

# The Eastern Lake Erie Fishery Report

by  
Joe Fischer

The 2002 fishing forecast is undoubtedly tied in with what actually happened in 2001. Many Lake Erie experts forecasted some of the “happenings” listed below although there were a few that were totally unexpected.

The big surprise was the quick rebound of the poor yellow perch fishery. Perch fishing had an excellent start in the spring of 2001 and virtually continued unabated until fall. Many devoted walleye fishermen were, due to the relatively poor walleye fishery, targeting the yellow perch with excellent results. Walleye fishermen were experiencing a by-catch of large perch on their deep-water walleye tackle. Most veteran Lake Erie fishermen simply had to look for the small cluster of boats that usually ‘indicated fishermen working a perch school and start fishing! If the fish stopped biting they simply move again to relocate the school. The areas where the perch were found were generally between the Cattaraugus Creek and Dunkirk harbor ‘in anywhere from 45 to 70 feet. One wizened veteran Canadian Commercial fishermen remarked “The perch fishing this year was the best in 20 years”. He went on to say that the commercial perch quota should have been higher because of the severe reduction in the walleye quota but that’s strictly his vested opinion on a controversial subject, which is not the focus of this article!

I suspect that the perch fishery will continue to be good in 2002 with many more fishermen because “the word is out on the great year in 2001. The good news is that the perch will generally be larger than the ones caught in 2001 with many being in the 10-13” size range.

An outbreak of Botulism E killed many fish and waterfowl. This outbreak started in late summer and continued into late fall. Most of the fish killed were fresh water drum (sheephead) but other near shore warm water species such as Smallmouth bass were also affected. At last count over 20 Lake Sturgeon were also killed.

The mortality rate among waterfowl was high with many gulls, mergansers and loons dying from botulism. Ken Roblee, a biologist at the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) office in Buffalo, estimated that 800-1000 loons perished along the New York State shoreline of Lake Erie! This is the second year that the loon population has been severely impacted by the botulism E. The cause of this epidemic is not known at present but the round goby and zebra mussel appear to be playing a major role. The goby has been found in almost all the dead fish and birds stomach contents and gobies have tested positive for the presence of botulism E. Ward Stone, chief pathologist for the DEC, has been unable to find botulism E in the

Zebra Mussel but with millions of Zebra mussels in the lake it is statistically difficult to obtain a representative sample. Assemblyman R. Smith, D 146 district N.Y. is calling for a unified effort of all of Lake Erie’s stakeholders with Sea Grant as the coordinator to investigate this serious problem and establish the root cause. It is the hope of the NYSDEC that this outbreak will be similar to other outbreaks in the upper Great Lakes which gradually subsided over a period of years.

The walleye fishing, for the first time, was generally poor throughout the summer in the New York waters of Lake Erie with no apparent eastern migration of Western basin walleye stocks taking place. The New York DEC felt that this could have been due to many factors including good forage supply in the western basin, weather conditions and a slightly reduced population of mature walleyes in the eastern basin. The 2000-class year of eastern basin walleyes appears weak and will not be abundant in future years. To paraphrase the old saying “go west young man” into “go east young walleye” sort of sums up the outlook for 2002. The Western Basin of Lake Erie is predicting excellent fishing with a good class year of young walleyes between 14-17". If these abundant walleyes run low on forage and move to the east in search of forage the Lake Erie Eastern walleye fishery will

be very good so the general outlook for 2002 appears to once again hedge on the summer migration of western basin walleyes. "Lots of forage generally causes poor fishing as the fish are well fed and possibly will not migrate" commented Doug Einhouse, senior biologist at the NYSDEC Dunkirk fisheries station. The general forecast would be that if the forage base is low and we have a good hot summer the walleye fishing could improve over the poor 2001 season.

