

Spinner/Crawler Magic on Erie

Spinner/crawler rigs are the go-to choice for many experienced Lake Erie walleye anglers.

by
Michael Veine

Known as harnesses, spinners or just plain meat rigs, spinner/crawler combos are a top choice among Lake Erie's walleye fishing armada. These rigs are as varied as the anglers that using them with

not forget the main ingredient either, a juicy night crawler. Versatile rigs, spinners can be trolled, drifted or cast to walleyes with deadly effectiveness. Sure, plenty of walleyes are taken with other methods, but when the going

Michigan. When I got back, I had one afternoon to figure out the bite before taking some customers out the next day.

My partner and I searched around at cruising speeds monitoring the



**Spinner/Crawler rigs tend to catch the bigger walleyes in any given area.
Photo taken by Michael Veine.**

thousands of homemade and commercial styles used. Most rigs consist of single or multiple spinners with some beads and/or rig floats strung onto a leader with hooks at the business end. Let's

gets tough, savvy anglers get out their spinner/crawler rigs.

Last summer I took a week off from charter fishing to work on my hunting property in Upper

graph. It took us a couple hours, but we finally managed to locate a promising school of walleyes away from the packs of boats. We started out trolling with crankbaits for a while, but we only



This fat walleye was taken on a Pa's rig. Photo taken by Michael Veine.

managed a few small-eyes to show for our efforts. There was a heavy Mayfly hatch emerging and most of the fish that we marked were tight to bottom. Despite putting the cranks right in their faces, they still showed little interest.

To tell the truth, I hate fishing with night crawlers. They are smelly, slimy and messy, but when walleyes are finicky they are oftentimes a necessary evil.

I broke out some spinner/crawler rigs and sent four of them overboard behind bottom bouncers. It was very calm, almost like glass, so I deployed my bow mounted, Min Kota, autopilot, electric motor for the ultimate in stealth and slow motion delivery. Two of the offerings were presented behind Church Tackle, TX-12, inline boards while the other two were just stuck in holders and run right behind the boat.

It only took a minute to latch onto

our first walleye and by the time we worked our way into the middle of the school we couldn't even keep the lines in the water. We had downgraded to just two handheld lines and in no time limited out on feisty 1-4 pounders. For the next week, we caught quick, limit catches every day on meat. It almost didn't seem fair; it was so easy.

The Rigs

Capt. Rocco Papandrea owns and operates Rock-N-Roll Charters (219-262-3370) out of Port Clinton. Papandrea is also well respected as a pro angler in the PWT circuit. Papandrea, a crawler-fishing expert says, "Spinner rigs are a key ingredient to consistent walleye success on Lake Erie and elsewhere."

Like this author, Rocco Papandrea's favors homemade spinner crawler rigs, but Rocco does recommend K&E Tackle's (www.stopperlures.com) har-

nesses, as they are very close in composition to what he makes himself. Where big walleyes are present, Papandrea likes larger rigs for suspended crawler trolling. His leaders are made from 17-lbs. test Trilene-XT, measuring 3-4' in length and he ties a ball bearing swivel to the end. He normally uses 6mm beads and strings on 2-3 ahead of a quick-change clevis, followed by 6-7 in front of the hooks. Red beads are his favorite. He ties on a single hook on the front and a treble hook as a stinger. For blades, he relies mostly on silver and gold in both hammered and plain finishes. For suspended walleyes, Papandrea uses #8 Colorado blades and polishes them with a jewelry polishing cloth before each use. If smaller fish are the target, then he downsizes his blades, beads and hook sizes accordingly.

For bottom fishing, Papandrea uses the same type of rig, but opts for a single, 2/0, bait holder hook. He uses piano wire instead of monofilament saying, "I use a short, six-inch length of wire leader material to make the rig impervious to damage caused from walleye teeth, bottom debris and zebra mussels. I use monofilament line to lengthen the lead off the bottom bouncer and adjust the length based on the bottom composition and the mood of the fish. If it's real snaggy or the fish are aggressive, then the lead is made very short."

Papandrea prefers #5, Colorado blades on his bottom rigs. He always uses whole night crawlers and runs the hook up through the worm's mouth letting the tail dangle freely. He says, "I've done lots of experimenting with



A crawler harness is tough to beat when the walleyes are finicky. Photo taken by Michael Veine.

different bottom rigs and found that the single 2/0 hook setup catches more fish.”

