

# The Eastern Lake Erie Fishery Report

by  
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The highlight of the summer walleye-fishing season in eastern Lake Erie has to be a tournament in which 86 walleyes were caught exceeding 10 pounds! This happened at the recent Southtowns Walleye Association's 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Tournament which ran from June 29<sup>th</sup> - July 7<sup>th</sup>. The winning fish, caught by Mark Kessler, weighed in at 11.77 pounds. Mark won \$15,000 in cash and merchandise exceeding \$2,000 in value. In all, over 20 fish weighed in over 10 pounds with the top 200 prize-winning fish exceeding 9.45 pounds! These weight totals far exceed any of the previous 18 Southtowns tournaments. To cash in the tournament this year you had to catch a walleye that exceeded 9.45 pounds which is well above last years cut of slightly over 8 pounds.

John Chapman won the bass division of this tournament with a 5.73 pound smallmouth bass. John won \$500 with his prize-winning fish. All 3-prize winners in this category entered fish exceeding 5 pounds.

I had the pleasure of fishing off Sturgeon Point during this tournament with Paul Stoops, an experienced Lake Erie walleye fisher-

man, and his brother Norman. We did have some success, boating two prize-winning walleyes over



**Fish like this 10.3 walleye caught by Paul Stoops, were commonplace in the recent Lake Erie Southtowns walleye tournament.**

10 pounds. We caught 6 walleyes during my 1-day fishing stint with Paul. Almost all of the walleyes were suspended as they were caught using No.20&30 Jet Planers and worm harnesses of various colors (watermelon, copper & blue, etc.) off planer boards. Paul runs his lures approx. 200 feet back of the planer boards

and prefers Fireline, one of the new generation of super braided lines. These lines have several distinct advantages over the traditional monofilament line as they do not stretch and are very thin which cuts down their visibility in the ultra clear Lake Erie water. These lines also can withstand quite a bit of abrasion and cut the water well, which allow the lures to run deeper. Care must be taken when setting the hook as these lines do not stretch and one could literally yank the hook right out of a walleye's mouth.

Paul also likes to use a walleye attractant like Berkley's walleye scent on all of his lures. Paul constantly repeated "Did you put walleye scent on the lure" during our 7 hour fishing trip. His policy, like many other Lake Erie walleye veterans, is to check and possibly change lures every 1/2-hour if no walleyes are caught. This is especially true if your graph is detecting fish or you are in a "hot spot". Another lure that has again proven to be extremely successful this year is the Ronesky plug. This lure has become the staple of walleye fishermen who like to run body baits in the eastern basin.

Why did this tournament have such an impressive jump in the number of large walleye caught this year? Some fishermen attributed it to the excellent weather, which allowed most fishermen, even in small boats, to fish almost every day. Another theory was the later date for the tournament improved the fishing as this tournament took place the first week of July, which traditionally produces better offshore walleye fishing. Previous Southtowns tournaments normally took place in early June. The very warm Lake Erie water temperatures might have also turned the "bite" on. Some fishermen theorized that the increase in the catch of large fish might be due to more tournament entries but this was not a factor as the entries were in fact slightly down from the previous year. In truth it was probably all of the above plus other unknown factors! The Southtowns Walleye Association deserves a great deal of credit for a well-run tournament, which annually attracts approximately 2000 entries. They promote conservation and will only accept fish in excess of 26" at their weigh in booths. Southtowns, by the way, has decided to move back the tournament date to early June for 2003.

Incidentally quite a few tagged "swimmers"(nomadic suspended walleye) from the western basin were caught during the tournament which could bode well for the late summer offshore walleye fishing. A heavy influx of western basin "swimmers" augments the local population of walleyes and greatly improves the eastern basin fishing. Many fishermen were also very encouraged by the amount of

3 to 6 lb. walleye that were caught during the tournament and a "mixed bag" walleyes weighing from 3 pounds to 10 pounds was common.

New York Walleye Association's mid- July Ameri-Can team tournament also had impressive catch results with the winning team of Capt. Eugene Malczewski weighing a 79.94-pound total for the 2-day tournament. John Dolly's team came in a close second with 78.66 pounds. Captain Gene now has won this tournament 3 times in row, an unprecedented feat, due to the incredible variances normally experienced in Eastern Lake Erie offshore walleye fishing.

The bottom line is that the walleye fishery in the Eastern basin has become a fishery of quality instead of quantity with trophy fish (10 pounds) becoming more and more common as the years have passed. Fifteen years ago most Eastern basin walleye tournaments would have been considered successful if 10 fish were caught in excess of 10 pounds. Limit catches of smaller walleye was also very common during this time but now are rare.

Smallmouth bass fishing continues to be world class in numbers and size and reported catches in excess of 10 fish (most bass fishermen practice catch and release) is the norm. Information on yellow perch fishing remains sketchy but most of my contacts report that the rather secretive Veteran Lake Erie perch fishermen are doing very well. Perch tend to be in small tight schools so most of the successful perch fishermen have to move continually to find and stay with the

nomadic perch schools.

On the negative side, the goby has become a very dominant fish in the eastern basin and is a continual pest for most bottom fishermen. This is true whether you are in shallow or deep water as the population of this exotic has exploded! The Zebra and its larger cousin, the Quagga mussel, appears to have stabilized and they continue to clarify the water with some Secchi disc readings in excess of 30 feet. These 2 exotics appear to play a major role in the botulism problem in the lake and also are suspects in the new "dead zone" reported in Lake Erie's central basin.

Several relatively large fish kills have occurred this year. Alarmingly these kills did contain some bass and walleyes. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) Lake Erie fisheries station at Dunkirk felt that these kills were probably due to Type E botulism and upwelling of cold water due to sudden directional wind changes. It is expected that waterfowl will also be affected during the late summer months. Undoubtedly more ecological changes will take place in the future as new exotics make their impact on the ecosystem of the lake. Lake Erie is the shallowest of all the Great Lakes and any ecological changes generally occur first in this lake. It truly is "the canary in the mine".