

Proven Lures & Presentations for Smallmouths

Part 1: Jigs, Tube Jigs, Grubs, Carolina Rigs

by
Mark Hicks

Before Zebra Mussels invaded Lake Erie and drastically increased its water clarity, smallmouth anglers who preferred lures over live bait were practically limited to jigs. In the murky water, which was especially prominent in the western basin, bass relied more on their sense of sound to find food than their eyes. They could more easily locate a darkly colored jig scratching along the bottom than a flashing lure darting overhead.

Now that Erie has become dramatically clearer, its smallmouths see prey farther away. The bass now move greater distances to pounce on a

meal or lure. This opens the door to a gamut of lures that take smallmouth bass from top to

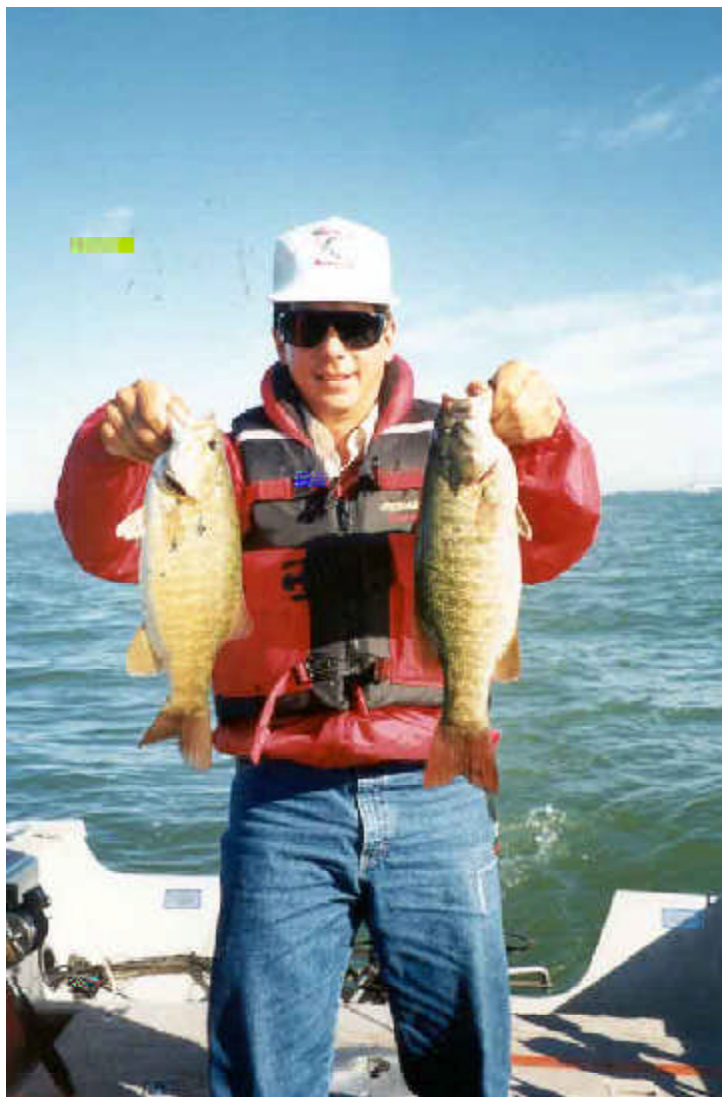
bottom. The key is matching the lure to the season and the conditions.

JIGS

Even though Lake Erie's smallmouths are now susceptible to a variety of lures, jigs still rank No. 1. For decades, the preferred Lake Erie smallmouth lure was a black or gray bucktail jig. Bucktail jigs continue to fare well, but they were nudged out of the top spot by jigs dressed with curly-tailed grubs. When plastic tube jigs found their way to Lake Erie, the response among smallmouth anglers resembled a mob scene at a rock concert. The enthusiasm for this lure has not diminished since.

TUBE JIGS

If you were limited to one lure for Lake Erie smallmouths, it would have to be a tube jig. Tubes take bass of all sizes throughout the season and often in greater numbers than any other lure. During



Lake Erie is now considered one of the top Small-



Tube jigs catch far more smallmouths from Lake Erie than any other lure. The slender jig hides inside the soft plastic bait. Scented and salted tubes work best.

a recent fall B.A.S.S. Federation Divisional tournament held in the western basin, teams of anglers from nine states and the country of Italy crushed every existing record for Federation tournament catches.

Overall, the three-day event racked up 1,429 bass, 221 limits and a total weight of 3,257 pounds of predominantly smallmouth bass. Lure selection for the tournament fell into the category of “no brainer.” So many of the competitors caught their bass on tubes that it was practically a one-lure tournament. The significant question was: What color tube are you using? For most it was some shade of green or smoke.

