



You don't need to venture far from shore (an issue for fishermen with smaller boats) to take advantage of Lake Erie's tremendous smallmouth fishery.

most fertile of all the Great Lakes. Here smallmouth bass enjoy a long growing season, abundant baitfish and crayfish, and ample hard-bottom areas where they spawn and feed.

ZEBRA MUSSEL INFLUENCE

When zebra mussels invaded Lake Erie from overseas in the latter 1980s, they proliferated at an extraordinary rate. These tiny shellfish now cover virtually all the hard rock and gravel bottoms that Lake Erie's smallmouths call home.

Each mussel filters over a liter of water per day as it feeds, removing small particles, including plankton, the base of the food chain. The result has been a dramatic increase in Lake Erie's water clarity, which is a primary reason for the sudden

surge in the smallmouth population.

Fisheries biologists feared that zebra mussels would undermine the smallmouth fishery by reducing nutrients and spoiling spawning areas. As it turns out, smallmouths spawn nicely on top of the zebras. So much so that smallmouths are establishing strong populations in areas where they previously existed in small numbers. The extensive reef system to the west of Ohio's Catawba Island, for example, has long been a key spawning area for walleyes in the spring. Now that zebra mussels cover these structures, smallmouth bass are caught here in much greater numbers.

The increased water clarity caused by zebra mussels also has improved the smallmouth's feeding efficiency. The bass can see and assault baitfish and other forage

from greater distances than in the past, hence the increase in their size.

OTHER EXOTICS

Other exotic species in Lake Erie have caused concern regarding their impact on native fish. One invader is the round goby from the Black Sea, which looks a lot like a sculpin, a native Lake Erie species. Gobies feed primarily on zebra mussels and also compete with sculpins, darters and other bottom-dwelling fish for snails and aquatic insects.

Gobies have intruded upon the rocky bottom structures that smallmouth bass call home. Though the overall impact of this nuisance species is negative, smallmouths find the plump, soft-finned goby to be an easy meal. "Gobies cause a decline in sculpin populations and an increase in smallmouth bass populations," says Roger Thoma, an Environmental



The round goby, although a nuisance species, has been a factor in smallmouth bass proliferation in Lake Erie.

Specialist with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.

Zebra mussels, gobies and other exotics were introduced by ocean going ships that dumped ballast water from overseas into the Great Lakes. In an effort to prevent other nuisance species from entering the Great Lakes, ships traveling the St. Lawrence Seaway from foreign ports now must exchange ballast water before passing through the first U.S. lock.

THREE BASINS OF LAKE ERIE

Stretching 210 miles northeast from Toledo, Ohio, to Buffalo, New York—with a breadth of 57 miles—Lake Erie contains three distinctly different basins. It is divided along its length by the Canadian boundary line. Fabulous smallmouth fishing exists in Canadian and U.S. waters.

WESTERN BASIN

Lake Erie's shallow western basin contains the most extensive smallmouth habitat and receives the heaviest fishing pressure for this species. The western basin averages 24 feet deep and lies west of an imaginary line extending north across Lake Erie from Cedar Point, Ohio, to Pelee Point, Ontario. This portion of the lake contains the Ohio islands of South Bass, Middle Bass, North Bass and Kelley's, as well as Ontario's Pelee Island. The hard bottoms around these islands feature countless points, humps, flats and drop-offs, which are prime smallmouth structures.

Smaller islands and many offshore reefs in the western basin also furnish excellent fishing, as do the near shore areas around Catawba Island (actually a peninsula) and east to Sandusky Bay. Sandusky Bay and the protected marinas on Catawba Island produce good smallmouth fishing in the spring, but bass generally run bigger on the main lake.

In the Michigan waters of Erie, limited smallmouth habitat exists compared to the rest of the lake. But Ontario waters, from the mouth of the Detroit River east to Pelee Point, deliver exceptional bass fishing.

CENTRAL BASIN

The central basin stretches from Cedar Point, Ohio, to Erie, Pennsylvania. In recent years, fishing pressure from Huron to Avon Point has increased substantially. However, the stretch from Avon Point to Erie, Pennsylvania, sees relatively few smallmouth anglers, with the exception of Pennsylvania's Presque Isle Bay. The bottom drops off more sharply in the central basin, with depths to 30 feet generally within 1 to 3 miles of shore and a maximum depth of more than 80 feet. Hard bottom areas near shore comprise expansive smallmouth habitat.

Key smallmouth waters in the central basin include near shore bottom structures from Huron to Avon Point, which lies west of Cleveland. Smallmouths are taken along the Cleveland lakefront, primarily off man-made break walls and Cleveland's artificial reefs, but the mud and sand bottom

in this area is generally not conducive to smallmouth bass.

East of Cleveland, rocky smallmouth habitat again shows up at Fairport Harbor. The best fishing takes place from the break walls in front of the harbor west to Mentor Harbor. Many productive near shore spots all along the southern shoreline of Lake Erie are related to the mouths of tributaries.

