

perch, catfish and white bass.

It was the walleye numbers, though, that suffered the most during that period. But, anglers could still catch them in the shallows. The water was turbid. Walleyes could go as high in the water column as they pleased. Weight-forward spinners like the Arbogast Tackle Co.'s Bunyon 66 dressed with nightcrawlers were the favored technique. The legendary Erie Dearie hit the market in the early 70s. Casting them to the tops of reefs or fan-casting them while drifting provided an effective tool to efficiently cover the water column from top to bottom, side to side with flash, vibration and live bait.

Walleye prospects improved dramatically with the passage of the Clean Water Act in the 1970s. Commercial fishing was curbed in the Canadian portion of Erie and banned in the part that laid within the United States. "We started seeing improvements almost immediately," Fofrich said.

The walleye rebound was well underway by later that decade. Fofrich recalls a day when he took Gary Roach fishing. Together they caught more than 60 walleyes in an hour, the smallest was 23 inches. He remembers another day when he guided a party to 80 walleyes in one drifting pass.

Still, there was much to learn. Impressed with what he had seen at Erie, Roach returned one April to discover the guides had not started fishing yet. The locals all thought the fish only spawned in feeder rivers. The banks were

lined with shore fishermen, and guides didn't want to take part in the mayhem. They chose to wait until later when walleyes began showing up at known haunts on the main lake. But Roach convinced Fofrich to venture out into the western basin. He cast a Fuzz-E-Grub dressed with a minnow to the top of a reef and wham, a walleye. Springtime on Lake Erie has never been the same.

Lake Erie remained a shallow fishery for years. The algae-stained water allowed game fish to inhabit the upper regions of the lake on structure from 6 to 18 feet deep. Anglers didn't have the knowledge of fish behavior or the equipment, such as advanced sonars, to explore the depths. Indeed, there was little need most days. "We were extremely effective in the shallows - extremely, extremely effective," Fofrich said.

Enter zebra mussels. Once introduced from the ballast of merchant ships, the invaders from across the Atlantic Ocean multiplied by the millions, each one filtering algae from a liter of water each day. Erie's fishery evolved from shallow to deep much of the time. Walleyes could still be found on the reefs during spawn. But, it soon became clear to the fishermen that new tactics had to be found in order to reach fish that often inhabited depths of 25 to 40 feet.

Anglers exchanged the one-quarter, three-eighths and one-half ounce weight-forward spinners they had used for five-eighths, three-quarters, 1 ounce and an ounce-and-a-half. But even then,

walleyes that once crunched the standard weight-forward spinners seemed to have become finicky biters. They merely nibbled at the 'crawlers. When Fofrich felt a tap, he would tip the rod toward a fish to feed the lure to it. But more than half the time, the fish was not there when he set the hook.

It was about that time the Professional Walleye Trail came to Lake Erie to host its season opener. For several years in a row, the PWT headquartered their operations at South Bass Island. Locals learned from the pros, especially about trolling tactics like planer boards which moved baits away from boat noise to avoid spooking fish. They saw innovations like bottom bouncers that resembled hand-lining "trolling-sinker" set-ups (3 ounce weights on three-way rigs). The old timers had hand-lined as far back as when Elvis was king.

Fofrich experimented with new tackle ideas and presentations himself. He reasoned the weight-forward design would still work but that it needed refinements to catch spooky fish. He came up with the notion to put a double-hook nightcrawler harness on an 18-inch leader on the rear of a weight-forward head. The weight-forward's spinner blade, which would make the rig ride upward if left on the head, was moved back to the harness. "We started smoking them immediately" he said.

Versatility was the Flip'N Harness' strong point. The model that weighed five-eighths of an ounce can be cast like weight-forward spinners. The one-and-a-half-

ounce Flip’N Harness can be drifted and dragged on the bottom with a dead stick. Fofrich likes to use light-action rods. He drops the Flip’N Harness down to the bottom before letting out enough line to let the line drift back to keep a 45-degree angle with the surface. He puts clients on the bow and stern casting Flip’N Harnesses as they watch the dead sticks for strikes. “It’s a super way to fish,” he said. “My boat looks like a porcupine.” The Flip’N Harness can also be trolled behind planer boards. He lets out different lengths of line to cover a wide range of depth. Average speed is about 2 mph.