Berkley’s Power Tube, the first lure of this type to establish itself on Lake Erie, impressed many charter captains who previously relied only on live bait.

“The Power Tube,” says Capt. Bob Troxel, “is the first lure I’ve seen that competes head to head with live bait. Even clients who have little fishing experience regularly catch bass on it.”

Fat 3 1/2-inch tubes impregnated with salt, such as Kalin’s Super Salty Scented Tubes and Venom’s Erie Series Tubes have proven to be just as effective on Lake Erie smallmouths as Berkley Power tubes. The most popular colors include chartreuse, watermelon and dark green, all with black flake. Smoke and brown hues also score well. One reason tubes work so well is they mimic the primary forage upon which Erie’s smallmouths feed. Root a tube along the bottom and it resembles a crayfish or a fat goby. Swim it above the bottom and it appears to be a baitfish on the run.

Narrow jig heads, often in a teardrop shape, slide inside tubes and give these lures a clean, uninterrupted appearance that smallmouths find inviting. Jigs weighing from 1/8- to 3/4-ounce will handle anything Lake Erie throws at you, with 1/4- and 3/8-ounce sizes being the work-horses.

Early in the season, New York

smallmouth guide Jim Hanley rigs tubes with 3/8- and 1/2- ounce jigs and casts them to deep points where smallmouths stage prior to spawning.

“If it’s not too windy,” says Hanley, “I hold the boat with the electric motor and cast to the fish. Because the water is only in the upper 40s to low 50s, I want to keep the tubes on bottom and give them very little movement. In early spring, I love clear silver flake and firecracker colors.”

Fishing guide Terry Jones, who works both the New York and Ontario waters of the eastern basin, fishes tubes vertically early in the season.

“When the bass are on the breaks,” says Jones, “I stay right on top of them with my trolling motor and drop a tube straight down to the bottom.”

As the water warms and bass move up to the tops of flats and humps, drifting methods prevail. Many anglers fail to take full advantage of this phase because they overwork their tubes. Jeff Snyder recommends that you drag tubes with a long line that keeps them digging bottom. Hold the rod low and dead still.



Retrieve or drag tube jigs along the bottom with little additional movement.

“Just let the boat do the work,”



The darter head jig and grub (top) and football head spider grub (bottom) are both effective when used with the correct technique.

says Snyder. “When I’m not fishing a tournament, I hold one rod in each hand. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve hooked two bass at once.

GRUBS

A jig dressed with an undulating curly- tailed grub is the runner-up to the tube. A 3- inch grub was once the most popular size, but the 5-inch fat grub now holds the position of prominence. Joe Thomas, of Cincinnati, Ohio, relied on this lure to win a \$ 1 00,000 purse during a Red Man All-American bass tournament on eastern Lake Erie at Buffalo, New York.

“If you’re after big smallmouths,” emphasizes Thomas, “you’ll score better with big grubs.”

Thomas rigs a 5-inch Kalin’s Salty Lunker Grub with a 1/4-ounce darter head jig that has a long-shanked hook. The long shank is crucial for securing solid hookups with these thick-bodied lures. After casting the grub and letting it touch down, Thomas snaps it up, sharply about 3 feet off the bottom and continues the jump- bump action all the way back.

“That big grub darting up brings out the smallmouth’s aggressive nature,” Thomas believes. “They nail it on the fall.”

Jeff Snyder, another proponent of the 5-inch Kalin’s grub, threads the bait on a 118- to 5/8-ounce football head jig. The wide, football head imparts a stable swimming action and avoids snagging in boulders better than other jig designs, especially with the drift-and-drag presentation that Snyder employs.

To give the jig even more bulk and animation, Snyder embellishes it with a hula skirt which he slips onto the jig’s collar before fixing the grub in place. This combination is referred to as a spider jig.

Spider jigs almost seem too big a

mouthful for smallmouths, but the bass engulf them with relish. Snyder’s most reliable colors are pumpkin-pepper, pumpkin with green flake, avocado seed and chartreuse salt and pepper.

The most crucial facet to effectively dragging a grub is the amount of line let out behind the drifting boat. Start by making a long cast into the wind. Then hold the rod tip low and still. You should soon feel the jig ticking bottom.

