

# Western Basin Spring "Hot Spots"

*During the spring, the western basin hosts marauding schools of oversized walleyes; the trick is finding them*

by  
**Michael Veine**

Lake Erie is the personification of big water walleye fishing. With hundreds of square miles of fishable waters, finding active walleye can often be a daunting task. During the spring, adult walleyes tend to congregate in the relatively shallow waters of the western basin where savvy anglers can cash in on a mixture of eaters and true trophies.

One day last April, my partner and I launched at Boles Harbor near Monroe, MI for a day of early season walleye action. As I made my way down the channel, I fired up my Lowrance GPS receiver and switched it to its plotter mode. As we cleared the last buoy, I hit the throttle sending us on our walleye search and destroy mission.

While keeping an eye on the graph for fish marks, I first searched on a parallel course along the Michigan shoreline. Finding

no fish in the ten foot depths, I then made another reconnaissance pass from south to north a bit farther

from shore. Using a back and forth grid type exploration technique is often the best way to

locate elusive spring walleyes. Since there were very few boats actively fishing at that time, we simply had no choice except to find our own fish.

After two hours of searching, I still hadn't been able to find any concentrations of active fish. Scratching my head in bewilderment, I was puzzled. I knew there were fish in the area, but their location was still a mystery. Even in the fabled walleye waters of Lake Erie, you can't catch them if you can't find them.

It dawned on me that with the moderate south/east winds hammering portions of the shoreline, the walleyes might be tucked up close to the beach. I selected a shoreline with a steep drop-off south of the Edison plant near Luna Pier. The wind was



**Oftentimes, cold weather must be endured to get in on the spring fishing action. Proper attire is a necessity to promote enjoyment. Photo of Donna Veine taken by the author.**



**It's routine business landing impressive walleyes during the spring on the western basin of Lake Erie. Photo of the author taken by Donna Veine.**

quartering along the drop-off making trolling passes most efficient. Since the water was less than ten feet deep, scanning the area with sonar would be pointless. Instead, we set out lines up wind for some in-your-face style scouting. Since the water visibility was rather poor, we opted for subtle action body baits and a rather slow trolling speed. We set out a mix of Storm Jr. Thundersticks in varying colors presenting them behind my Mr. Walleye boards. In-line planer boards are critical to trolling success when targeting walleyes in murky, shallow waters because they present the baits well away from the fish spooking presence of the boat.

It's funny how walleyes seem to know when you're not paying attention. One second all the boards were running straight and true, the next instant one of the

mini-skis had already been pulled almost directly behind the boat. Obviously a big walleye had attached himself to the business end and was putting on the brakes. I handed the bowed over rod to my wife Donna who was still a little cranky from our long, bumpy boat ride. It's amazing how a big walleye can wipe a droopy frown from one's face and instantly replace it with a wide, tooth baring smile.

Donna pumped the heavyweight slowly but steadily until I was able to remove the Mr. Walleye board. Without the added resistance of the planer, pulsating head shakes could be felt as they reverberated up the line to her trembling hands. In the sloppy water, the walleye was invisible until it broke the surface of the water, sending a rush of adrenaline through both of us. It was a true hog and with one scoop

of the net it was ours. In the next four hours, we managed to catch and release dandy walleyes until we simply were tired from pulling them in. Even though we were wiped out from a long day of catching walleyes, you certainly didn't hear any complaints from us.

The western basin of Lake Erie is defined as all the waters to the west of a line running north from Marblehead, OH, through Kelley's Island and then to Point Pelee Ontario. Biologists estimate that Lake Erie's current walleye population numbers over 60 million adult fish. Lake Erie's walleyes are entirely self sustaining with natural reproduction accounting for all of the fish stocks. During late March and April, most of Erie's adult walleyes migrate to the western basin to procreate. Michigan, Ohio and portions of Ontario waters are littered with reefs, rocky shorelines and rivers where Erie's walleyes take advantage of ideal spawning habitat.

During the spring, the shallow waters of the western basin warm up quicker than the rest of the lake. This bowl of warmer water draws plenty of bait fish like smelt, shiners and other walleye snacks. The combined attractions of massive schools of baitfish and reproductive urges turns the western basin into a walleye angler's heaven.

Walleyes typically spawn when the water reaches between 45 and 50 degrees. They will actively seek out warm water areas that hold favorable spawning habitat. This is what draws the walleyes to the reefs, shorelines and rivers of the

western basin. For optimal comfort and growth, walleyes prefer water temperatures that range between 65 and 70 degrees. The relatively shallow western basin typically yields water temperatures for spawning during mid-April. The water warm-up doesn't usually surpass the 70 degree mark until mid-May. After that, most of the temperature sensitive adult fish migrate east to the deeper waters of the central and eastern basins. That leaves western basin anglers with about 45 days of prime trophy walleye fishing. This period is divided into three distinctly different phases designated as pre-spawn, spawn and post-spawn stages.

