

Locating 'Eyes and Steelies after the Lake Erie Winds Blow

by
Jeff Frischkorn

The hunt was on but it was good to know that two of the Central Basin's best bird dogs were hot on the fish's tail. "People always ask why we fish every day but really, every day is different. You have to find them and stay with them," said Ron Johnson of Perry Township.

A well-known and equally well-respected Lake Erie charter captain, Johnson was tag-teaming with fellow Grand River fishing guide, Marv DeGreen of Huntsburg Township.

Johnson and DeGreen were engaged in a scouting mission designed to relocate both steelhead trout and walleye. The effort was made necessary because last weekend's nasty winds created rough seas. This tumultuous duo of titans scattered the lake's horde of walleye and steelhead, also sending the baitfish to parts unknown. All that was left was a nickel's worth of change.

"Every blow is different and a good one sometimes sets up a mud line, which is fine. You can usually locate fish at the edge of a mud line," DeGreen said.

Thus, finding both the prey and the predators is a never-ending chore. So even when the men aren't working they are, well, working,

both charter skippers said.

"Before the blow everything was cooking," DeGreen said, rigging up one of the planer board lines with clips.

To these snaps DeGreen and Johnson attached lines cabled with Stinger spoons. The most popular Stinger spoon colors of late include the firm's "confusion" - a mixed bag of hues that sparkle and dazzle the fish into striking.

Other good Stinger spoon colors include what's called "yellow jacket" and "boy/girl" - a pattern that involves fusing pink on the lure's port side, blue on the starboard side and a streak of silver showing down the middle.

"The steelies' love it," Johnson said. "But when things get tough and the water is turned all around then sometimes body baits work better. I think it's the size of the lure and the fact that a body bait can attract the attention of a walleye or a trout."

Yet first finding fish is the highest priority since throwing lures at something that isn't swimming within a few yards will guarantee a cooler filled with air instead of walleye.

To that end the charter captains watched the passing of the images

on the boat's electronic fish finder. They also looked for slicks, or trails of water that appear on the lake's surface.

"Those are currents," Johnson said, pointing to a set of zig-zagging slicks in the trackless lake. "Find those and a steelhead might be nearby."

Importantly, DeGreen also said, is the need to look for the establishment of a thermocline, an invisible cordon that separates the lake's warmer waters from its colder waters.

The more well defined the thermocline the better the odds are in favor of the fishermen as the walleye and the steelhead are found straddling the barrier.

Even more telling is that the thermocline represents the zone in which the all-important bait fish uses as their reference point, DeGreen says. "Walleye and steelhead have to eat so you have to go looking first for the bait," DeGreen said. In these kinds of conditions, after a blow, the fish and the bait could be anywhere, top to bottom."

The hunt this particular evening started out many miles from Lake Erie's south shore. In water about 68 feet deep Johnson and DeGreen set up their usual arsenal

of directional divers and Jet Divers to which went a selection of spoons.

In short order a 5-pound trout tripped a directional diver as did an equally sized walleye. Neither fish impressed the two charter captains who modulated the boat's speed either faster or slower to see if any alteration would help get the fish's attention.

When their work failed to yield the hoped-for results, DeGreen and Johnson then throttled up the boat's engines. Their destination was south toward much more shallow water off the Mentor Lagoons. It was here that a coterie of fellow fishing guides were plucking walleye.

With a water depth never exceeding 50 feet, the zone for locating fish became all that much more confining. "Last year we had the fish in this same area all the way through July. It was good for business because we didn't have to run very far or use up much gas," DeGreen said. "It was our gravy run."

Dinner was definitely being spooned up as the Stingers bit the lips of nearly one dozen walleye before the sun tilted below the horizon."Once you know the program, where to go and what to use, then you're going to catch fish," DeGreen said.

For information about fishing with DeGreen, contact him at (216) 970-1246. For information about fishing with Johnson, contact him at (440) 487-0002.

Better Walleye Days Ahead?? **By Jeffrey L. Frischkorn**

Though all of the statistics are far from in, chances are that Lake Erie's Central Basin will have experienced an average walleye angling year. If that. Yet ongoing fisheries research is pointing to much more productive angling beginning in 2003.

"Our work so far is showing that we have a good 2001 year class of walleye, which will help build up the population. These should start to appear in the fisheries beginning next year as right now they are only 7 to 8 inches long," said Kevin Kayle, manager of the Ohio Division of Wildlife's Fairport Harbor Fisheries Research Station.

The lake's largest stock of walleye is made up of fish from the 1999 year class with the fish measuring 15 to 18 inches. Another strong year class of walleye include those fish which were hatched in 1996. These latter fish measure 21 to 25 inches and make up about 20 to 25 percent of the lake's total population, Kayle said.

"And we still have from 2 to 5 percent of fish from the 1986 year class. These fish are the real trophies: 29 inches or longer," Kayle said.

With such heavy weights, a possibility exists that the current state record walleye title will fall. This record-holding fish weighed 16.19 pounds, measured 33 inches long and was caught by Tom Haberman of Brunswick on November 23, 1999.

"There is always that potential, especially when you consider that the lake has about 40 million walleye," Kayle said. Kayle added that last year an estimated 217,000 fish out of the 1.16 million taken by Ohio Lake Erie sport anglers were caught in the Central Basin.

The net result is that Lake Erie's sport fishing fleet should experience angling at least as good as it was last season. "Next year it will be different because then we'll begin to see those 2001 year class fish enter the picture," Kayle said.

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