

Lake Erie "Perch-Jerkin Fever" Catch IT!

by

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Anglers and other vacationers who travel to Lake Erie this year will not want to miss out on the perch fishing bonanza Lake Erie anglers have been enjoying in recent years. This popular Lake Erie species provides a fun, easy, and affordable angling experience with big rewards.

Most anglers agree that the walleye ranks number one in popularity, but yellow perch are considered the tastiest fish in the lake. They are abundant, widespread, easy to catch, and provide perfect family-style entertainment.

"Yellow perch offers the only 'Mom and Pop' fishery on the lake. That's what makes it such a bonus," said Jim Fofrich, Sr. of Toledo, who has fished Lake Erie since his youth. Fofrich has also been a charter captain on the big lake for more than 30 years. "Dad and Mom can take the kids to a pier or out in a small boat and get

limit catches of nice yellow perch in the 9 to 12-inch range. It's simple fishing that doesn't require a \$40,000 boat or sophisticated equipment, and perch are fun to catch."



Mom and son with a 'Double-Header' of perch which are common in Lake Erie, especially during the fall perch run. Photo by Norm Kubb

Perch of the Past

This popular fishery has been luring anglers to Ohio's big lake for decades. In a January 1957 article in the Ohio Conservation Bulletin (the forerunner of Wild Ohio), the author summed up the 1955 yellow perch season.

'During September and October; sportsmen who journeyed to the lake from all parts of Ohio and surrounding states to enjoy the beautiful Indian summer weather were treated to

large catches of big perch daily... Catches from 100 to 300 perch per small boat were not uncommon and, of course, the take by party fishing boats was proportionately greater. "In this area where a catch of one fish per hour is average, (creel census during the period showed a range in the perch catch of from three to 11

fish per hour; other species excluded. On October 4, 1955 a creel census from 108 anglers revealed a catch of 2,411 perch which figures to be about 11 fish per hour."

In the Toledo Blade in 1955, outdoor columnist Lew Klewer reported that one party fishing boat out of Toledo caught 19,467



Head boats are an affordable way to get out on the water and enjoy the fall perch season on Lake Erie. Photo by Chip Gross.

perch for the season. The park manager at Catawba State Park estimated that for a 30 day period during September and October of that year, approximately 60,000 pounds of perch were brought in by the boats using the launch ramp at the park.

Today, although perch are now second to walleye as the most sought after sport species, this was not always the case. Division of Wildlife creel records show that in 1975 anglers spent more than 3.3 million angler hours fishing for yellow perch and only 660,000 angler hours in pursuit of walleye. But two years later, the walleye fishery took off with anglers spending 3.5 million angler hours in hot pursuit of walleyes, and 3.2 million angler hours catching yellow perch.

**Great Lakes Fishery
Commission -
Lake Erie Committee**

These two popular sport fish have provided Lake Erie anglers years of top-rate angling because of some successful spawns and lake-wide management efforts through the Great Lakes Fishery Commission's Lake Erie Committee. The committee, made up of fisheries managers from the Lake Erie states and Ontario, Canada, establish interagency management strategies and set an annual number of walleye and yellow perch (total allowable catch) that can be taken from the lake without harming the populations.

"Yellow perch stocks have declined all across the Great Lakes, but Lake Erie is the only Great Lake where yellow perch have had a steady recovery (after low numbers in the mid-1990s). That speaks well for the Lake Erie Committee," Fofrich said.

Today, Ohio Lake Erie anglers fill coolers with 5.5 million yellow perch annually. Despite the

popularity of walleye, yellow perch takes center stage in late summer and fall. Some anglers fish for yellow perch spring through fall, but the traditional perch-fishing months are August through October when perch are concentrated in large schools near shorelines. The best action and highest catch rates occur in September and October, when limit catches of 30 fish per angler are often caught within two or three hours of fishing. The action continues into early winter, often as late as November and December for some hardy anglers with only wind or storm events slowing the action.

Yellow perch are well distributed across the entire lake with traditional fishing hot spots too numerous to mention. But boat anglers need not go far from shore to get into a school of perch. If perch aren't biting at one location, the best strategy is to move to another location until a school is located.

Anglers usually know right away if they have found a school of perch. The action usually starts soon after dropping anchor and can be fast and furious. The fish's quick, light to medium tugs or "jerking" on the rig makes perch fishing loads of fun. Upon getting a bite, anglers instinctively jerk their rods up to set the hook, hence the nickname "perch jerking." Catching doubles and triples- more than one perch taking separate baits on the same rig at one time- are common.

Erie's yellow perch are not only plentiful and well distributed, but large. The number of jumbo-sized perch has increased in the past few years as recent hatches have

matured. Perch from a large hatch in 1996, the largest hatch in 10 years, now measure 10 to 12 inches. Other year classes that are adding to the current catch include 1998-spawned perch (8 to 10 inches) and 1999-spawned perch (8 to 9 inches.)

Make it a Family Affair

The traditional fishing method used for catching perch is easy to master, making yellow perch fishing an ideal family activity. The equipment is simple, no casting is involved, and for kids, catching lots of smaller fish such as perch is more satisfying than catching fewer, bigger fish such as walleyes.

“Having grown up within walking distance from Edgewater breakwall in Cleveland, perch fishing on Lake Erie has been a family activity since I’ve been old enough to bait a hook,” said Gene Emond, Lake Erie angler and fisheries biologist with the Division of Wildlife’s Lake Erie Fisheries Research Unit in Sandusky. “Tools of the trade were and continue to be affordable for all income levels, with the added bonus of a delicious perch dinner for the table.”

Emond has passed the perch fishing tradition on to his two children and offers some advice for families considering a perch-fishing outing.