So, how is Lake Erie today? “Even when Erie is tough, it’s still the Walleye Capital of the world,” Fofrich said. Call him at 419-729-2181 if you have any doubts.

**Looking to Charter  
On Lake Erie?**

See the Captains listed in our Charter Directories on page 40 in this issue or at

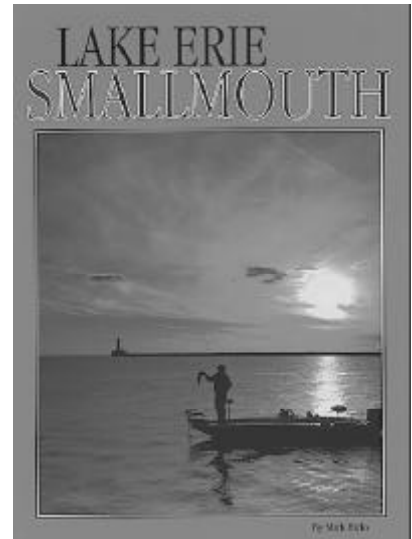
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# Lake Erie and the Year 2000

*A Captain's Perspective on Expectations for the Coming Year*

by  
**Captain Robert Collins**

**W**hat can we as Ohio anglers expect the walleye fishing on Lake Erie to be this year? Well, it all depends who you talk to. Walleye are the preferred species almost all anglers who fish Lake Erie seek. As a result, walleye fishing becomes a barometer of the health and productivity of Lake Erie. Let us for a moment take a look at the entire Lake Erie area and its three basins. We must realize that Lake Erie touches the shores of the following states: New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and the Canadian province of Ontario.

Each year in early spring the input of data from these four states and Ontario determines the quotas for sport and commercial fishing. Since commercial fishermen mostly do walleye fishing in Canadian waters, sport anglers who fish the U.S. waters almost always challenge those spring quotas. Considering that, many times commercial data reveals much about the catchable numbers of walleye that exist in Lake Erie. Sport anglers numbers are gathered by census takers and trawling surveys conducted by states. Determining quotas on the yearly basis helps wildlife managers make their quota decisions close to the start of the actual fishing season.

Since most of the U.S. waters lie within the borders of the state of Ohio and most of the sport anglers

walleye fishing is done in Ohio waters, division of wildlife estimates of catchable walleye play a major role. Sport anglers watch and wait for these quota numbers to come out yearly.

No matter what the quotas are determined to be or what the catchable amount of walleye are estimated to be, the sport anglers measure their success by how many walleye they were able to catch. Anglers must realize that nets, in particular gill nets, are fished 24 hours a day and catch fish as long as they are in the water. Hook and line sport anglers however catch fish only when they are biting. Having said all that let's move on to what we as sport anglers can expect the fishing in the year 2000 to be on Lake Erie.

Let's put one thing to rest very quickly: Lake Erie is still the recognized "Walleye Capital of the World." No other body of water offers the quality or quantity of walleye fishing to the sport anglers. Even though many times those of us that fish Lake Erie have experienced what we considered to be lean years, the walleye fishing is better than any other place in America.

Consider that the success of walleye fishing on Lake Erie will be determined by many factors. The following forecast will be determined to be a fair and best possible predic-

tion of what can be expected this year.

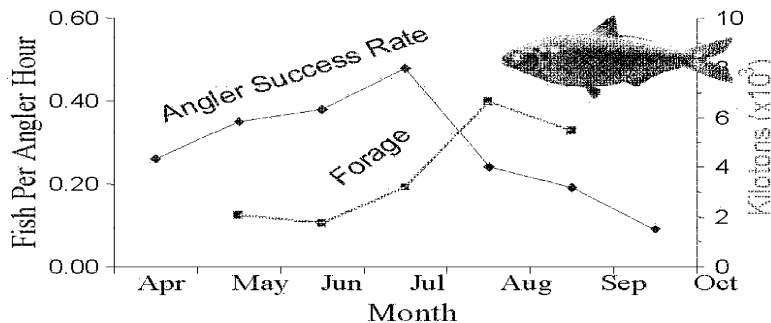
The end of 1999 produced a new state of Ohio walleye record. Tom Haberman of Brunswick, Ohio landed a 16.19-pound walleye while perch fishing on Lake Erie. It surpassed the old Ohio walleye record of 15.95 pounds. The new record was the talk of Ohio walleye anglers when it was caught November 23, 1999, off Cleveland, Ohio shores. Tom was fishing with friends for yellow perch with 6-pound test line when he caught the walleye. In addition a total of 9 new Ohio state record fish were certified this year across the state.

