

Two-Timing Walleyes

by
Mark Martin

In fall, I follow a pattern that mirrors the predictability of the walleyes. It goes like this: jig moderate depths most of the day; cast or troll minnowbaits in the last hour or two before dark and on into the night.

Sound straightforward enough? You bet it is. Although other patterns exist, say, plumbing the depths with lead-core line, I like to keep it simple everywhere from the natural lakes of the North Country to the big water of Lake Erie and the rest of the Great Lakes. This is the time of year when walleyes are primed to feed before winter, focusing on minnow-related prey. That's precisely why I do the same, working live bait or plastic minnows on jigs during the light of day, then casting jerkbaits and trolling slim-minnow imitations once the witching hour arrives. The way I look at it, it's a recipe for destruction.

Bigger Bait, Live or Fake

Grab a handful of Northland Fire-Ball jigs and a bucket of shiners and chubs and you're partway there. To complement a live-bait

little faster work great when fish are highly aggressive or rather neutral. Sometimes the neutral ones respond to a little more speed than to standard jigging with bait.

Try some of each to find what's working. One new offering from Berkley is an assortment of bulked-up four-inch minnows, new additions beyond the standard three-inchers that mimic the bigger baitfish of fall.

When picking out prime areas, I look for points, humps, weeds and flats near deep water. During the daytime, I'll slide off the edges of them, starting at the break and working deeper. Quality electronics, such as the Lowrance liquid-crystal units, will pinpoint both bait and fish, pretty fine starting points



The combination of jigging during the day and casting at dusk and into the evening are proven techniques for catching fall walleyes.

approach, I'll stock up on Berkley Power Minnows and long-shank Northland jigs an option for when walleyes are really popping or when they're really not. By that I mean that plastic minnows jigged a

by me. Another asset for such areas is a fairly steep break, which gives the fish the ability to hang out on mud or rock bottom for most of the day and climb into the shallows to chow down as

evening approaches.

Typically I'll control my drift with a bowmount Minn Kota trolling motor, jigging vertically with sizable minnows (just what walleyes are looking for in fall). I pay attention to when I feel the minnow struggling, a tip-off predators are in the area. With plastics such as Power Minnows, I'll pitch out and snap them back with a lift-and-drop retrieve or work them right below the boat, hopping them six to 10 inches off bottom. If the wind's an issue, consider investing in Trojan deep-cycle batteries, which have the staying power in the gusts of fall, teamed with an easy-to-open, easy-to-retrieve drift sock from JNB Originals. The sock, along with the long-lasting batteries, will keep you from speeding too fast even in the gales of October and November.

Prime depths depend mostly on water clarity. If the lake has a little stain, I can catch fish jigging with bait or plastic between about 12 and 18 feet. If it's pretty clear, I'll go deeper, as deep as 30 feet. Here it's important to watch for fish on electronics. Remember, the deeper you get, the easier it is to see them, particularly in depths in excess of 15 feet. One solid strategy for finding fish is to check out a Fishing Hot Spots map and to look for the most prominent structure on the lake. Then I take a closer look to find where the contour lines are closest, an indication of steeper drops. That's the key area to key in on, and it's the fastest way to find fall walleyes.

The Boatside Bash

For all the excellent fall fishing in the depths during the daytime, I know when to say when, that is, when to slide shallower when the sun nears the top of the trees. Like clockwork, walleyes move in farther and are even more aggressive. That makes them perfect targets for minnow baits.

My favorites are Rapala Husky Jerks, suspending baits that dive when retrieved and stay put, hovering at the same depth, when stopped. In fall, I seldom use anything smaller than a No. '0, usually going larger with a No. '2 or No. '4, even if the fish aren't all that large. The reason is that autumn walleyes key in on large baits. It's that simple. A trick, though, is to add a strip of reflective tape from WTP Inc. to the bait's side. I was sold when I watched minnows flash in a fish tank in low light; I was sold even more so when I tried the tape long ago and caught more walleyes than other anglers in my boat without it.

To work the five- to 12-foot depth profile, I whip out a Husky Jerk, crank to get it down and stop. If you're around walleyes, you sometimes can let it sit until you get bit. If you don't get one to hit the bait, twitch it once, twice or three times and stop. Repeat all the way back to the boat. Warning: Big walleyes will often smack a jerkbait when it's a foot from the boat. That's a riot.

In this instance, keep a loose drag so walleyes don't come unbuttoned on a short line. I put Berkley 6-pound FireLine, a thin-diameter superline, on my Mitchell reels. The reels cast great, eliminating

twists and snarls from the line, and offer a smooth drag to help offset the boatside bash.

My other favorite technique, although it's not as up close and personal, is to troll Rapala Original Floaters with an electric motor. When I'm 10 feet or less during the evening or after dark, I seldom add weight to a No. 13 Rap, the perfect size in fall. (I just make sure I add reflective tape and a ring of glow paint around the tail and head of the bait, then attach the Rapala with a Berkley Cross-Lok snap to allow the bait to wobble.) I'll let the lure out 80 to 120 feet and tune in the trolling motor at a speed just fast enough to make the lure wobble. Now you're in business. The Rapala is buoyant enough to stay above weeds or rocks. If you're smacking bottom too often or snarling in weeds, bring the Rap in 20 feet at a time until it's running free. It's often difficult to run a bait too high above the fish, since they'll rise up to smack it. The distance behind the boat simply provides a little cushion between you and the fish to minimize spooking.

With all the techniques out there and all the options that exist when fish are scattered from shallow to deep in summertime, jigging and working minnow baits are refreshing returns to simplicity. After all, when the walleye's patterns are downright predictable, it makes the most sense to mirror their patterns with minnow imitations out deeper during daylight and in shallower when the light wanes. Well, what are you waiting for?