

Crankbait Trolling on Erie

Crankbaits and Erie Walleyes Go Together Like Thunder & Lightning

by
Michael Veine

It was March, but the balmy weather made it seem unseasonably spring-like. After the customary dockside greetings with my charter customers, the inevitable question was asked. "How's

taking 30-40 walleyes per trip and the majority of those fish were trophy class adults. Then I really stuck my neck out by predicting the same kind of action on their trip. After all, the weather had been fair

After a short run, I began setting lines right along the shoreline in just 10 feet of water. The hot lures were Jr. Thundersticks in dark colors. "Crankbaits," one of my customers expressed in surprise. "I thought most captains used

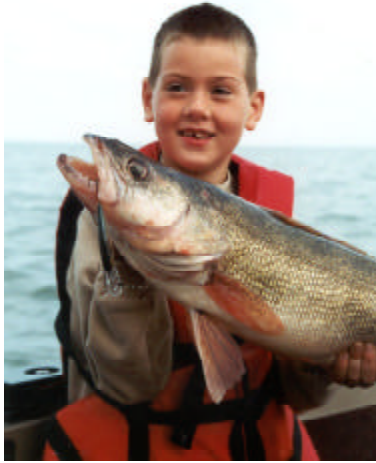


The author took this nice walleye during mid-June on a fire-tiger Shad Rap. Photo taken by Donna Veine.

the fishing been?" With an ear-to-ear grin rapidly spreading across my face I informed them that over the past several days we had been

for 10 days in a row and the water was crystal clear. Perfect pre-spawn walleye conditions.

minnows or crawlers at this time of the year?" He questioned. I explained that the warming shallows were teeming with shad and gobbies and the walleyes were



Deep diving crankbaits are very effective on all sizes of walleyes. Photo taken by the author.

actively feeding on baitfish in preparation for the riggers of spawning. The Thundersticks did a pretty good job of matching the hatch.

After setting a nifty spread of six lures trailing behind Mr. Walleye inline planer boards, the three of us didn't have to wait long before one of the boards began falling out of formation indicating a strike. I prefer letting the fish pull the board all the way back before starting the retrieve. This lets the fish clear the remaining lines and also maintains maximum tension during the fight resulting in a high bite to catch rate. We all watched in amazement as the board just kept going and going back until it was all the way back directly behind the boat.

The angler slowly reeled in line. However, it took over five minutes just to retrieve the board to my waiting hands so I could detach it. With the somewhat heavy board removed, you'd think the fight would have gotten easier. Wrong! Drag still kept slipping and the battle wore on for another five minutes. Finally, I was able to slide the net under a 10-pounder with flared gills and the kind of rotund belly that a beer drinking, pizza eater would be proud of. We went on to catch and mostly release dozens of big walleyes that day and all on crankbaits.

It's a fact that some conditions dictate the use of crawlers, minnows, spoons and other alternative lures. None-the-less crankbait trolling is by far my most productive walleye fishing tactic on Lake Erie day in and day out. When the walleyes are cruising in the shallows or when they are suspended over deeper water, crankbaits are typically deadly medicine. They are even effective when the fish are scraping their bellies on the bottom.

Crankbaits attract walleyes mainly by imitating forage. Sometimes it takes some real imagination, but

most effective crankbaits on the market look somewhat like minnows, shad, gobbies, crayfish or other walleye delicacies. On the other hand, some hot crankbaits on Erie don't look even remotely like any natural walleye forage that I've ever seen before. These cranks solicit reactionary strikes, sometimes the only way to open a walleye's jaws on some days.

Cold Water

When the water temperature holds below 48 degrees, crankbaits with a longer profile and a stubby diving lip typically get the most bites. Often called stickbaits or body baits, these cranks are perfect for the slow trolling presentation necessary to entice walleyes in frigid waters. Lures like Storm Thundersticks, Normark Original Floating Rapalas, Husky Jerks and



During the early spring and then again during the fall, big walleyes are susceptible to slow trolling tactics using crankbaits. Photo taken by the author.

Countdowns along with Reef Runner's Lil' Ripper and Rip Stick all have their days. Other good stickbaits include the Bomber Long-A, Smithwick Rattlin' Rouges, Excalibur Minnows, Mystic Minnows, Cotton Cordell Red Fins and Cabala's Real Image Floating Minnows. In fact, there are so many good quality, minnow imitating stickbaits on the market these days that it boggles the mind. During cold water conditions and especially when the water clarity is poor, dark baits like black/silver and gold seem to produce the best. Clear water colors run the spectrum with dark colors still working well on some days; other days dictate using bright finished baits for best success.

A main factor contributing to walleye success with these lures in cold water is trolling speed. I typically start trolling stick baits just after ice at less than .5 miles per hour (mph). At an idle, my 9.9 hp, four-stroke, Mercury trolling motor barely idles down slow enough. If there's a wind, then the deployment of drift socks or the use of an electric motor becomes necessary. On some occasions I simply drift along using my motor as a rudder to keep things moving straight and tangle free. The same slow trolling tactics also work well after the waters cool down during the fall.