Smallmouth Bass fishing was relatively poor in 2001 compared to recent years but this world class fishery still had many days when bass fishermen could catch and release over 20 fish. Why this fishery was somewhat slower was not totally understood, as the population of mature bass was high. The suspicion is that the bass had plenty of forage with adult gobies present!". The good news is that the 1999 class year of bass was excellent and would classify as the best I have ever seen", commented Einhouse. Don went on to say that these fish should enhance the already excellent population of Smallmouth Bass in the eastern basin and contribute to this world class Smallmouth Bass fishery in the coming years. Smallmouth Bass between 1.5 - 3.5 pounds are common in this prospering fishery. This fishery has gotten more attention in recent years and last year for the first time more fishing hours were spent bass fishing than walleye fishing in the Eastern Basin according to NYSDEC surveys. Eastern Lake Erie's habitat of

rocky shorelines, coupled with abundant forage and the recent excellent spawning years should continue to enhance the reputation of this world class fishery.

Another Eastern Lake Erie warm water fishery that has recently gained international status is the Muskellunge. The area around Buffalo's Small Boat Harbor and the Upper Niagara River has been producing muskies in excess of 50 inches for several years now. 2001 was not especially a good year as the catch rate per hour dropped but as any devoted musky fishermen knows, musky fishing is more about quality than quantity! Many fish caught were in excess of 30 lbs. and should continue to grow so a 55-60 inch musky will probably be caught in the not too distant future. This fishery should continue to produce world class size muskies in 2002 because of the catch and release policies and habitat protection programs of the Niagara Musky Association. This club of approximately 200 devoted musky fishermen, quickly recognized the fragility of their superb fishery and worked with many of the local politicians and NYSDEC personnel to protect and enhance the muskie's sensitive underwater habitat at the Buffalo waterfront. With the return of the perch fishery and the continued world class Smallmouth Bass fishery many of the local fishermen are optimistic about 2002. If a heavy migration of western basin walleye stocks occurs during the summer local fishermen could have a banner year in 2002!

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## Try This Walleye Recipe

### Grilled Walleye in Creamy Basil Pesto Sauce

(4-6) medium walleye filets  
(2) tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
(2) cloves of garlic (minced)  
salt and pepper

In a large bowl cover walleye filets with oil and garlic. Let sit covered in the refrigerator for 15 minutes. Heat grill.

Sprinkle salt and pepper on filets, then wrap all walleye filets in one large sheet of tin foil, and place on grill, keeping it away from extreme heat.

Filets will be done in approximately 15 minutes or when they flake easily with a fork.

Remove from heat, cover with sauce from recipe below.

### Creamy Basil Pesto Sauce

(2) tablespoons fresh ground basil  
(1) clove garlic (minced)  
(1) tablespoon extra virgin olive oil  
salt and pepper  
(2) tablespoons fresh ground parmesan or romano cheese  
1/2 cup half and half  
(2) tablespoons ground pine nuts

In a food processor, vigorously combine ingredients to form a paste. Serve immediately.

Serves four

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### From Erie "Eyes", page 7

During the early morning hours start with a lead of 100 feet; and as the sun progresses higher move the dipsy back to 150, and finally to 200 feet. The smaller #0 dipsy is best used with planer boards. Set it at 0 and start with a lead of 100 and again adjust according to feeding patterns and sunlight.

**Easy Plug Fishing:** By any standard and whether your fishing western, central, or eastern basin of Lake Erie, a diving plug will consistently catch fish; besides, trolling plugs is the easiest way to enjoy walleye fishing.

Begin by trolling the 3 1/2-inch Thunderstick (black/purple, green or rainbow trout) during the early hours. The best presentation is 150 feet lead (using 12-pound monofilament) off the planer board. This setup will keep the plug in the upper 15 feet of water. Later in the day, when the walleye begin to drop lower in the water column, switch to the larger deep diving plugs. If your boat is not equipped with a planer mast, flatlining larger plugs, such as Berkley Power Divers or Storm Thundersticks will work just as well.

