving the boat, including several doubles. By the time we headed in, our spoons had accounted for more than 50 bass, including three in the 5-pound class.

Scalish favors fast sinking spoons, such as the Hopkins Shorty and Horizon Lure's Perk Minnow. To insure more reliable hookups, he replaces the original treble with a No. 2 Gamakatsu round bend hook that features a wider gap and thinner wire. To cut down on line twist and improve the lure's fluttering action, Scalish rigs his spoons with a large O-ring and a swivel. He matches the spoon with a heavy-action 6 1/2-foot baitcasting outfit and 15-pound line.

Vibrating blades, such as Reef Runner's Cicada, may be fished in the same manner as jigging spoons. These heavy metal lures kick hard from side to side when you lift them, sending out vibrations that excite lethargic bass.

"I start with spoons and Cicadas," says Snyder, "right after ice out in

late March or early April. I'll fish these lures 25 to 35 feet deep until the water temperature rises to the upper 40s. This approach has produced some of the biggest smallmouths I've ever caught from drop-offs around the Bass islands. When the water gets close to 50 degrees, I switch to tubes and grubs."

JERKBAITS

When smallmouths get active, twitching jerkbaits beneath the surface pulls them up from deeper water and generates electrifying strikes. This exciting fishing method is especially productive in the spring during the spawning period.

"I start throwing jerkbaits," says Snyder, "when the water temperature rises to 55 degrees. That 55- to 60-degree range is prime time for these lures. I also have luck with jerkbaits again in the summer when bass feed on baitfish and suspend. I've brought bass up from 20 feet that were suspended over 40 feet of water."

The retrieve defines the term "jerkbait." Any long minnow lure worked beneath the surface with a jerk-pause action falls into this category. Lures 4 1/2 to 5 inches in length fare best for Lake Erie smallmouths. Proven models include Smithwick's Rattlin' Rogue, Reef Runner's RipStick, Bomber's Long A, Storm's ThunderStick and Rapala's Husky Jerk.

Floating jerkbaits take Lake Erie smallmouths, but suspending models generally fair better.

Instead of rising quickly toward the surface during a pause in the retrieve, as standard floating minnows do, a weighted jerkbait suspends or rises very slowly. It mimics a disoriented minnow. Even sluggish bass have trouble resisting such a temptation.

Several companies have introduced weighted jerkbaits. The balance is so critical, however, that nobody has yet found a way to mass produce a truly neutrally buoyant lure. Most manufactured models rise very slowly, which is usually good enough to encourage strikes.

When bass demand long pauses, the lure must stay down. This requires that even new suspending jerkbaits should be tuned before you put them to work. Switching to different hooks or slightly oversized hooks may balance the lure. Storm Lures makes SuspenDots and SuspenStrips, which are self-adhesive metal weights. Stick them to the belly of a lure to achieve the balance you desire.

On calm days, you may maneuver a boat with an electric motor and cast to the bass. In breezy conditions common to Lake Erie, you're better off drifting with the wind and casting ahead of the boat.

Start the jerkbait down with a sideways pull on the rod. A medium-action baitcasting or spinning outfit with 10-pound test monofilament performs this task nicely. Then hold the rod tip low and twitch the lure along with a steady cadence, such as *jerk-jerk, pause..., jerk; jerk-jerk, pause...jerk. Or jerk-jerk,*

pause..jerk-jerk, pause.

The critical aspect is the length of the pause. Most strikes occur while the lure is at rest. Active bass may require a pause of only one or two seconds. When they're more tentative, you may have to let the lure suspend six seconds or more. The waiting game may try your patience, but you'll get over it the first time a heavy smallmouth inhales the jerkbait.

SPINNERBAITS

Though few anglers fish spinnerbaits on Lake Erie's offshore structures, they are gaining favor with those who probe weed beds that grow in protected bays. Put-In-Bay on South Bass Island, Presque Isle Bay and the Inner Bay of Long Point Bay can produce fast action with spinnerbaits when bass move shallow. Overhead style spinnerbaits featuring large willow leaf blades appeal to Lake Erie's smallmouth bass, particularly 3/8- to 3/4-ounce sizes. A heavy spinnerbait carries farther under windy conditions.