This author is extremely picky about spinner crawler rigs. I assemble all of my own rigs using only the best, premium quality components. A few years ago, I started using fluorocarbon leader material on my spinners and have found Berkley Vanish in 12-lbs.-test ideal. The stuff is tough, nearly invisible underwater and it also has very little memory, so it doesn't kink and coil like other leader materials. My leaders are always 4' in length and a loop knot is tied on the end. White, quick-change clevises are standard equipment. I never put beads in front of the clevis, as they tend to put pressure on the clevis reducing the spinning action of the blade at slow speed.

For a suspended fishing rig, I string on 7 or 8, 6mm beads preferring the 28 sided, plastic

beads that I have only found in craft stores. My hooks are #4, Eagle Claw, Laser Sharp, short shank trebles. The front hook is attached with a snell knot. The stinger is about 8" behind the front hook and is attached with a half-blood knot.

Most of my blades are ordered from the Cabela's Tackle Craft catalog. I use #6, Colorado blades exclusively for suspended rigs. My overall favorite pattern is chartreuse beads with either a plain chartreuse or chartreuse splash blade. I also like purple beads with a red splash blade or red beads with a hammered silver or red splash blade.

I try to find the biggest crawlers available for my suspended walleye rigs. The crawler is hooked crossways through the nose on the front treble hook. The stinger is stuck through the worm about 2/3 down its flank.

My bottom bouncing rigs start out with the same 4' leader length, but the lead is often shortened depending on the bottom composition and the mood of the fish. After sliding on a quick change clevis, two 6mm beads are strung on followed by a 3/4" rig float from Cabela's, then two more beads are added. The rig float adds bulk and a little flotation, which prevents snagging. For hooks, I rely on #4, Eagle Claw Bait Holders, which I sharpen to a sticky point with a stone. I snell on the front hook and attach the rear hook 5" down with a half-blood knot. The crawler is strung onto the front hook and the stinger is applied about half way down the worm leaving plenty of tail for action. I often inject the crawler with air under the collar and in the tail.

My blades for bottom bouncing are #3, Colorados. Favorite colors are chartreuse beads, float and blade or orange beads, chartreuse float and yellow orange splash blade. I also like pink beads and float with a silver blade, red beads, red float and silver blades or gold beads, chartreuse float, gold blade.

Suspended Presentations

Rocco Papandrea and I agree that our overall favorite trolled, suspended crawler presentation involves using a Pa's Lures. A very popular bait on Saginaw Bay, Pa's also work wonders on Erie's walleyes.

Pa's Lures are like a cross between a sinker and a crankbait. A piece of lead is molded onto a wire shaft like a weight forward spinner. The painted weight has a crankbait style diving lip and the



Tournament anglers often rely on spinner/crawler rigs when the chips are down. Photo taken by Michael Veine.

lure has a few beads and spinner blades for attraction. The diving lip allows the Pa's to maintain depth better than a weight forward spinner, snap weight or sinker. Pa's are readily available at every bait shop around Saginaw Bay, but I've yet to see one anywhere around Lake Erie. A search on the Internet found them for sale at www.walleyecentral.com/paslures.htm.

I use 3/4-oz. deep diver Pa's exclusively and match the color of the PA's to the bead color of my harness. Out of the package, I make a quick modification to the Pa's lures replacing the supplied single hook with a ball-bearing snap swivel to which I attach my crawler harness. A 1-2' harness lead length seems to work best behind Pa's. I try to keep my trolling speed at 1-1.5 mph and vary the setback to target specific depths. For accurate presentations, the book Precision Trolling

(800-353-6958) has running depth information for Pa's lures. I usually run a spread of Pa's behind inline boards.

Pa's can also be used as a casting lure. Using the supplied single hook, string on a chunk of a crawler and cast it out, let it sink a few seconds and then retrieve it.

When fishing snaggy waters or shallow spots, I prefer using a simple, rubber-core sinker or snap weights to take the rig to the desired depth. Last summer I had a great day catching walleyes on crawlers by letting out 100' of line, attaching a snap weight and then letting out just two feet of line and putting on a board. The fish were in shallow water and just under the surface.