\* Worm harness tip: If undesirable fish start to be a problem, try an old "Captain's" trick; instead of letting the nightcrawler trail from the last hook, "ball" up the crawler on the bottom hook. It might look strange, but when hooked 5 or 6 times, the walleye really devour it.

?? Dipsy Diver tip: Once a pattern is discovered, stick with it for a few hours. Also, color is important. When running two or more dipsys, use the same color harness and dipsy. No scientific reason to this; but, it works.

\* Plug trolling tip: All of the common plugs – Reef Runner, Thunderstick, Rapala, Power Diver, and Long A – will catch fish, however, the farther way from the boat the better. It is not uncommon to have leads up to 400 feet.

Walleye fishing on Lake Erie does not have to be a mystery. The science of fishing can be greatly simplified by understanding that catching a fish is achieved by fishing. On your visit to the big water, remember target big "eyes" with the proper depth control and the right lures. Most important, anglers will find that trolling is easy, effective, and above all - fun.

### From Forecast, page 12

week, which is a little slower but not much. Weekends the population doubles or even triples. Traffic is congested and it seems everyone is in a hurry to get out on the lake.

You might try calling 1 800 BUCKEYE and ask for information on Ohio's northern shore from Toledo thru Huron this summer. Port Clinton seems the central area for anglers to flock. If you want to talk fish you can e mail me at [capt.phil@cadez-charters.com](mailto:capt.phil@cadez-charters.com). GOOD FISHIN!!

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## From Steelhead, page 22

pools. And don't forget a landing using fresh spawn, yarn flies, or larger nymph imitations.

Although many experienced steelhead anglers prefer a long, 8-net!! Even a small steelhead is difficult to land and unhook by hand, especially if you plan to catch and release.

During early to mid fall, concentrate efforts in stream pools closer to the lake. You may even want to try beach fishing (casting spoons and spinners) where small tributaries enter Lake Erie. In deeper pools, try drifting live shiner minnows, worms, salmon eggs, or maggots just off the bottom below a bobber. Use only enough split shot weight to keep the bait down. You may also want to cast small spinners and spoons in deeper stream pools and in wide, deep stretches of larger rivers. Keep all baits near the bottom, and expect to occasionally become snagged!

During late fall and winter, steelhead will have moved further upstream, providing more fishing opportunity. Concentrate in deeper pools where current is visible, using live bait fished near the bottom. Be careful of frozen areas; river and stream ice are never safe to walk upon.

Come spring, steelhead can be found in deep pools, yet will also move to shallow, rock and gravel riffle areas for spawning. Live bait and spinners still work well, yet the best spring bait is fresh steelhead spawn (eggs), which you can obtain from a successful

angler, or purchase from select bait shops. Many anglers will use salmon eggs, with fly fishermen 10 foot, steelhead rod and spinning reel, or a fly rod outfit, a 6-foot medium weight spinning rod and reel spooled with 8-10 pound test line will perform just fine.

For more information steelhead and salmon identification and methods for preparing, request the following Sea Grant publications: FS-022: Lake Erie Salmon and Trout: Handling and Preparation (free); FS-031: Getting to Know Your Catch: Lake Erie Salmonid Identification (free); FS-032: Fish Smoked at Home (free); GS-005: Lake Erie Cookbook (\$4.00).

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## From Proven, page 29

poppers, such as Rebel's Pop-R, Storm's Chug Bug and the Rico. These baits are all in the 1/4-ounce size range and sport dressings on their rear trebles to help coax strikes. Their cupped faces pop, gurgle and spit water

during the retrieve. Work them over the surface with three to five quick pops interspersed by pauses, or give them a continuous chugging action.

This article was an adaptation from Mark Hick's Book, Lake Erie Smallmouth. Part I appeared in the Fall 2001 issue of Lake Erie Walleye Magazine. To order Mark's book on smallmouth bass fishing in Lake Erie, see page \_\_\_\_ or call 1-800-447-8238

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