Effective blade combinations include a No. 2 or 3 nickel Colorado lead blade with a No. 5, 6 or 7 gold willow leaf trailing blade. Painted chartreuse blades also have their proponents.

Rubber or silicone skirts in white, chartreuse, red and combinations of these colors appeal to smallmouths. Dress the hook with a 3- or 4-inch curly-tailed grub in white, chartreuse or red.

Retrieving big spinnerbaits slowly beneath the surface sometimes

takes smallmouths, particularly when the lure ticks along the tops of submerged weeds. More often, however, a fast, churning retrieve that runs the lure just beneath the surface triggers more strikes.

The large willow leaf blade reflects a wide band of light. Smallmouths react aggressively to the commotion, often darting up from boulders or weeds several feet below to assault the lure. Grip the rod firmly, because strikes may be jolting. You need something on the order of a 6 1/2-foot medium-heavy action bait casting outfit spooled with a minimum of 15-pound test monofilament to withstand this hard-hitting brand of bass fishing.

For deep spinnerbait fishing, opt for a 1/2- to 3/4-ounce lure matched with a large Colorado or Indiana blade that gives off sharp vibrations. Let this lure helicopter to the bottom. Then work it back by ripping it sharply off the bottom and letting it flutter back down. The ripping action attracts bass, which strike as the spinnerbait falls. A handful of anglers are having good results with this ploy during the summer by fishing black-skirted spinnerbaits after dark.

CRANKBAITS

Crankbaits are largely overlooked smallmouth lures on Lake Erie, except by those who employ trolling tactics. If you enjoy casting crankbaits, don't hesitate to give them a workout when bass relate to bottom structures less than 20 feet deep. There's no question that Erie's smallmouths will belt a big-lipped, deep diving

crankbait as it bumps and bounces along the bottom like a distressed crayfish or a fleeing baitfish.

Whatever brand and model crankbait you select, it should dive deep enough so that it grinds the bottom for several feet before it begins climbing back up to the boat. If you're targeting a reef that tops out at 12 feet, choose a crankbait that digs 15 feet or deeper. Long casts give crankbaits more time to dive deep and work the bottom. Thin lines allow crankbaits to dive deeper. A medium-action 7-foot rod and 8-pound monofilament helps you run crankbaits down where they need to be to tempt smallmouths.

Lipless rattling crankbaits, such as the Rat-L-Trap and Cordell Super Spot, have no diving bills, but they still deserve a place in your tackle box. When retrieved briskly, these lures swim with a tight wiggle that makes their internal BBs chatter wildly. The tumult drives smallmouths mad, particularly bass in shallow water, such as in bays and over points.

One deadly presentation is to rip a lipless rattler along at a fast pace and to suddenly stop cranking. Let the lure sink for a few seconds, rip it ahead several feet and kill it again. Continue this stop and go action all the way back to the boat. Smallmouths often tailgate rattlers. When the lure abruptly stops and sinks, it triggers a reflex strike.

TOPWATER

The greatest thrill in fishing occurs when a smallmouth explodes after a topwater lure. Lake Erie's clearer water has improved the

odds for getting into this kind of action. Your best bet is in the spring when the bass move shallow. Calm water in bays and on the lee sides of islands give the bass a better opportunity to see your lures dancing across the surface.

Arguably the best topwater plugs for trophy smallmouths are stickbaits, such as Heddon's aged Zara Spook. At 3/4 ounce and 4 1/2 inches in length, the Spook is shaped like a fat stogie. It has no propellers or other noise makers, but sashays back and forth across the surface with a lifelike dance called "walking the dog."

Walk the dog by rhythmically twitching the lure on a semi-tight line with a low rod tip. Take up line between twitches to maintain the proper tension. Too much tension prevents the lure from swapping ends and gliding to the side; too little tension results in a loss of control.

Propbaits, such as the Devil's Horse, stir smallmouths into action. Twitch this type of lure across the surface and the propellers on each end gurgle, splash and rip up a fuss.

Vary the force of the twitches and the length of the pauses until you determine what the bass prefer on a given day. Sometimes subtle movements with long pauses are required. At other times, a frantic action with momentary stops turns them on.

Many smallmouth anglers dote on

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