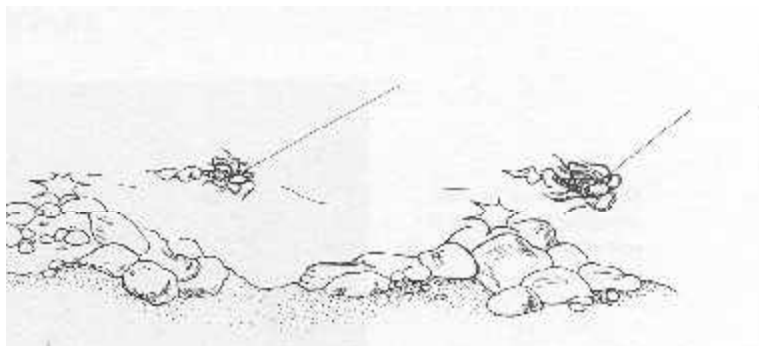
If the jig bangs into one boulder after another and tends to snag, reel in until the bottom contact becomes less frequent. The jig should swim freely above the bottom with only occasional contact.

CAROLINA RIG

Carolina rigs perform well for casting and drift-and-drag presentations. Put together a basic Carolina rig by first threading 15-to 20-pound monofilament from a stiff baitcasting outfit through a 1-ounce egg sinker. Tie the line to one end of a swivel. To the other side of the swivel attach a 3- to 5-foot leader comprised of 8- to 12-pound



Jump a darter head jig dressed with a fat grub over bottom with sharp hops.



A football head spider jig resists snagging better than other jig designs when dragged behind a drifting boat.

test monofilament.

The business end of the leader should sport a 2/0 or 3/0 worm hook dressed with some type of soft plastic morsel. Curly-tailed grubs, 4- to 6-inch worms, tubes and reapers have all proven to be effective on Lake Erie. Hanley especially likes Berkley's Power Sand Worm. Rig the lures Texas style, with the hook's point embedded into the plastic to make them snag resistant.

A Carolina rig's heavy sinker beats a lively tattoo on Erie's rocky bottoms. The ruckus brings smallmouth bass around to investigate, at which point they find the plastic floating seductively behind. It's

usually an offering they can't refuse. Many anglers place one or two 8mm glass beads above and below the sinker to generate more noise. That's not a bad idea, because the commotion caused by the heavy sinker banging against the bottom attracts fish.

"The more noise you make," says Hanley, "the more fish you're going to catch. I've seen many days when a Carolina rig out fishes anything else. I'm convinced it's because the sinker rattles, pounds and bounces along the bottom."

Another fishing guide who praises the Carolina rig is Greg Horoky, who works out of Colchester, Ontario, in the western basin. Horoky is convinced that the

biggest smallmouths suspend above bottom and prefer larger baits. To appeal to these fish, Horoky and his friend Bill Gitlin developed Mann's Floating Jelly Tube in 4- and 6-inch sizes.

This fat plastic lure dwarfs conventional tubes and comes packaged with flotation inserts. The foam inserts make Floating Jelly Tubes float high off the bottom when rigged Carolina style with a 3- to 6-foot leader. Since the lure floats above bottom snags, Horoky rigs it with a straight-shanked 3/0 or 4/0 hook, tip exposed. He runs the hook's shank between the inside wall of the tube and the foam insert and out the nose of the bait.

"Just drag the bait behind the boat," says Horoky. "When the sinker hits and bounces off rocks, the tubes starts and stops and hangs in a bass's face. That's when they pounce on it."

SPLIT SHOT REAPER

Erie's smallmouths grow difficult to catch when they suspend high above the bottom, as they often do during the hot months. Live bait usually fares better than lures at this time, but Hanley recently discovered a finesse lure presentation that overcomes this challenging period: a reaper floating above the bottom behind a single split shot.

In the summer," says Hanley, "I see tons of fish on my graph suspended above the bottom, but I've never been able to catch them on lures with any consistency. Now I throw a reaper out over 25 feet of water and drag it behind the



A Carolina rig's heavy sinker makes a bottom commotion that attracts bass to the lure trailing behind.

boat like live bait. The split shot pulls the reaper down about 10 feet. This little setup has me suddenly catching those bass that have eluded me all these years. I bet I caught three or four hundred smallmouths that way last summer. And I'm catching the better fish doing this."

Hanley's split shot rig consists of a Clear Water Reaper-manufactured under his own name-rigged Texas style with a No. 1/0 light wire Daiichi worm hook. Pumpkin pepper with a chartreuse tail has been an especially productive color combination for Hanley. He pinches a small split shot (1/32, 1/16 or 118 ounce) about 12 to 18 inches above the hook and fishes the reaper with a medium-light 6-foot graphite rod and 6-pound monofilament.

"You just let it float out there doing nothing," says Hanley. "It's great. Just don't get carried away when a bass strikes or you'll break off. With that fine wire hook, all you need to do is raise the rod and keep the line tight."