Because cold water walleyes often seek out the warmest water they can find, they often suspend high in the water column or move into the shallows, especially during the evening on warmer days. This makes the use of planer boards a must for consistent success. Slow trolling presentations do not lend

themselves well to large, tethered style planer board setups. Instead, inline boards shine and when fished properly, the hookup to catch ratio can be quite high. The key to success is to allow the fish to fully pull the board back before grabbing the rod from its holder. Cold water walleyes and especially the big ones typically just chomp down on lures holding on without ever realizing they're hooked. When the board is fully pulled back, maximum pressure is applied to the business end, so when the walleye finally does perform those stereotypical head-shakes, the hooks are more likely to dig into pay-dirt.

Warming Water

When the water temperature rises above the 48-degree mark, it's often like a light switch has been flipped on. Walleyes typically switch their feeding preferences to faster paced offerings. Usually the more lure action the better. This is when long-lipped, deep diving crankbaits shine with their fast side to side, vibrating action. The list of productive long-lipped, Lake Erie cranks is quite extensive to say the least. My all time favorite crankbait on Erie though is the #7 Normark Shad Rap. I've caught thousands of both trophy and eating sized walleyes on those diminutive Shad Raps and I only use four colors during the entire season. When the water is cold (below 55 degrees) and the conditions are muddy, the shad pattern works wonders. Once the water clears up somewhat I use black/silver during low light periods and chartreuse/silver and fire-tiger during bright sunny days. I've also had considerable success using

Storm Hot'N Tots with the 1/4-ounce size being the most productive. The green herring-bone over chrome is my best Hot'N Tot pattern with purple, perch, naturalistic perch, gold/black and chartreuse/silver all having their days.

Storm Deep Jr. Thundersticks are also some of my most productive Lake Erie crankbaits. Fire-tiger has been my most productive pattern with black/silver-scale coming in a close second. Reef Runners are another productive crankbait and they're gaining popularity every year on the Great Lakes and inland waters. Capt. Rocco Papandrea rates the Reef Runner Lil' Ripper in chartreuse patterns as his most consistent producers. When walleyes are aggressively feeding during the summer, many anglers favor tiny crankbaits like Wiggle-Warts or Wee-Warts. I've also had good luck taking smaller walleyes with the 1/3-ounce Cotton Cordell CC-Shads in bright colors.

Depth Control

Crankbaits are versatile baits that can target walleyes in all levels of the water column. There are four factors that affect how deep a trolled lure will run: Lure design, boat speed, line diameter and the set-back all contribute to running depth. For all my crankbait fishing, I always use 10-lbs. test, monofilament line. This provides a consistent line diameter for precise lure running control. I also use Daiwa Line Counter reels to measure the setback for repeating previously productive programs.

Most savvy charter captains and pro anglers rely on a book titled "Precision Trolling" created by Steve Holt, Tom Erwin and Mark Romanack. These three skilled and noted authors are also seasoned walleye pros. This book provides dive curve data for most of the popular crankbaits on the market today. Using the dive curves, it's a simple matter to hit a specific running depth by simply measuring out the proper setback and then controlling the trolling speed. This valuable book can be purchased by phoning 231-829-3344. The book even comes laminated for long lasting endurance.

Adding weight is a surefire way to achieve deeper running depths with crankbaits. I religiously use rubber core sinkers during most of my crankbait fishing applications. Adding rubber core sinkers makes setting lines faster by shortening the setbacks; an important factor when trying to run lots of lines. A shorter setback also results in less line stretch and a better hookup ratio. You'll also experience fewer tangles using sinkers as they catch debris, preventing lures from fouling. They also help baits to track straighter. Removable weights like Off-Shore Snap Weights or Church Tackle Supper Clips are another great method for taking baits deeper without interfering with lure action or spooking fish.

Fine Tuning

A crankbait is only effective if it runs true. Landing fish is the biggest culprit in knocking baits out of tune. This can easily be cor-

rected by bending the eyelet or the wire connecting link in the opposite direction that the lure is tracking. This process may take some trial and error. I check the tune on my baits every time I set use them by first inspecting their running characteristics alongside the boat before letting them back.

Dull hooks are perhaps the single leading cause of lost fish when crankbait trolling. Walleyes and especially those huge trophies have bony mouths that defy all but the sharpest hooks from taking hold. I hone my hooks to a sticky sharp point using a sharpening stone specifically designed for the task. When a walleye hits a trolled crankbait, the hookset usually occurs when the walleye shakes his head soon after realizing he's been had. Knowing this makes sharp hooks especially important for successful trolling. If you have any questions, veinemr@aol.com is my email address.



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