

Trolling Open-Water Walleyes

Two Lake Erie Central Basin Charter Captains Share Their Tips

by
W. H. (Chip) Gross

One of a charter boat captain's toughest jobs is locating fish day after day, week after week, month after month. And once he's found fish, he must be able to put them in the boat for his clients. Two of the best at doing that in Lake Erie's vast Central Basin are charter captains Jim Cooper and Bob Schmidt. Both captains run boats out of Lorain, Ohio and are members of the Central Basin Charter Boat Association. Following are a few of their suggestions for catching walleyes and steelhead by trolling.

Captain Jim Cooper on:

A Basic Trolling Spread

"Ohio fishing law allows two rods per licensed angler, so if I have six customers, a mate, and myself onboard I run 16 lines at once. My spread normally consists of eight directional diver rods (4 on each side of the boat) and six planer board rods (3 on each side). In addition, I and some of the other boats in the area also run downriggers. Of the three methods, the downriggers seem to catch fewer walleyes than the other two. However, when the steelhead are running the 'riggers work great. I recommend using the same make and length of rod for the board lines. I also run them straight up in the air. That way, it's easy to tell if you have a

small fish hanging on when you see one rod bent more than the



others. For my directional-diver rods, I run 7-, 8-, 9-, and 10-footers. This gives me a little more separation between rods. I lay them down in a horizontal position in the rod holders."

Preferred Lines

"I run 50-pound test braid that has 12-pound diameter. This line, combined with 25-pound test fluorocarbon leaders, has really cut down on lost fish because of line breakage. I recommend fluorocarbon leaders because they are close to being invisible, are soft yet tough, have minimal memory, are

abrasion resistant, and have minimum stretch. I cut my leaders in six foot lengths. Many people use rubber snubbers between a diver and the leader. I personally haven't had any problems landing walleyes without them, but I do run snubbers on the divers closest to the boat when steelhead are in the area. Good snap swivels are also important."

Preferred Baits

"In the Lorain area, spoons are very popular, whereas east of Cleveland worm harnesses seem to be used more. I run mainly spoons, worm harnesses, and shallow diving plugs. When running deep-diving plugs, I don't run them off diving devices as they will pull the back of the diver down causing it to come to the surface. Controlling lure depth is extremely important. I've always said that I'd rather be running the wrong lure at the right depth than the right lure at the wrong depth. It's also better to be running baits a little above fish than below. If



you're not catching fish, don't be afraid to experiment with various depths and baits."

Captain Bob Schmidt on:

Finding Fish

"Zebra mussels continue to have a drastic effect on the water clarity of the lake, and as a result I recently bought a speed and temperature gauge to help me find the comfort zone of fish. I thought that would help me locate the fish themselves, but what I discovered was this. In the mornings, as the sun was just coming up, light penetration was only about ten percent at 45 feet. But very quickly the light increased to 100 percent by about nine a.m. and stayed that way all day until evening. I checked it many days and at all depths and got similar readings. The only difference was after a storm when the water was turbid.

"I was having trouble catching fish at the normal [pre-zebra mussel] water levels. It didn't make any difference what baits I used, the



results were the same—some fish, but not the numbers I needed. What I believed was happening was this. If the light-shy walleyes wanted to feed during the day, they had to do it in bright light no matter what the depth. So I started looking for bait fish and usually found them up around ten feet. I tried running baits off #10 Jet Divers from a planer board on one side of the boat and #20s on the other side. That did the trick; I started catching more fish. I was even able to run flat lines at times. The point is this, with that much light in the water it didn't make any difference where the fish were in the water column, they couldn't get away from the sunlight. And if they wanted to eat they eventually had to come to where the bait was, oftentimes very high. I was limiting out by running most of my baits high when other captains were struggling to get just a few fish."

Braided Line vs. Mono

"I've tried some of the new braided fishing lines on my trolling reels (30-pound test, 8-pound diameter) and found that it's so thin it's like using sewing thread. Knots are almost impossible to untangle. It gets Dipsy Divers down fast and deep, but too deep and too close to the boat, in my opinion. Monofilament for running Dipsy's has its disadvantages too because of line stretch, but given a choice, and with water fleas now in the lake accumulating on trolling lines, the new oval-shaped monofilaments might be the way to go."

Spoons

"Lake Erie walleyes and steelhead love Michigan Stinger spoons, but as most trollers know the paint on the older spoons peels off easily. I repaint my old spoons with powdered paint that you melt onto the spoons. If you have the time and the will to do it they work great, and the paint stays on. You can also add some metallic tape to the spoon to give it more flash. I like pink best, but most colors worked for me last year. I usually had at least two or three spoons in the water at all times."

For more information contact:

Central Basin Charter Boat Association – 1-800-686-4702 or www.cbcba.com

Captain Bob Schmidt – BoKay Fishing Charters, 888-551-0440

Captain Jim Cooper – J & H Fishing Charters, 800-595-6673