JIG TACKLE

A sensitive 6 1/2 to 7 foot medium-action graphite spinning or baitcasting outfit serves nicely for jig fishing. Match the rod with 8 to 10 pound test monofilament. Heavier lines prevent jigs from getting deep, especially when dragged behind a drifting boat. Thinner lines made from Spectra and similar fibers help in this respect.

The drawback with light lines is that they don't stand up well to

zebra mussels which cover most of the bottom structures that Lake Erie's smallmouths frequent. Reduce breakoffs by rigging a 4-foot 12 pound test monofilament leader to a thin Spectra line. Attach the leader via a swivel, or join the two lines with a double UNI knot.

This article was an adaptation from Mark Hick's Book, Lake Erie Smallmouth. Part II will appear in the Spring 2002 edition. To order Mark's book on smallmouth bass fishing in Lake Erie, see page 17 or call 1 800 447-8238.

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The Eastern Lake Erie Fishery Report

by
Joe Fischer

The Eastern Lake Erie fishing report for 2001 is a "mixed bag" as usual with some surprises. The late spring near shore fishery for walleyes was generally slow with the best results coming on late night trolling stints off Hamburg and Dunkirk. "I usually caught between 2 to 4 fish on an all night trolling trip using the old reliable No. 11 Rapalas" commented seasoned nightfishing veteran Dave Goodberry. Dave's catch was actually above average be-0.3.5 5238eSEas knowledg3.5 e n usuag hotspots" rouandVranBtorn potine

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that produced similar results with better than half the teams not even weighing in any walleyes on 1 of the 2 days! These results are very poor considering that this tournament annually attracts some of the finest local Eastern Lake Erie walleye fisherman from Canada and New York State.

The Professional Walleye Trail Eastern Pro-Am Tournament (PWT) came to Dunkirk Harbor in early August for a 3-day tournament. There were 126 professional entries competing for a top prize of approximately \$49,000. This tournament runs over 3 days with each contestant allowed to weigh in 5 walleyes daily. Amateurs also fished with randomly selected professionals every day for a separate division of prizes. The fishing once again was spotty with only 1 pro bringing in a creel limit of 5 walleyes each day. Some of the pros were even shut out one day of this 3-day tournament. The winner of this event was George Barach of Barryton, Michigan with a total weight of slightly over 89 pounds, which is less than 6 pounds per walleye. The amateur winner was Greg Seese of Bryceton Mills, West Virginia with a total weight of 86.30 pounds. These are still impressive numbers considering the difficult fishing conditions.

These pros ventured the entire length of the New York waters of Lake Erie in search of nomadic walleye schools and baitfish with mediocre results. This year is totally unlike the mid-summer of 2000 when there was a heavy concentration of Ohio walleyes present in the eastern basin and most veteran walleye fishermen

were bringing in limit or close to limit catches of walleyes in excess of 6 pounds. The type of lures used by the professionals was almost identical to the lures used during the aforementioned Southtowns tournament.

Cormorants are starting to show up in mass along the eastern Lake Erie shoreline as they start their annual fall migration. They also will deplete the tenuous walleye fishery. The round nose Goby also is now very well established in the eastern basin of Lake Erie as almost every fisherman I've talked to has caught many of these exotics. The effect of these invaders has yet to be totally determined but I will predict it won't be positive! It's very obvious to most veteran fishermen that Lake Erie is at a transition point and important decisions and sacrifices must be made by all stakeholders to protect and preserve this wonderful resource for future generations. We do not need a repeat of Nova Scotia.

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Marina to be expanded at Middle Bass Island

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) has been awarded a \$956,623 federal grant to expand and improve a public marina at Middle Bass Island in the western basin of Lake Erie.

"The grant will help provide more and better public boat docks at Ohio's future Middle Bass Island State Park," said ODNR Director Sam Speck. "There is a tremendous need for short-term dock space around the Lake Erie islands where recreational boating is so popular."

ODNR purchased almost 124 acres at the southern tip of the 758-acre island last year at a cost of \$6.75 million. The site includes a mile of undeveloped shoreline; glacial grooves and other natural features; wetlands and grasslands that house several endangered species of plants and animals; and a safe harbor marina.

So far, ODNR has installed 25 new docks at the island's marina to accommodate visiting boaters for stays of up to 10 consecutive days each. As many as 50 boats can tie up at the new docks — which cost about \$125,000 to install.

Daytime dockage is available on first come, first served basis. Dockside electric and water will not be available this summer. A reservation and deposit (credit cards accepted) are required for overnight stays. Boaters should call the Lake Erie Islands State Park Office at 419-797-4530 for reservation information.