"Creeks and rivers bring fertile water into the lake," says Ohioan Jeff Snyder, a career bass angler who probably has more firsthand experience fishing for smallmouth bass throughout Lake Erie than anyone alive. "More fertility means more food, more food means more shad, more shad means more smallmouth bass."

Other prime smallmouth locations along the northeast Ohio coastline include near shore areas off Ashtabula and Conneaut.

"It's one of the best big fish areas on the lake," says Snyder of Conneaut. "There's a tremendous amount of rocks and drops out there. I do especially well along a 5-mile stretch just west of Conneaut."

Heading east from Conneaut into Pennsylvania waters, you are likely to catch bass along near shore areas all the way to Presque Isle. Hard bottom structures just west of Presque Isle are especially good.

Presque Isle Bay, at Erie, Pennsylvania, is protected by Presque Isle peninsula. Many smallmouths are taken from weed beds in the bay in

spring and early summer, but larger bass are generally taken out on the main lake.

The Canadian side of the central basin offers comparatively few smallmouth fishing opportunities. "That stretch," says fisheries ecology supervisor Phil Ryan of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, "doesn't have the right bottom composition. It's primarily sand and drops off sharply."

EASTERN BASIN

East of Presque Isle lies the eastern basin, which continues to Buffalo, New York, and holds the deepest, clearest water in Lake Erie. It is bordered by cliffs, features deeper water closer to shore and plunges to a depth of 210 feet. The Pennsylvania waters east of Presque Isle see relatively few bass anglers despite excellent fishing, especially in front of Sixteen mile Creek and Twenty mile Creek.

Moving east along Erie's coast, near shore smallmouth structures—rocky flats, humps and points—become more prominent and expansive. Here smallmouths grow bigger and more abundant.

Superb smallmouth fishing in New York begins at Barcelona. Launch here and you'll find bass on near shore bottom structures to the east and west. Farther east lays Van Buren Point, which drops, into an extensive stretch of smallmouth habitat that reaches far into the lake.

Next comes Dunkirk, which gives up good bass in its bay during the

spring and along near shore structures to the east and west. The next hot smallmouth water is found outside Evangola State Park, particularly the stretch from Evangola east to Silver Creek.

Farther up the coast lies Sturgeon Point, an especially popular fishing area. Put in here and fish west past Muddy Creek. The water from Sturgeon Point to Buffalo is home to Jim Hanley, a local bass pro, TV host, bass guide and fishing promoter for Erie County and Buffalo.

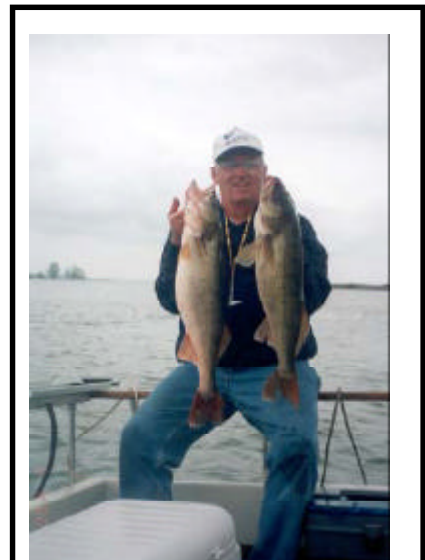
Known as the "Dean of Smallmouth," Hanley has witnessed Erie's smallmouth bass explosion first hand.

"The smallmouth fishing," says Hanley, "has always been good. But with the dramatic increase in water clarity, it has gone from being a very good fishery to where, now, it's just beyond belief."

Some of the better smallmouth fishing east of Sturgeon Point includes a series of humps and shoals in front of Eighteen mile Creek, Seneca Shoal (an offshore structure out from Buffalo) and near shore bottom structures in the very southeast corner of the lake.

Rocky bottom structures and points along the Ontario shoreline of the eastern basin, from Buffalo west to Long Point, also support legions of bass. The Inner Bay of Long Point provides an important smallmouth spawning area.

Note: This article is a condensed version of the first chapter in "Lake Erie Smallmouth," a new book by Mark Hicks. The book tells where and how to catch smallmouth bass throughout Lake Erie and includes 41 detailed fishing maps. Send \$14.95, plus \$3.50 shipping to Big River Press, P.O. Box 130, Millfield, OH 45761. (Ohio residents add \$0.93 tax.) For credit card orders call: 1-800-447-8238.



A pair of trophies from the "Braggin' Board".

