

# Bait & Search for Fall Walleyes

by  
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In fall, walleyes can be anywhere—say, six inches under the surface in 80 feet of water or tight to bottom in 10 feet. Sound challenging? It can be, unless you know how walleyes drift off of structure and suspend in the vicinity of bait. Finding them is a looking game with quality electronics; catching them is a straining game with planer boards, spinners and crank baits. The pattern holds true wherever you are, from Great Lakes to inland waters, and wherever walleyes are chasing baitfish. Which, it turns out, is everywhere.

## The Baiting Game

The bait connection betrays the walleye's presence. In fall, when walleyes ramp up their feeding before winter, the fish will never be far from food. On the Great

Lakes, you might see enormous pods of one- to three-inch gizzard shad skittering on the surface or

never far behind.

How do you find them? Start

looking for structure on a map and then with electronics. Points, humps and weed edges are all fair game. But when you look with a quality locator that pinpoints fish and bait, such as Lowrance's X-16, the key is to veer away from the structure and look over open water. If you've seen fish on structure at a certain level—15 feet, for instance—you can bet they'll be at that same depth over open water, from hundreds of yards to half a mile away from the structure. Walleyes will do this day and night. The most important thing to remember is not to glue yourself to structure—the walleyes will

wander away from it if bait is present.



**Fall walleye fishing is all about searching and finding the correct bait to use. Big fish are often the result.**

as big blobs on a locator. Shiners and the like herd up as well on inland waters, and predators are

## Search Mode

The best way to enter into search mode is to start trolling. This way you can cover water and zigzag to find fish. It would be far too time-consuming to jig or live-bait rig. Trolling, on the other hand, spreads lines to the sides of the boat and behind it—the better to cover a swath of water at different depths.

I always try to maximize my efforts with the most rods possible and the greatest coverage. Enter planer boards, the handy devices that veer lines away from the boat. With them, you can run more rods without tangling and pull lures through more territory. My new favorites for boards are from Church Tackle, which now makes smaller, more manageable models that still track well away from the boat. The TX-6, which is about the size of a deck of cards, is great for pulling crank baits or spinners with snap weights of up to one ounce. Anything heavier will sink the board. Even small fish or a piece of weed will sink it, which is a big help when you're trying to keep your lures clean. A large fish will sink the little board like a bobber—something I love to see. With the TX-12, which is twice the size of the TX-6, you can get away with weight to two ounces, which you might need for deep spinnering.

Which brings us to my two favorite offerings in fall. While few people fish spinners after summertime, the reliable crawler harness keeps working through October and even into November. You can boost up a size or two with your spinners in fall to tempt

more big fish. If, for instance, you were using No. 2 blades in summer, you now might want to try Nos. 4 and 5. The heavier thrum is often just what the walleyes want when they're starting to feed with gusto before winter. And since baitfish, more than bugs, are the main course of fall walleyes, try Northland's holographic blades. They come in silver shiner, gold shiner, golden perch and more colors to mimic baitfish.

By November, though, I normally start switching to crankbaits. You can move them faster and cover more water (2.0 or 2.3 mph for cranks vs. 1.1 mph for crawlers), and since the fish are so keyed on baitfish, cranks will often do the job even better. Experiment with cranks and crawlers to find out. In the cool waters of fall, try running cranks and crawlers at the same relatively slow speeds—say 1.2-1.4 mph. For the lures themselves, it's hard to beat Rapala Husky Jerks (in shallow and deep-running versions), Tail Dancers and Shad Raps. Again, match the colors to the prevalent baitfish and conditions—silvers around shiners and shad, brighter fluorescents in darker or stained water. You can trick out your lures with additional color with holoform tap from WTP, formerly known as Witchcraft. Add a strip of silver or glow to the lure's sides, something that's particularly effective at night.

If the structure is particularly steep or difficult to follow, you might want to try leadcore. I like it if I'm on a break that twists and turns and I'd have too much line out with boards. Even in 45 feet of water, you can often get down to

the fish zone with 75 to 85 feet of line out.

For rods, I use two models by Berkley in the Lightning Rod Signature Series. One is the 7-foot, 10-inch offering. It has a heavier tip that will handle heavier snap weights. If, however, I'm using lighter weights or crankbaits, I switch to the 8-foot, 6-inch model, which has a more limber tip that tends not to tear out hooks. Still, you can get away with weights up to four ounces (say, if you're bottom bouncing next summer) or heavy-pulling cranks.

More than anything, targeting fall walleyes is a matter of perspective. While it's easy and familiar to stay close to structure, that's not always where the fish are. Open your mind to the possibility of roamers and suspenders, and then go looking for them. They could be half a mile away from your favorite reef or hump. But you'll never know unless you try it.