

Small Boats, Big Waters...

by
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It was a sobering sight. A fiberglass bass boat bobbed vertically in the water—only the tip of its pointed bow visible and stabbing toward the sky with every swell. Flotsam in the form of tackle boxes, coolers, life jackets, and other, smaller items floated on the waves surrounding the swamped craft.

As we approached, another boat already on the scene advised us that the anglers had been rescued and that no one appeared injured, just shaken. Still, it made such an impression that the image remains in my mind yet today, though the incident happened years ago.

The swamping occurred in an area of the Western Basin of Lake Erie known informally as the Slop Chute, that area between the Catawba Peninsula and South Bass Island, where, on a busy summer's weekend, the wakes of

thousands of fishing boats and pleasure craft crash together from every possible compass heading. Unfortunately, the low-sided bass boat was ill prepared for such choppy waters.



Fishermen in small boats are wise to stay close to shore even in the calmest of Lake Erie conditions.

An angler who survived a similar mishap, this one caused by wind-driven waves, is George Wolfe of Columbus, Ohio. An accomplished tournament bass angler, Wolfe was fishing on Lake Erie in October of 1998. Two miles off shore in his 20-foot bass boat, Wolfe and his partner headed in as the wind shifted and four- to five-foot waves began to build.

“I had not topped off both my fuel tanks before leaving shore as I usually do,” said Wolfe, “and the motor began to cut in and out. I stopped to change tanks and that’s when we took a wave over the transom. Then the engine stalled.

After several more waves we were swamped, and then the boat completely rolled over.”

Wolfe and his partner clung to the up-turned hull of their boat for most of an hour in 57-degree water before being spotted and rescued by a passing charter boat—the only other boat they had

seen out fishing on that particular day. While being treated for hypothermia at a local hospital, the doctors told the two fishermen that they couldn’t have lasted much longer in those lake temperatures.

In reflecting upon the situation, Wolfe believes that staying with the boat and not panicking may have saved his life and his

partner's. "We were holding onto the trolling motor, and I knew that in those waves we wouldn't be able to do that much longer. So we worked our way to the back of the boat and I straddled the motor shaft while keeping my buddy in front of me between the motor and transom."

Wolfe learned several things from the mishap. "My buddy is six feet, five inches tall and weighs nearly 300 pounds," he said, "and his life jacket was not nearly adequate for someone of his size. He also didn't have the straps pulled tight enough, and during the time we were in the water the jacket kept working its way up around his neck and head, almost to the point of coming off."

Wolfe also learned something about his boat-owner's insurance. He had been paying for a special rider that would cover his rods, reels, and tackle boxes should he ever lose them. But he came to find out that the policy did not cover those items "...thrown, dropped, or propelled overboard..." only theft. So, unfortunately, he was out of luck with his lost tackle. The policy did, however, cover the damage to the boat and motor.

But all is not negative when it comes to small boats on big waters. At times, they have many advantages over larger craft. For example, small boats are usually less expensive to buy, run, maintain, and store than their bigger brothers, and in addition, they can be more readily trailered. If, for instance, a hot bite suddenly occurs many miles down the lake, with a small boat it's a simple matter to merely hook up the

trailer and go. This mobility also allows the opportunity of fishing multiple Great Lakes per season and even inland lakes if desired. And small boats have advantages on the water, too. Anglers can safely get closer to fish-producing reefs and shorelines, control drift, and precision troll much better from a small boat.

The main disadvantage of a smaller craft, of course, is the danger of getting too far from shore and being caught in open water by wind, waves, or lightning. Lake Erie is serious water and at times very unforgiving, especially during cold-water seasons. Using common sense and being prepared are the best ways to make sure that you always return to the launch ramp when fishing from a small boat.

The number one rule for all small boat anglers should be: **wear a Personal Flotation Device (PFD)**. It doesn't matter if you can swim or not. If you are knocked unconscious as you go overboard or are otherwise injured, your Olympic swimming abilities will do you little good.

Another important preparation strategy is to have an alternate source of power for getting back to shore if your main engine should fail. Small "kicker" or electric trolling motors can do double-duty here as cheap insurance. It may take awhile to get back from several miles offshore in this way, but at least it beats the alternative.

But should you not be able to get off the water for some reason, having a way to signal for help is imperative. Most small boats are not equipped with marine radios.

However, with the proliferation of cell phones today, don't leave yours in the car if you have one. There are even inexpensive cell phones on the market now that allow you to make only out-going calls. Again, cheap insurance. Lastly, signal flares and a distress flag should be on board, as well as all the other required safety equipment. And just as a reminder, don't forget to top off all your boat's fuel tanks before leaving shore.

