

The Eastern Lake Erie Fishery Report for Spring 2003

by
Joe Fischer

Before we make our annual fishing forecast for Eastern Lake Erie for 2003 lets take a cursory review of what happened in 2002 because, as always, much of the forecast for 2003 is based on 2002. Last year started slowly with average early spring nearshore walleye fishing. The walleye fishing improved markedly during the annual Southtowns Walleye tournament in early July with fishermen establishing a new record catch with over 200 walleyes exceeding 9.45lbs! The good tournament fishing proved to not be a fluke as the rest of the summer and early fall was even better for seasoned offshore Eastern Lake Erie walleye fishermen. 2002 offshore walleye fishing was different than other years as the walleyes did not follow their normal mid-summer migratory pattern from the shallower water in the east near Buffalo to the deeper waters off Barcelona and Dunkirk harbors. Many walleyes were still being caught west of Sturgeon Point in 60-80 feet of water in mid to late August. In most of the previous summers the walleyes would have migrated into deeper water (70-100ft.) in early August. The reason for this lack of movement is unclear but a good guess would be that it is related to plentiful bait and water temperature.

Perch fishing was outstanding

with many limit catches especially in late summer and early fall. Many eastern basin fishermen switched from walleye to perch fishing because in their opinion nothing beats a fresh Lake Erie perch dinner!

The smallmouth bass fishing was excellent as it continues to become recognized as a world class fishery which is finally getting the recognition it deserves. It was not uncommon to catch and release over 20 good size smallmouth bass on an average day! For the first time the amount of people fishing for smallmouth bass fishermen is almost equivalent to the walleye fishermen on the eastern shores of Lake Erie.

Last years fall trawling surveys by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) revealed that the young of year (YOY) walleye class for 2002 was very poor. This bad news was easily offset by an excellent yearling class of walleyes from 2001, which are expected to grow to legal size by the fall of 2003. This "good year, bad year" spawning cycle is quite common with walleyes and other species of fish. The older classes of big walleyes from the 1980's are still around but are becoming scarcer every year. The walleye fishery for 2003 will be dominated by the good class years of 1996

and 1998. The eastern basin population will continue to be a quality rather than a quantity fishery with walleye averaging 4-6 pounds. I do not believe that this quality walleye fishery can be matched anywhere in the United States at this time.

Anyone interested in trying this trophy walleye fishery should consider fishing in August and September as recent NYSDEC surveys have revealed that the greatest walleye fishing pressure occurs in July whereas the peak walleye fishing in the last few years usually starts in mid-August through September! Close to limit catches are very common during the aforementioned prime time.

The August and September offshore fishermen generally have fiberglass boats larger than 20 feet as they sometimes venture a good 10 miles from the shore to find the walleye schools. The weather can be quite capricious in late summer and early fall with wind and rain sometimes arriving without much warning. It is advisable to monitor your weather radio if you have a smaller boat and are not sure of current weather conditions. Always remember Lake Erie is quite shallow and waves 3-5 feet can come up in a very short time and can make for a difficult trip especially if your destination port is upwind!

The lures of choice once again will be similar to last year with Ronesty plugs and spinner and worm of various colors and sizes leading the way. Tipping your body baits with a small piece of worm also has proven effective when the walleyes are biting short. The terminal tackle preferred by most offshore anglers is planer boards, Jet Planers of various sizes, downriggers, Dipsy Divers and wire and braided lines. A good fish locator and GPS satellite navigational system are also a must if you wish to locate and stay "on" the small tight walleye schools.

Don't be surprised if you catch quite a few steelhead this year as the population of this great fighting fish is very high due to the stocking efforts of primarily Pennsylvania and New York. The late summer offshore walleye fishermen are also fishing in 60-100 feet of water, which is considered steelhead territory along with the late summer walleyes.

The bottom line is that the eastern basin walleye fishery appears to have evolved into a stable quality fishery comprised of many class years of walleyes. Remember the new daily creel limit for walleyes in New York waters of Lake Erie is 4 fish at least 15" long.

Perch fishing will once again be very good in 2003 and I would expect to see more and more boats fishing for these delectable little morsels as the word continues to get out on the rebound of this popular Lake Erie fishery. The key to perch fishing is to move until you find a feeding perch school and if they stop biting continue to move until you find

them again. Look for small tight pockets of boats still fishing, this is a sure sign of fishermen probably working a school of perch. The bait of choice is a Lake Erie emerald shiner but in a pinch almost any minnow will work. If unsuccessful try fishing deeper water as the NYSDEC netting surveys have shown that most perch seemed to be found in deeper water than the fishermen were working.

Local sportsmen's groups such as the Erie County Federation of Sportsmen, the Erie County Fish Advisory Board, Southtowns and New York Walleye Associations have joined in a cooperative effort with the NYSDEC to develop plans for a potential walleye stocking program in the Buffalo river and Lake Erie. This stocking program could start as early as 2004. The initial program calls for an annual stocking of approximately 50,000 walleye fingerlings into the Buffalo River for a period of 5-7 years. If the program is successful, it could lead to an annual walleye-spawning run in the Buffalo River that would probably enhance the local population of walleyes in the eastern basin waters of Lake Erie. This program is based on the initial success of a similar program started in the Cattaraugus creek approx. 8 years ago. This cooperative venture between the sportsmen and the NYSDEC is the first of its kind on eastern Lake Erie; hopefully it will not be the last! Have a great 2003 fishing season.

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more of these boards are being fished side by-side it's especially easy to tell when a fish has been hooked.

When a fish strikes and is hooked, the board and fish are reeled in together. Depending on how the board is attached to the fishing line, the angler can either reel in the board and quickly remove it, or release the board and allow it to slide down the line while fighting the fish. We'll get in more detail on how to rig in-line boards in another feature.

Walleye anglers are some of the most devoted in-line board users, but these smaller sized boards can be used effectively on any species of fish. The important thing to know about in-line boards is not all are created equal. A good in-line board should be large enough to support the weight and drag of common trolling tackle such as deep diving crankbaits, snap weights, lead core line, attractors and other gear. Many boards simply aren't big enough to get the job done.

An in-line board should also be ballasted properly. The OR-12 Side Planer is carefully weighted so the board rides nose high and always rights itself in the water. Boards that aren't ballasted correctly tend to dive in rough water causing all sorts of problems.

Because in-line boards are small, they can be tough to see on the water. The OR-t2 features a bright red flag that contrasts with the yellow board, making them easy for other anglers in the area to spot. The OR-12 is also versatile enough to be rigged in a number of ways suitable for walleye, salmon, trout and a wealth of other species.