“Keep in mind that each child will have a different level of interest. Some kids, like my daughter, Lauren, will fish all day and love every minute of it, even when the fish aren’t especially cooperative. Others, like my son, Nathan, look

for a book or some other activity if the fish aren’t jumping in the boat right from the start.”

Nothing discourages a new angler more than a reel that’s difficult to use or fish that won’t bite, says Emond. Younger anglers requiring assistance should be provided with a reliable rod and reel combination. These can be purchased at most discount stores for under \$20, less for youth-sized gear. Easy to use, closed-face spinning reel and rod combos, equipped with perch or crappie rigs or spreaders and sinkers, should be all that the beginning angler will need. For the best success, trips planned during the months of April and May or August through October offer dependable and exciting action at most public piers and breakwalls, according to Emond.

Walk-on charter boats (holding 20 to 50 people) are available at a reasonable cost at many major ports along Ohio’s shoreline, with most operating twice a day for your choice of either a morning or afternoon excursion. The cost is around \$25 per person, versus a “six-pack” charter (for up to six people) that goes for about \$400 to \$450.

“A common mistake of new perch anglers is storing your perch in a bucket, either empty or filled with water, especially in warmer weather,” Emond said. “The inevitable result is that tomorrow’s meal tastes fishy or stronger than expected, which can turn off many people to future perch fishing trips. Always take along a cooler of ice for the day’s catch and get your perch cleaned as soon as possible.”

sible.”

For those who want a quick and convenient option of cleaning the day’s catch, Emond recommends the many fish-cleaning businesses situated in and around most ports and harbor communities along the lake.

“One thing is for sure. When the fishing is good, everyone’s happy and the smile on a child’s face when a fish is on the line is a memory made for life,” he said. “There’s a saying that when you give someone a fish, you feed them for a day, but when you teach someone to fish, you feed them for a lifetime,” said Emond.

How It’s Done

The simplest and most effective technique for catching perch uses two or three hooks attached to a spreader or “perch rig” and weighted with a sinker of up to two ounces. This is baited with live emerald shiners or minnows and dropped to the bottom. (Anglers also use salted minnows, nightcrawlers, red worms, or perch belly meat as a substitute for live minnows.) Anglers are most successful by varying the location of the bait on or near the bottom in a jigging fashion, moving the rig up and down in the water column.

Yellow perch tend to move offshore in the summer months, moving back closer to shore or islands as waters cool in the fall (10- to 20-foot depths in the Western Basin, and 20 to 40 feet or more in the Central Basin.) Perch fishing is also very popular with shore anglers. Many public

fishing piers and breakwalls located all along the Ohio shoreline from Toledo to Conneaut provide easy access to some good perch fishing. See the sidebar with this article that lists some shoreline areas providing good perch fishing, especially spring and fall. Shore anglers can be successful using traditional perch spreaders tipped with minnows, but many perch are also caught when using other live bait while fishing for “whatever bites.”

Ice anglers also do well in pursuit of yellow perch when the lake and Sandusky Bay get sufficient ice cover. Again, minnows are the preferred bait, but some perch are taken on jigging spoons or jigs tipped with waxworms, maggots, or worms. Once the ice melts, anglers have found several traditional spring hot spots: Marblehead/Catawba area and downtown Cleveland breakwalls generally provide good success in April and May.

“With wise management and a healthy outlook for Lake Erie’s yellow perch population, perch jerking will continue to be a Lake Erie tradition for generations to come,” said Emond. “It’s the stuff memories are made of, so don’t forget to take along your camera to capture the fun on film.”

Good Places to Fish for Yellow Perch from the Lake Erie Shore:

Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area -SR 2 at Bono Road, Curtice

Port Clinton Pier -Perry Street (SR 163), down-town

Port Clinton Catawba State Park Pier - Moors Dock Road, Catawba

Mazurik Access -8 1/2 miles east of Port Clinton off SR 163 on Northshore Blvd.

Dempsey Access -CR 135 (Bayshore Road) at CR 14, 5 miles east of SR 169

Sandusky Bay Bridge Fishing Access -Exit SR 2 at SR 269, exit on west end, Bayview

Battery Park Marina -701 E. Water St., downtown Sandusky

Jackson Street Pier -foot of Jackson Street, down-town Sandusky

Kelleys Island State Park Breakwall -north tip of Kelleys Island

Huron Pier -north of SR 286 at Huron

Cleveland Lakefront State Park – Edgewater Memorial Parkway, use Edgewater Park exit
East 55th Street Access -north end of East 55th Street, Cleveland

Gordon Park -north end of East 72nd Street, Cleveland

Euclid Beach -SR 283, east of East 156th Street, Cleveland

Wildwood Park -junction of SR 283 and East 174th Street, Cleveland

Fairport Harbor Port Authority Boat Launch -north end of Water Street, Fairport

West Breakwall -Walnut Beach Park, Ashtabula

West Breakwall -Conneaut Harbor, north end of Broad Street, Conneaut

The following county visitors bureaus located along the Lake Erie shoreline can provide more information on charter boat services and lodging:

- ? Ashtabula County Convention & Visitors Bureau (1-800-337-6746)
- ? Lake County Visitors Bureau (1-800-368-5253)
- ? Convention & Visitors Bureau of Greater Cleveland (1-800-321-1001)
- ? Lorain County Visitors Bureau (1-800-334-1673)
- ? Sandusky/Erie County Visitors Bureau (1-800-255-8070)
- ? Ottawa County Visitors Bureau (1-800-441-1271)
- ? Greater Toledo Convention & Visitors Bureau (1-800-2243-4667)
- ? Ohio Division of Travel & Tourism (1-800-BUCK-EYE)

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