### Pre-Spawn

Frigid water conditions and rotten weather typically characterize the period before the spawn. From just after ice-out until the second week of April, Lake Erie can be a formidable opponent. Despite the challenges, I manage to catch some huge walleyes during this period every year. Basically, sacrifices must often be endured to have a crack at those awesome, sag-bellied brutes.

Pre-Spawn walleyes have a rather slow metabolism making them reluctant biters. They move into the western basin during the winter

and continue to stage in the area until the warming water kicks them into gear. The adult fish are typically scattered in the deeper water and they often hug the bottom. A slow, meticulous live bait presentation is often the hot ticket during this cold period.



**With the Edison Plant near Luna Pier in the background, the author displays a nice walleye taken on a frigid early April day. Photo taken by Donna Veine.**

Controlled drifting combined with vertical jigging and bottom bouncing tactics are often the best medicine during early spring. Captain Rocco Papandrea owns and operates a charter boat between Toledo and Port Clinton OH. Papandrea also competes professionally in the PWT, NAWA and MWT walleye tournament

circuits. Besides his other tournament accomplishments, Rocco placed very respectably cashing checks in both of the last two major events held around his home waters on Erie. Rocco passes along this wisdom concerning pre-spawn jigging: "Every year around the middle of April, Lake Erie's walleyes begin their spawning activities. From the end of March until the spawn starts, I catch pre-spawn walleyes in waters from 15 to 30 feet deep north of the Bass Islands. 25 foot depths have historically been the most productive waters and during this period jigs with live minnows have been the best bait. We vertically jig using heavier jigs when it's windy and lighter ones weighing no less than 1/2 oz. when it's unseasonably calm." Rocco went on to say, "We let the walleyes decide what color jigs they prefer on any given day. This is accomplished by fishing a different color jig on each rod and then switching over to the hottest setup once a pattern is discovered."

Rocco rates the areas north and west of the Camp Perry firing range as top pre-spawn waters for trophy 'eyes.

The deeper waters due west of Luna Pier all the way to West Sister Islands are also excellent waters to target fish staging for their run up the Maumee River.

The waters from the Sputnik light house north to the mouth of the Detroit River are another hot spot that harbors good numbers of pre-spawn walleyes.

**The Spawn**

This author has experienced days on Lake Erie that dreams are made of during the spawn. On one occasion, I caught and released over thirty walleyes in one afternoon with most weighing over eight pounds and a few 10+ pounders thrown in for good measure. By days end, my boat was a filthy mess from all the milt and eggs that were sprayed all over the deck.

When walleyes are actually spawning in the open waters of Lake Erie, you can bet that they will be either holding in shallow water or staging nearby along dropoffs. Since spawning is triggered by warming water temperatures, a heightened metabolic rate causes the cold blooded walleyes to feed quite heavily. Trolling along shorelines, dropoffs and reefs with the aid of

in-line planer boards is possibly the most productive tactic during this period.

Capt. Rocco Papandrea had this to say about the spawning phenomenon, "Once the walleyes

spawn are the Camp Perry firing range reef complex, the Turtle Island reefs and any shorelines that are lined with a gravel or rocky bottom. Look for rocky shorelines where wave action is present because when

walleyes spawn, they prefer turbid waters.