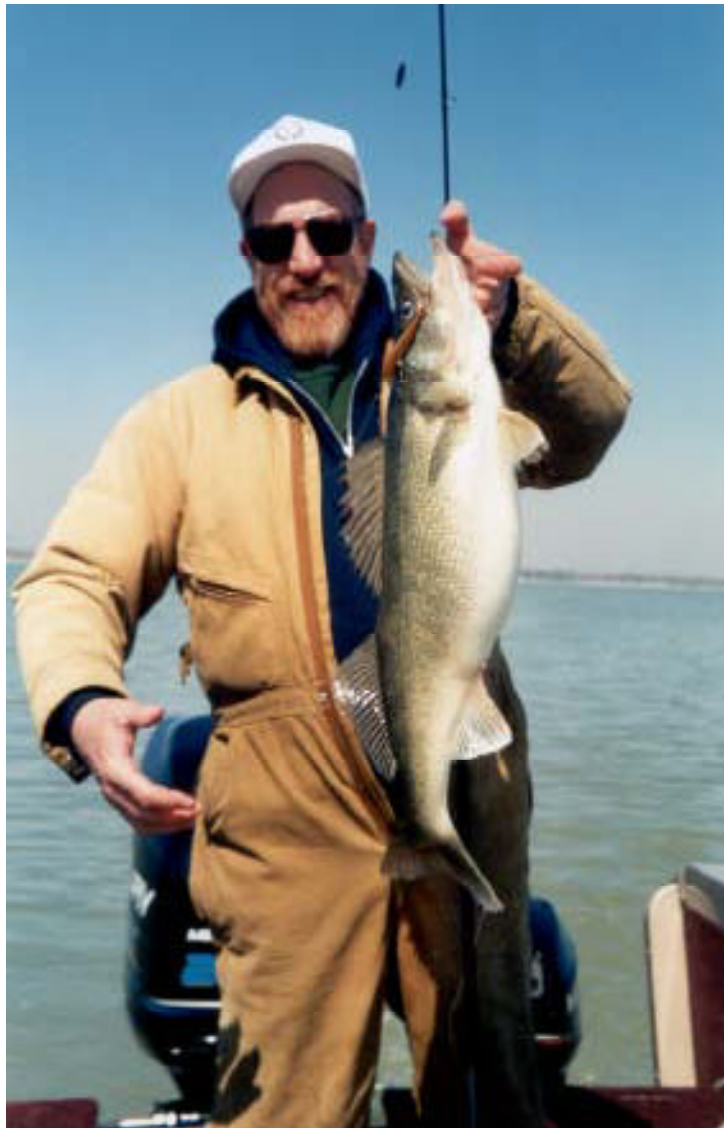
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Trolling for Muddy Water Walleyes

A Precise presentation and plenty of patience both are required to catch walleyes with mud in their eyes

by
Michael Veine

Some of the toughest walleye fishing involves pulling those fish from muddy, low visibility water. To many, it seems like walleyes tend to shut down when the water dirties up; the truth is that walleyes will still actively feed, but they really have a tough time catching their dinner. Walleyes are primarily sight feeders, so poor water clarity forces them to rely heavily on their senses of smell and hearing to find food. Under crummy conditions, walleyes need to hunt for food longer in order to satisfy their hunger. One thing's for sure: When walleyes are forced to feed in low visibility water they are often very aggressive biters. The trick is to put the lure right in front of the snapping jaws of old marble-eyes' and keep it there



It's often possible to catch dandy walleyes by overcoming the muddy water. Photo taken by the author.

long enough for them to gulp the bait down.

Last April, Lake Erie was one tough customer when periodic storms with gale force, east winds turned much of the Western Basin into a big bowl of mud-soup. The muddy water persisted well into May creating the lowest early spring catch rate in modern years. Even when the weather permitted anglers to hit the water, typical fishing success was still dismal. Only those anglers that applied some specialized, refined techniques managed to eke out decent catches of walleyes.

One day during mid-April, my partner and I fished Erie with only one inch of water visibility. Baits would literally disappear just under the surface of the water. My



In-line planer boards are important ingredients to any muddy-water trolling tactic. Photo taken by the author.

normal fishing technique for Lake Erie is to first locate the fish using my electronics. I often search for hours before even wetting a line. While searching on that day, we managed to find some slightly clearer water several miles out from Breast Bay, but there were no fish inhabiting the cooler water in that area. However, we did mark large schools of bait-fish and large hook shaped icons close to shore and right in the middle of the slop. According to my Lawrance X85, the bait-fish were near the surface and the predatory walleyes were just below them perhaps five or six feet down. The overcast skies and dingy water conditions prompted us to try a modified night-fishing technique. We deployed dark colored, minnow imitating body baits that contrasted with the light brown hue of the water. Minnow imitating body baits like Black/silver and Black/gold Storm Jr. Thundersticks are

proven baits under these conditions; they closely resembled the Real McCoy; an important factor considering that the walleyes would get a close, first look at the baits.

Thundersticks also have rattles that give out increased fish attracting vibrations.

The body baits were set back varying distances from 40' to 100' behind the boards. 1/4-oz. rubber-core sinkers were installed one rod length in front of the baits to both take them deeper and to catch debris to prevent the lures from becoming fowled. The varied set-backs would present the baits at differing levels allowing us to determine a productive running depth. Mr. Walleye, in-line planer boards were then used to take the trolled offerings away from the fish spooking presence of the boat. The boards would also allow us to sift the water with a wide trolling spread. Since we had marked the fish close to the surface and there was little boat traffic, we deployed the boards quite a distance out from the boat for the ultimate in stealth. During poor water visibil-



Even though the water visibility was only inches, the author still managed to bring in some awesome catches last spring. Photo taken by the author.