Someone who has safely fished Lake Erie's Central Basin from a small boat for more than 40 years is Alex Koroknay of Mansfield, Ohio. Alex docks his boat at Cranberry Creek Marina just a few miles east of the Huron River, where it is a short run to the productive Ruggles Reef area.

"I first started fishing there for yellow perch," said Alex, "and then in the 1970s the walleyes began showing up. I used a 14-foot aluminum boat for years and wore out half a dozen motors trolling. But two years ago I bought a 17½-foot Lyman to be able to get out to deeper water more safely, because that's where the walleye seem to have moved."

Alex attributes this walleye shift from shallower to deeper water to two phenomena: natural fish cycles and the clearing of Lake Erie waters by zebra mussels. "It seems to cycle like the weather," he said. "For example, there may be a period of four or five years when you can catch walleyes close to shore. Then, all of a sudden things change and the

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Try this Fish Taco Recipe

Serves 4-6

2-3 lbs of fish fillets
vegetable oil
1 cup of all purpose flour
1/2 tablespoon of salt
1/4 tablespoon of pepper
1/4 tablespoon of garlic powder
1 package of store bought tortillas
your favorite store bought Spanish Rice
large can of ranch style beans
1 bottle of Lawry's Mesquite marinade
2-3 average sized tomatoes
grated cheddar or jack cheese
1 jar of your favorite salsa

Wash and pat dry the fillets. Place fillets in large bowl of Lawry's Mesquite marinade for at least 2 hours prior to cooking (overnight is best). Refrigerate until ready to cook (be sure to flip the fillets several times during marination to ensure even saturation). Prepare bowls of your toppings - diced tomatoes, grated cheddar or jack cheese, salsa. Sour cream-black olives-and chopped lettuce are optional. Heat 1/4 inch of vegetable oil in frying pan. Mix flour, salt, pepper, garlic powder on a paper towel. Using this mixture coat fish fillet on both sides, then shake off excess flour. Place into deep frier and cook until the fillets begin to rise. Remove from frier and drain on paper towel. While fish is frying, heat tortillas according to package directions. Serve on counter or buffet style(paper plates and bibs are good). Each diner layers fish and condiments into warm buttered tortillas—rolling and folding tortillas envelope style. Serve with Spanish Rice, made earlier from a packaged mix and open a can of Ranch Style Beans heat in the microwave.

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walleyes don't seem to come into the shallow water like they used to. In the fall—September and October—we used to get big fish right off shore, in anywhere from 15 to 25 or 30 feet of water. Lately, we've had to go deeper to get fish."

But deep or shallow, Alex Koroknay will no doubt be chasing walleyes, perch, smallmouth bass, and even an occasional steelhead as long as he is able. "maybe it's the little boy in me, but as old as I am I still get enthused about fishing. I'm 79 years old and I've fished Lake Erie for 45 years, but I still look forward to every fishing season."

And Alex has been able to pass along his love of fishing and the outdoors to his three sons. His youngest son, Tom, has even built a full-time business around the water, restoring and repairing Lyman boats, the classic wooden craft of Lake Erie.

So when it comes to small boats and big waters, how small is too small? Conventional wisdom says that a deep, V-hulled 14-footer is the absolute minimum when it comes to Lake Erie fishing, and then these boats are only safe close to shore when the weather is clear and calm. Deep-sided 16-, 17-, and 18-footers, with as much freeboard as possible, are even better choices if you are considering fishing from a relatively small boat.

But whether you choose to fish from a small boat or large, common sense, being prepared for

emergencies, and keeping a sharp eye on the weather will keep your fishing trips safe and enjoyable. And like Alex Koroknay, no matter what your age, you'll continue looking forward to every upcoming fishing season.

Fish Ohio's Lake Erie Artificial Reefs!

Lorain

Polish Fisherman's Club Reef

41 28 .076 N

82 12 .758 W

The Mountain Reef

41 28 .150 N

82 12 .750 W

Lakewood

Cuyahoga County Commissioners Reef

41 30 .175 N

81 47 .266 W

1984 Experimental Reef Site "A"

41 30 .271 N

81 47 .533 W

1984 Experimental Reef Site "B"

41 30 .256 N

81 47 .041 W

Cleveland Stadium Artificial Reefs

Edgewater

Cleveland Stadium Reef West #1

(north)

41 30 .148 N

81 45 .575 W

Cleveland Stadium Reef West #2

(south)

41 29 .970 N

81 45 .416 W

Euclid

Cleveland Stadium Reef East

(Euclid)

41 35 .933 N

81 33 .804 W