

The Eastern Lake Erie Fishery Report

by
Joe Fischer

The best fishing news this year, to many old time veteran Eastern Lake Erie fishermen, has been the continued return of the yellow perch which is considered by many to be the best eating of all fresh water fish. It was common to see many clusters of boats still-fishing for these fish years ago but the amount of perch fishermen dwindled as the perch population in the eastern basin of Lake Erie dropped precipitously in the last 5-10 years. In 2001 however, due to an excellent 1998 spawning year, the perch fishing rebounded with reports of catches of 20-50 perch from 8-12" throughout the season. A lot of fishermen were also reporting by-catches of perch while walleye fishing. The eastern basin Canadian commercial fishermen also reported excellent perch fishing. One veteran commercial fishermen felt that the perch fishing was the best he had seen in 30 years! Last year's rebound of the yellow perch fishing caught many veteran Eastern Lake Erie fishermen by surprise but this year "the word is out" on their return and a lot of fishermen have made these delectable little morsels their prime target.

The clear water appears to have driven the perch into deeper water than in the past with perch schools sometimes being found in water deeper than 70 feet. On an outing in late spring my fishing partner and I boated 30 perch in the 10" range in water that was 65 feet deep off the Cattaraugus Creek in

southern Erie County. These fish were finicky biters as the only bait they would hit was a lively Lake Erie minnow. We also had to re-anchor 5 times before we located this tight little school of fish in much deeper water than we started the day in.

Don Einhouse, senior biologist at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) Fisheries station located in Dunkirk New York, stated at a recent eastern Lake Erie seminar "perch fishing in 2002 should be at least as good as the banner year of 2001". Don went on to recommend that perch fishermen try deeper water (50-70 feet) as DEC trawling surveys found more perch schools in deep water. This is probably due to the very clear water in the eastern basin. To get to water in excess of 70 feet in the Eastern basin I would recommend launching out of the Cattaraugus or Sturgeon Point and heading to the southwest. This quick rebound of a fishery that was previously thought to be in trouble was very good news for many Eastern Lake Erie fishermen. If you are interested in trying perch fishing in this area I would suggest light line, good Lake Erie minnows, a sensitive fish finder and patience as you might have to spend some time in locating the fish. Another suggestion would be to look for the boats, chances are if you spot 5 - 10 boats fishing close together their probably into a school of perch! The good news concerning

walleyes is that it appears that an experimental NYSDEC 5- year stream-stocking program of walleye fingerlings at the Cattaraugus Creek might be working! Early season DEC stream shocking checks for spawning walleyes has a good population of spawning walleyes in a stream that had virtually no spawning run less than 10 years ago! Genetic tests are now being run to verify that the fingerlings stocked did imprint and are the fish that are presently spawning in the Cattaraugus Creek. If a positive I.D. is made, other stream stocking programs at the eastern end of Lake Erie will probably start in the near future. Stream spawning survival is far superior to shoal spawning in the open lake where a single early season storm can wipe out a walleye-spawning year. Many people feel that one of the reasons that the western basin has a good population of walleye is due to excellent structure and a heavy annual stream walleye spawning run in the famous Maumee and other rivers. This program hopefully would go a long way in enhancing the local population of walleye in the eastern basin and mitigate some of the poor spawning years experienced on the offshore shoals. I will have a lot more on this subject in future articles.

The annual nighttime nearshore walleye fishing was good at the traditional "hotspots" off Hamburg town park near Buffalo and Van Buren point located approximately

5 miles south of Dunkirk. Both of these spots have extensive shoals where the walleye feed late at night. "The walleye fishing was typical with catches of 3-6 fish after a long night of trolling" stated Dave Goodberry, a veteran nighttime walleye fishermen who has trolled for walleyes after dark for over 25 years. Dave went on to say that most of the walleyes he caught were in the wee hours of the morning when most boating traffic over the shallow shoals had subsided. Most of the fish caught this year were mates ranging from 17-24". This was probably due to the relatively mild winter, which produced an earlier, spawning run. Female walleyes are known to immediately leave the spawning sites for the open waters of the lake whereas the males tend to stay around the shoreline for a period of time. The lures of choice were No. 13 Rapalas slowed trolled ISO- 200ft. behind the boat. The preferred colors were firetiger, black-silver, chartreuse and fluorescent orange. Junior Thundersticks also worked well on occasion. Dave also recommended a 3-foot leader of almost invisible line such as "Vanish" to counteract the extreme clarity of the water. This type of walleye fishing is truly small boat fishing as it takes place on the shallow near shore shoals where larger boats dare not venture. Small boats also enjoy a degree of safety as they can fish close to shore and can get off the lake quickly if one of Lake Erie's early season storms arise.

The offshore walleye fishing in late May through July was spotty with good fishing one day only to find out that your GPS waypoints didn't produce fish the next day. The lures, which worked the most

consistently, were worm harnesses of different colors with Ronesky and Reef Runner plugs also effective on some days. The walleyes caught were of high quality with many in the 8-10 lb. range! Brief moments of success followed by long periods of boredom where you have to continue to change location and lures seems to best describe the sporadic early summer offshore walleye fishing in eastern Lake Erie in 2002. Some good charter captains instruct their first mates to change lures every half-hour if they are marking fish and no strikes occur. Sometimes lures that do not work early in the day produce strikes later, so don't be afraid to try lures several times during the day, especially if the lure has been successful in the past. Most of the veteran fishermen are now using some of the new generation of lines like "Berkley's Fireline". These lines have virtually no stretch and have a small diameter, which allows a fisherman to run his lures deeper without adding weight. Wire line and Dipsy divers still remain staples on most charter boats. The success of the upcoming late summer walleye fishing will, as always, depend heavily on an influx of Lake Erie western basin walleye. Last year was the first time in recent memory when this annual migration from west to east didn't occur. If you are considering a trip up to western New York consider giving this world class fishery a try. More up to date information on walleye fishing can be found at www.Buffalocvb or the fishing information line at 716-844-1111 ext.4142. If you would like one of the new up to date Buffalo and Erie County Fishing Guides call 716-858-6926.

Try This Walleye Recipe

Walleye in Cream Sauce

4 tablespoons butter
1 onion, peeled and chopped
2 pounds walleye fillets
salt
freshly ground black pepper
1 bay leaf
1/2 cup dry white wine
1/2 cup fish stock
1 cup heavy cream
2 tablespoons chopped parsley
2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill
pinch of ground nutmeg
juice of 1/2 lemon

Melt the butter in a large frying pan and add the onion. Saute for 3-4 minutes and add the fish fillets. Season with salt and pepper and add the bay leaf, white wine and stock. Cover and simmer for 20 minutes. Remove the fish carefully to a serving platter and keep warm. Reduce the poaching liquid in the pan by half. Add the cream, parsley, and dill and reduce by half again. Season with the nutmeg and lemon juice and pour the sauce over the fish.

Hint: Be careful not to overcook the fish. Also, cookfish with the skin side up.

This recipe goes well with rice or noodles.

**Catch
Lake Erie Walleye
on the Internet
at:
WWW.WALLEYE.COM**