In-Fisherman Magazine recently published a special issue "Angling Adventures 2000." The popular fishing publication named Lake Erie a top 10 angling destination for walleyes, smallmouth bass, and steelhead trout. More PWT records have been set on Lake Erie than any other of their contest sites. And PWT will return to Erie in April this year (2000).

Chief Mike Budzik stated, "Good walleye spawning success throughout the 1990s is sustaining a healthy population of these popular sport fish, which have long drawn anglers from across the country."

At a recent meeting (12-10-99) of

# Every year...



The chart, courtesy of the Ohio Division of Wildlife, demonstrates clearly that when forage fish are abundant angler success rates go down. Many other factors determine angler success: weather, water depths, water clarity and much more.

the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association, Roger Knight, Lake Erie fish biologist, gave a presentation regarding expected year 2000 walleye fishing.

Here is what Rodger had to say. "I'm glad that the presentation was helpful to LECBA and that you and Ohio anglers are trying to become better informed about Lake Erie issues. As you are learning, this is a very dynamic complex system and we'll never have all of the answers, but we are certainly trying. Understanding the challenges we face as fisheries managers in developing and improving predictive forecasting ability is important to the future of your charter businesses and sport anglers. We'll do our best to keep you informed."

He continued: "Gobies are included in the forage data beginning fall 1996 and, while they have increased every year since then, they still made up less than 10% of the peak monthly prey biomass estimate in 1999. Shad

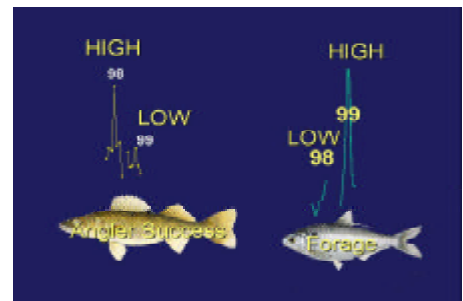
were by far the dominant species."

The following are some of the Ohio Division of Wildlife predictions:

- 1.) Walleye anglers should have a better year than 1999 since last year had an exceptionally large bait fish spawn.
- 2.) Low water levels experienced in 1999, produced by a very dry winter, are expected to rise to normal levels. In 1998 the spawn was poor but 1999 young of the year trawl samples are expected to show a good spawn season. Which is good news for the future.
- 3.) Many young 1 & 2 year old walleye never left the Western or Central basins in 1999 and good numbers of walleye were available in the Central basin into September of 1999.
- 4.) Gobies are becoming a baitfish that all species of game fish are eating. Gobies are being found in deeper waters than in previous years and the

yellow perch are eating them when they are found away from the shoreline. It is expected that the more walleye, smallmouth bass and perch eat them (gobies) the more their availability will go down.

5.) A new indicator model was developed in 1999 using the available bait fish vs. angler success input (See Chart Below). The new indicator points to a good available baitfish spawn, equals a tough walleye fishing indicator. And poor baitfish spawn equals a good walleye angler success. Gobies are considered in this model and yellow perch, walleye and smallmouth are now eating this invader species.



Anglers may want to consider using baits that will imitate the colors of the goby. If jigging in spring or trolling the basins in the summer, make sure to add to the popular silver, gold and chartreuse colors some smoke, brown and sparkle motor oil colors.

Anglers appreciate (usually) the fact that fisheries managers are keeping track of all the data input from various sources but, the final question still remains, "How is walleye fishing going to be this year?"

The answer based on all the available sources is... very good!