

Shallow Water Walleyes

by
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One of the biggest myths about walleyes is this - they tend to stay in deep water. Not so, and believing it can lead to fishless days. Walleyes were at home in the relatively shallow rivers before their range grew to include lakes and reservoirs. So why does it come as such a shock to so many anglers to learn walleyes often inhabit water less than 10 feet deep?

Most likely the confusion comes from misunderstanding of the "eye" in "wall-eye." Those bright peepers are what we notice first. When told those terrific light gathering orbs give walleyes vision far superior to their prey, the next step is to conclude incorrectly that walleyes must go deep to avoid the sun. If that were true, then logic dictates our baits must go deep, too. Most followers of the deep-water theory concede that maybe walleyes move shallow to feed after dark, but they think walleyes always slip back into the deeper areas at dawn.

But biologists who attached radio transmitters to walleyes in one study found them at a depth of nine feet twice as often than at any other. In another, scientists determined walleyes were in water 10 feet deep or less more than a third

of the time and in water less than 20 feet deep about three-quarters of the time.



Often times larger fish can be found in shallower water

Countless tournaments have been won fishing shallow-water patterns. The reason is simple if you think about it. During most of the year, when walleyes - or any gamefish for that matter - are close to shore, they are there for one reason - to eat. No matter whether relating to weeds, rocks or

wood, walleyes are there because baitfish are there. And, that spells aggressive fish.

Like a couch potato on Super Bowl Sunday, walleyes like their comfort. In addition to feeding, they go shallow at times to find warmer water in their favored zone of 60- to 70 degrees. In rivers, they may be looking for spots with less current. In spring, they are looking for places to spawn.

Fishing shallow has two other advantages. First, in a game won by ounces, pros find that shallow fish are often larger fish. And, second, the deeper a fish, the more precise your presentation has to be. While you may have to bump a deep fish on the nose with a 'crawler to get it to say "ahh," shallower fish tend to be willing to move longer distances to snatch up a tasty morsel.

Perhaps you never caught a shallow walleye before because you never tried. Perhaps you didn't believe the fish were there, or maybe you just didn't know the know-how. Perhaps you tried with slim success because you frightened fish away before you made your first cast. Here's a few tips to improve your odds:

- A key is to eliminate large

sections of a lake or river before the boat is launched. Call guides and baitshops. More than asking what lure the locals are using, ask at what depth fish are being caught. That question alone can eliminate 50 percent of the water. Question 2: what kind of structure are they on rock, weeds or wood? That eliminates another big chunk. Check what you've learned on a lake map. Look for sloping structure near drop-offs.

- Bottom-finding-only sonars are of little use in water less than 10 feet deep. The sonar's cone is too narrow for fish to be detected. Shallow-water walleye anglers resemble their brothers and sisters in the bass community -they cast to visible structure to find active fish. Bottomline's sidefinders can be a very useful tool while fishing shallow water.

- Polaroid sunglasses can reveal weeds, submerged logs, shallow rock piles and even a walleye. Sunglasses also help detect changes in water color that can prove critical to finding fish. Doesn't matter how clear most of a body of water it is. Find stained water and you will find shallow walleyes. Bait fish move into the cloudy water and walleyes will be close behind. Look for such things as waves splashing against a mud shoreline or feeder creeks which drain from farmland. Even carp slashing and rolling near shore may stir up the water.

- If on rock bars and humps, fish the windy side rather than taking up position in calm areas because it's more comfortable.

- Scout a lake at night with a high-intensity spotlight and shine the beam into the shallows. Reflected light from that walleye eye can be a dead give-away. Don't assume those fish are gone at sunrise. They may move tighter to cover, but they'll often still be near.

- Keep your jig and line as light as possible - a sixteenth-ounce or eighth-ounce jig and 4- to 6 pound is best in water 5 feet deep or less. A plastic dressing is always a good idea. If walleyes sense the hook when they inhale the bait, they will try to spit it back out. But a plastic curly tail will catch in their teeth like Velcro, giving you crucial extra moments to sense the strike and set the hook. Experiment with color.

- A minnow is good live-bait option early and late in the year. 'Crawlers become an important part of river fishing earlier than in lakes - right after the spawn when water temps are still fairly cold. Use half a worm on the jig. Leeches are good in water above 55 degrees, especially on lakes.

- Hooked fish will almost always grab the bait and swim toward deeper water. That's often directly at the boat so you won't feel the bite. Become a line watcher. High-vis line may be a plus.

- When focusing on weeds, cabbage and coontail are prime. Start with the outside edge and look for points or inside turns. Cast a jig, make contact with weeds. Let your bait fall and don't be afraid of letting it make a little commotion -weeds filter a lot of

nutrients which are scattered when the weeds are disturbed. The action can spur a feeding frenzy by bait fish and get a walleye's attention. The most ignored area of a weed bed is the inside weedline, which often holds lots of big fish.

- Wood is especially important in rivers where it serves as a current break and slacker water forms behind it. Look for blowdowns with trunks and limbs that are twisted bent, loaded with lots of nooks and cranies for walleyes to hide. Use a split shot, a hook and a good-sized minnow or a 16th-ounce jig which allows the minnow to swim. The bait often swims directly underneath the cover and into the mouth of a waiting 'eye.

- Shoreline rock, like the manmade rip rap of bridges or dams, is especially good during prespawn, spawn and post spawn.

- Most shallow walleyes are just a rod-length from the shoreline. Don't cast far. The less line out, the more you can tell what's happening with your jig.

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