

The Eastern Lake Erie Fishing Report for Fall 2003

by
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The old adage that 10% of the fishermen catch 90% of the fish could be used to assess the offshore Eastern Lake Erie summer walleye fishery in the summer of 2003. The walleye fishermen that fished several times a week could keep close tabs on the nomadic small schools of walleye and consistently return to port with near limit walleye catches in late July and August. Once again worm harnesses seem to work the best followed closely by Ronesky and similar stick baits. Spoons tipped with worms also started producing later in the summer. The veterans followed

the old adage "run silent run deep" using Downriggers, Dipsy Divers, Jet Planers, wire line, braided line and other devices to attain the desired depth of the suspended walleye schools. This year the majority of the walleye seemed to be west of the Cattaraugus Creek, which is a return to the typical pattern of the offshore walleye in the summer. Last year was unusual in that a lot of walleye seemed to stay to the

east of Cattaraugus Creek instead of gradually moving west as the summer progressed.

Most fishermen had to really "pay their dues" as the walleye season



Gary Dudek was the big Southtowns Tournament winner in 2003 with a 12.36 pounder

started very slowly. This was especially true during the Southtowns Walleye Association's 19th annual walleye tournament as the water was cold and the fish scattered. This tournament generally has approx. 2000 entries and many large fish are caught. This again was true in 2003 as it took a 12.36-pound walleye to win. Cash prizes were awarded for the top 200 fish with low to cash exceeding 9 pounds. The walleye

that wins this tournament has gotten consistently bigger over the years, during the 1980's a 10-pound walleye was uncommon with 5-10 being caught for the whole Southtowns tournament and low to cash weighing between 7 and 8 pounds. Last year over 30 fish exceeded 10 pounds! The general trend in the eastern basin fishery has fewer but larger walleyes. This year however a lot of 3-5 pound walleyes have been showing up which is very encouraging for the future fishery. Southtowns is a very conservation minded club in that they strongly advocate catch

and release if the fish is not intended for consumption and will not even weigh in walleyes at their tournament that do not exceed 26".

The professional walleye fishermen (PWT) also had a tournament in the middle of July at Dunkirk. These fishermen quickly showed why they are pros as they caught hundreds of walleyes in their brief stay at Dunkirk. They fished a little differ-

ent then our local experts in that they used a lot of lead core line to get their lures deep. The vast majority of these fishermen had open bow aluminum boats between 18 and 24 feet equipped with large outboard motors so they would waste very little time getting to their selected fishing spots. These boats are great for smaller lakes but as many of our Lake Erie veterans know, are marginal for offshore Lake Erie fishing. The lack of weight and size almost caused a tragedy as one of these boats capsized during a gale force windstorm with 8- 12-foot seas on the second day of the tournament. Both participants were tossed into the sea but as luck would have it another tournament boat happened to accidentally discover them shortly afterwards. To accidentally discover anyone in the water in 8-12 foot seas, I believe is extremely unusual to say the least! One of the participants suffered minor injuries along with hypothermia and was treated in Lakeshore hospital. Both boats did not hear the earlier suspension of the tournament due to the high winds and rough water. The capsized boat valued at approx. \$80,000 went to the bottom and as of this article has not been recovered. The local soup kitchens benefited from this tournament as they received "unsavable" walleyes for their use. All of the PWT tournaments advocate catch and release and the fish are handled with due care but if the fish does not survive they are normally donated to local charitable organizations who distribute the fish to needy families.

Early reports seem to indicate that 2003 was an excellent year for walleye spawning on the Eastern Shore of Lake Erie. Historically a cold long winter followed by a rapid warm-up seems to produce the conditions nec-

essary for a good class year of walleye. I will have more on this once the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) completes their annual fall survey of the Eastern Lake Erie fishery. Preliminary reports are that the western basin also might have a benchmark year for walleye spawning.

The cooperative venture between the Erie County Federation of sportsmen, the Erie County Fish Advisory board and the NYSDEC is still being planned with the initial stocking of 50,000 walleye fingerlings to take place in Buffalo River next spring. This landmark program will run for approx. 5 years with an annual stocking of 50,000 fingerlings. It is hoped that the walleye eggs used for this project will come from local waters such as the Cattaraugus Creek, Smokes Creek or from the nearby open water shoals on Lake Erie. It is hoped that these walleye fingerlings will imprint on the Buffalo River and return to spawn in the future. This will stabilize the annual class year success of walleye on the eastern basin, which at this time is problematic at best. The success of spring open water spawning of walleye on Lake Erie is sometimes decimated by the tenuous weather patterns in early spring.

The cold water fishery in the deeper waters off Dunkirk and Barcelona Harbors was "hot" this summer with rainbows, lake trout and the occasional Salmon leading the way. The New York State record for Lake Trout was broken in August with a Lake trout that weighed in at over 41 pounds. It was not uncommon in August for offshore fishermen to return to port with a "mixed

bag" of fish which would sometimes include perch, walleye, smallmouth bass and cold water species such as lake trout or steelhead. The summer offshore steelhead fishing can be quite spectacular due to the annual stocking programs of Pennsylvania and New York State.

Summer perch fishing was spotty for the fishermen and to be successful the fishermen had to find the somewhat elusive schools of perch. The fishing should pick up this fall when the perch school and feed before the onset of winter. Last year the offshore fall perch fishing was great with limit catches (50 fish) not unusual. I think this will again occur during October and November. If the lake freezes I would expect to have a repeat performance of last year when the ice fishing was excellent.

Last but not least the smallmouth bass fishing continued to be world class in 2003. Mike Desforges of Ontario, Canada recently won a KEY professional bass tournament with a weight of 53-02 pounds for 15 smallmouth bass. He collected \$50,500 for his efforts. This fishery is getting national attention and more and more tournaments are coming to the area to check out this remarkable fishery. Fall musky fishing, which runs through the end of November can produce trophy size muskies for the hardy fishermen who want to brave the cold winds off Lake Erie in late fall. Muskies in excess of 50 inches have been caught this summer and supposedly the big ones bite in the fall! Almost all of the local musky fishermen practice catch and release in an attempt to preserve and enhance this fragile local fishery. I hope you had a good season, I certainly did.