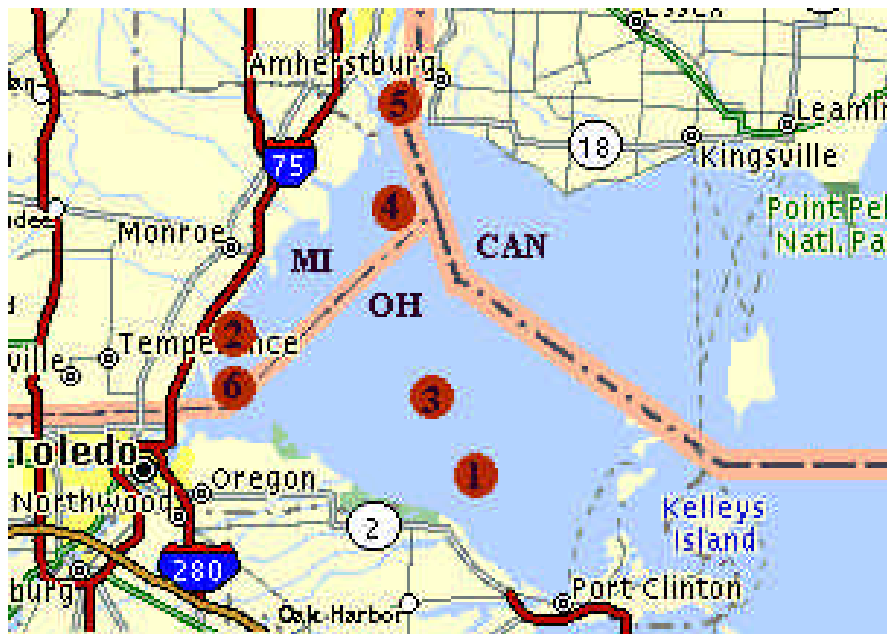
**Post Spawn**

Late April and May are top months for taking excellent numbers of adult walleyes in the western basin. The mid-depth waters adjacent to spawning structures are great places to way-lay a mess

of above average sized, post spawn walleyes. I prefer waters between 13 and 18 feet deep during this period.

The waters south of the Camp Perry firing range and the mid-depth waters between the Maumee River and the Detroit River all hold good numbers of aggressive walleyes during this period.

Since water temperatures will progressively rise during the post spawn period, faster action crankbaits and spinner crawler rigs pulled behind boards are often hot



**Map Locations: 1) Camp Perry Firing Range, 2) Waters west of Luna Pier, 3) West Sister Islands, 4) Sputnik Light house, 5) Mouth of the Detroit River, 6) Turtle Island**

move onto the reefs and up the rivers to spawn, we switch to trolling tactics using body baits behind in-line boards. I've had excellent success using metallic rainbow or silver prism Reef Runner Ripsticks. The surface trolling fishery lasts until the beginning of May when the walleyes move off the shallows and into the adjacent waters to fatten up after the rigors of reproduction."

Areas to key in on during the

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Thundersticks and Rapala Husky Jerks. Grothe went on to say that a Rip Stick that is run 80-120 feet behind the boat will dive to 9-12 feet, perfect for intercepting hawg walleye. Utilize in-line planer boards to spread your baits and increase your coverage.

Experiment with speed, typically starting out around 2 m.p.h. and ranging up to 3 m.p.h.

It's just a matter of days. Who knows? The ice is off and the fish may be active right now, just waiting for a bait to swim by. Use caution, staying on shore when the beast roars and fishing when it purrs. It's hawg time.

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tickets. My favorite crank baits are Storm Deep Jr. Thundersticks, 1/4 oz. Hot'N Tots and #7 Rapala Shad Raps. Colors run the gambit with dark colors seeming to be preferred in low visibility water conditions and fluorescent and flashy colors performing best on bright days with clear water.

The Lake Erie walleye spawning phenomenon has a profound effect on the fish. With millions of trophy walleyes cruising around Lake Erie's western basin, anglers have an unbeatable opportunity to put a walleye on the wall or just catch a

bunch of eaters for the table. With limits set at 10 walleyes per angler in both Michigan and Ohio, fishermen can go home with enough walleye fillets to make a trip well worth the investment. Armed with a working knowledge of the latest tactics, a seaworthy vessel, modern equipment and up-to-date fishing information, walleye anglers have never had it so good.

### Additional Information

For up-to-date fishing reports, wave heights, current tendencies and many other useful Lake Erie fishing facts, visit the Michigan Fishing Information page at <http://members.aol.com/mifishinfo> on the internet. Also, pay a visit to [www.walleye.com](http://www.walleye.com). Of the dozens of charter boats that operate in the western basin, only a handful offer early spring trophy walleye trips. One operation that specializes in catching the biggest walleyes that Erie has to offer is Trophy Specialists Fishing Charters. Phone them

at 800-305-6988. Captain Rocco Papandrea can be reached at 219-262-3370. Monroe, MI lies in the heart of the western basin's spring walleye action. For a list of Monroe's accommodations, area attractions and other trip planning details, call the Monroe Chamber of Commerce at 734-242-3366.

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If the winds do not cooperate trolling will also work. Trolling should also be done with close contact to the bottom and at a very slow pace. Vary your spinner colors and types. As an example, try using blue, green or silver spinner blades on a sunny day and use colors like red, purple or pink on cloudy days. Planer boards are also very effective because your lure will not be traveling behind the wake of the boat. Walleyes tend to be spooked very easily which accounts for the success of planer boards. If there are a lot of boats in an area trying to move to a different location because the presence of all these boats will quickly spook the fish. If you decide to come up and give it a try, call J. Hanley at 716 549-2232 or W. Elliott at (716) 681-0253 for up-to-date conditions. Good luck  
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