

# The Eastern Basin Fisheries Outlook for 1999

By  
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The new year is here, the local boat shows are about to begin, Buffalo's Outdoor Sportsmen's Show at the Agri-Center in Hamburg will take place in March, and best of all I just received my annual Spring Cabela's fishing catalog. Can spring be far away? I know most of you are experiencing the throes of "cabin fever" and cannot wait to wet a line so I'll add a little coal to the fire with the Lake Erie fishing forecast for the spring of 1999. The Eastern basin's environment, as you know, is undergoing a dramatic change with extreme water clarity, low phosphorous levels, Zebra and Quagga mussels, cormorants and the recent discovery of the goby all playing a role.

The extreme water clarity has made it easier for predators to seek out prey which might account for

the disappearance of a good 1996 year class of yellow perch. W. Culligan, chief of fisheries at the Dunkirk New York State Department of Environmental Conserva-

tion office, commented, "The fall DEC netting surveys seem to indicate that the 1996 class year of perch has disappeared." This is not the first time this has happened as good class years in 1993 and 1994 seemed to have come upon the same fate. In past years if a good young of year (YOY) class of

perch existed one could readily forecast good fishing in future years. It appears that YOY perch are much more heavily predated on than in the past. The culprits may be smallmouth bass or possibly cormorants who would have easy pickings due to the water clarity. The last thing the eastern basin perch fishery, which already has experienced a precipitous decline, needs is losing another good class year of perch!

The walleye forecast seems more promising as the 1998 year class of walleyes appears to be very good with YOY walleyes appearing in the fall netting survey. It

is to be hoped that they will not have the same fate as the aforementioned perch. "The walleyes grow quite rapidly with some attaining 8" in size by fall, which should hopefully keep predation down" commented Don Einhouse, fisheries biologist at the DEC's fisheries station in Dunkirk. Perch



**Eastern Basin walleye fishing should be good this year. Large fish are expected to be as numerous as they were last year. These hawks were taken in July of 1998 off of Cattaraugus Creek, near Dunkirk, NY.**

tion office, commented, "The fall DEC netting surveys seem to indicate that the 1996 class year of perch has disappeared." This is not the first time this has happened as good class years in 1993 and 1994 seemed to have come upon the same fate. In past years if a good young of year (YOY) class of

grow slowly with the average size being only several inches long in the fall of the first year. This makes them a perfect prey for a much longer time for heavy predation by other fish and birds. Walleyes also tend to be more nocturnal and are more active in low light conditions when other predators are not feeding.

The DEC and local sportsmen are concerned about the potential impact on the Lake Erie fishery of 2 relatively new predators, the cormorant and the goby. A recent DEC study revealed that the cormorants consumed approximately 87 million fish from the Southeastern end of Lake Ontario during 1988! This breaks down to 23 million alewife, 26 million stickleback, 16 million perch, 1.3 million smallmouth bass, some walleyes, trout etc. The smallmouth bass fishery in the Southeastern end of Lake Ontario is in a critical state as many of the future class years (5-10 inches) were virtually wiped out by this federally protected predator. Many of these birds are now showing up in numbers from Dunkirk harbor to the Small Boat Harbor in Buffalo and undoubtedly will have some effect on the fishery. The 2 species I worry about the most would be the already stressed perch population and the world class smallmouth bass fishery.

The effect of the recently discovered goby, a small pugnacious little fish, is not certain, but wherever this little fish has gone it soon became the dominant species. The DEC fears that this fish will spread rapidly as it is an excellent bait fish and will be spread unwittingly by

live bait fishermen. The one good piece of information is that the goby does like to eat zebra and Quagga mussels.

Phosphorous levels are low but appeared to have stabilized in the last several years. Phosphorous is essential for the lower food chain (zooplankton, phytoplankton, etc.). Our expert local DEC personnel at the Dunkirk fisheries station readily admit that the lake's ecosystem is changing quickly and the mixing of all the aforementioned predators make it very difficult to predict the future of the eastern end of the lake. The DEC has some new information regarding the nutrient levels but they have not completed the analysis of their data at this time.

What does all this mean in the forecast for the 1999 Lake Erie spring walleye season? I would feel the most concerned about the clarity of water and its effect on walleye. Because of water temperatures and post spawning lethargy a great deal of the early fishing takes place in very shallow water. This water will now be ultra clear with a great deal of light penetration. Walleyes, as you know, do not like bright light and are easily spooked even by bright running lights in shallow water. The water clarity will undoubtedly drive the walleyes deeper which in turn will require you to troll in deeper water and even use small amounts of weight on your lures. Night trolling with body baits in 5-10 feet of water is the traditional method favored by most early season eastern basin walleye fishermen. If you can't get strikes in shallow water I would recommend that you

try 10-20 feet with a little weight about 3-4 feet above your lure. The weight becomes necessary as most body baits like the Rapala or Jr. Thunderstick will only go down 3-5 feet without weight. The walleyes in their post-spawning state are very lethargic and are usually near the bottom and will not move very far to strike a lure. This therefore requires you to add a little weight in front of your body bait to get the lure down to them. I also think that trolling slowly is important because in most cases these fish will not chase a lure. Some of the local fishermen recommend using running lights that are somewhat subdued to prevent spooking the fish. Running long leads (100-200 feet) is also essential.

The lures of choice like the Rapala and Jr. Thunderstick still will work but different colors might work better than in the past due to the water clarity. Colors such as traditional silver and black, Silver and Blue or the Perch color might work better in clear water than the bright colors like Firetiger or Fluorescent Red.

If you prefer daytime fishing the locals like to drift (if the winds permit) in water 15-30 feet with three-way swivels and worm harnesses. The object here is to get as close to the bottom without becoming snagged up. To reduce tackle loss try tying a piece of lighter line to the sinker portion of your three-way swivel. This way when you snag the bottom you'll only lose the sinker and not the harness.

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