Targeting Bottom Walleyes

Bottom bouncers are perhaps the best way to take walleyes with sand rubbing their bellies. I've had my best luck with standard, Plain Jane, unpainted bouncers. Bottom bouncers can be used as an effective drifting presentation, but they really shine when slowly trolled.

One of the biggest mistakes anglers make is not using a heavy enough bottom bouncer. I rarely use lighter than two-ounce bouncers and typically use three or four ounces. Walleyes are attracted to the silt that the bouncers kicks up, but the key is to let out just enough line so the wire tip skips on the bottom without dragging. For bottom bouncing I rely on Fireline. The no stretch feature of Fireline communicates every tic and bump to the rod tip so the angler can adjust the setback or re-bait after a perch attack. I usually stick my rods in the holders and run the bouncers right behind the boat, however I sometimes run a couple on diminutive, TX-12 inline boards and watch them like a hawk. I usually try to keep my speed under one mph when pulling crawlers across the bottom but sometimes it pays to experiment with speed.

On one trip last year the walleyes were deep and just wouldn't take a slow moving crawler, so we trolled with Hot'n'Tots down deep and caught some fish, but they were only coming sporadically.

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Just for kicks, I sent out a couple spinner/crawler rigs behind bottombouncers. I used four-ounce bouncers and kept the trolling speed at 2.0 mph. It didn't take long before we started taking walleyes regularly on the bottom bouncers that were running right behind the boat. That fast trolling, multi-pronged technique paid off with limit catches on several charters last year and we seemed to take the biggest fish on the crawlers.

Storage

The best storage method that I've found for spinner/crawler rigs is to buy one of those noodle floats that kids use as pool toys. I cut them into foot long sections and also cut a shallow slit around the tube every couple inches. The leader with the loop knot is wedged into the slit and then wrapped around the tube with the hooks burred into the foam to keep the rig in place. The tubes can then be stored in a bag or boat compartment. Send questions to veinmr@aol.com.

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For information call 1 800 BUCK-EYE. Tell them the area you'll be traveling to and you'll get all the help you need. We feel this will be an excellent year to visit our lake. Plan ahead for charters or lodging because it gets very bush in the summer. You can also e-mail me at capt.phil@cadez-charters.com for information. GOOD FISHIN!

From Editor, page 2

There are some more changes in store for the magazine. Starting with this issue we include two new sections; **“Dockage for Lake Erie Fishermen”** and **“Lodging for Lake Erie Fishermen”**. Previously, this information was readily available on our web site at walleye.com but we decided to list a limited number of Marinas and Lodgings in the print magazine. These listings will be limited to those folks that are “Fishermen Friendly” to the nth degree!

Finally, we welcome Rick Olson and Norb Wallock to Lake Erie Walleye Magazine. Rick and Norb, both proven walleye tournament fishing professionals will be sharing their knowledge of walleye fishing on ‘big water’ to our readership. Welcome aboard Rick and Norb!

This past spring fishing was fantastic at times, when the weather cooperated. Included in this great fishing was the record breaking performance of the Professional Walleye Trail contestants this past April on Erie's western basin waters. The three hundred fishermen landed a total of 1,794 walleyes weighing approximately 7 tons. The winner, Pro Tommy Skarlis set a new record of 3 days, 15 walleyes and 138.28 pounds. Pro, Ted Takasaki broke the single day record of six fish, 50.40 pounds. There were 346 walleyes that exceeded 10 pounds. The previous record was 35 fish in excess of 10 pounds.

The tournament did generate some controversy with the large numbers of large female walleyes

taken during the spawning season. The INTERNET chat sites and discussion boards were riddled with views on this from all sides. What do I think? The image of 1,794 fish and 7 tons of mostly large female walleyes taken out of Lake Erie during the spawning season is disturbing. However, from a biological perspective, the number of walleyes taken during this tournament in terms of its future impact on the Lake Erie walleye population was in fact minimal.

Could the tournament have been held later in the spring, after the spawn? Certainly. I'm sure good arguments could be made to host a tournament at many different times of the year. Here is an idea, that I'm sure is not original. Why not harvest the eggs from the females taken during large tournaments held during the spawn season and contribute them to Fish Hatcheries! Sure, there are logistical concerns here, but it could work.

Tight lines this summer!!

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