

The Walleye Road to Nowhere

by
Mark Martin

Learn the principles of open water on Erie and you'll be ready to take the technique anywhere in walleye country.

When walleye fishing, sometimes there's no place like the middle of nowhere. We're talking far from any underwater point, hump or weed bed. We're talking far from flats, creek channels or any bottom-altering oddity that has fish written all over it on electronics. Yes, we're talking walleyes in the middle of nowhere, open-water roamers that chase bait partway down in the water column across miles of vast expanses.

Daunting? Maybe at first. Incredibly productive? You bet.

The best open-water walleye fishing on earth starts on Lake Erie in April and continues throughout the year. Meanwhile, while walleyes tend to hang closer to structure on inland waters until early summer, that's when a percentage of the population starts suspending. And that's where and when you can extend the principles of Erie's open-water trolling to anywhere in walleye country.

To start trolling for middle-of-nowhere walleyes on Erie or anywhere else, you'll need some

specialized gear, a motor that will troll down to slow speeds and a willingness to wander in search of wandering walleyes. From there, successful open-water trolling depends to a large extent on speed



Mark Martin with a good sized walleye. He's caught a few of these over the years.

control and just what constitutes the best potential water in the middle of nowhere. Even when you're 15 miles from shore on Lake Erie or Saginaw Bay, the smallest features make all the difference in the world.

Chairman of the Boards

For starters, gather up your planer boards and line-counter reels with matching rods. The planer boards I use are by Church Tackle, and they come in three sizes: the TX-6 Mini Planer, about the size of a deck of cards and best for pulling lightly weighted spinners and unweighted crankbaits; the TX-12, a great all-around board that will support up to two ounces of weight with clip-on or inline weights; and the TX-24, a magnum board with lead ballast to hold even heavier weights or even to troll with leadcore line. Another asset of the Church Boards is the fact that the clips are easy to open, making it quick and simple to get the board on and off the line.

For reels, check out the new C3 line-counters from Abu Garcia, which are built on the tried-and-true 6500 frame and come with a sophisticated line counter with LCD readout that can be calibrated for line size, type (even superlines) and spool fill.

If you already have a 6500, it's possible to buy just the counter to install on C3 and C4 reels. All you do is remove the end plate and slip the counter into place. Distance of baits behind boards, we'll find out in a moment, is a crucial part of the equation. Next, team the reels with the 7-foot, 10-inch Berkley Lightning Rod in the Signature Series with telescopic butt section stout

enough to hold up to 3- to 4-ounce bottom bouncers off the boat without boards. The 8-foot, 6-inch model has a softer tip that is perfect for trolling crankbaits and spinners with clip-on weights on boards with its flex, it also helps keep big fish from coming unbuttoned. So does monofilament such as 10-pound-test Berkley Trilene XT, which incorporates some stretch into the picture but has plenty of toughness for landing monster walleyes.

Another key ingredient is a motor to troll at slow speeds. Which ever kind of motor it is your big motor or an auxiliary kicker it has to be able to troll down to slow speeds for Erie walleyes in spring. If your big motor doesn't idle down, you can often slow the progress of the boat with a pair of 20-inch drift socks from JNB Originals, one on the starboard and one on the stern. I also use them when trolling with my kicker motor in big waves to smooth out my presentation and keep the boat from surging. For my kicker, I use the Mercury 9.9-horsepower BigFoot four-stroke with a Panther electronic steer. With the long 20-foot cord for the remote control, I can steer from anywhere in the boat, and the Merc idles down to under 1 mph, which is crucial in cold water.

Seek and Strain

On the water, the first thing I rely on is my electronics. The two most important units in my boat are the Lowrance X-16, a color unit that spots fish in vibrant reds whether they're a few feet under the surface or pinned to the bottom, and the Global Map 3000. The Global Map is also critical because it allows me to monitor trolling speeds to the tenth of a mile an hour and accommodates mapping cartridges from Fishing Hot Spots. On the electronic maps, I can see a wreck or a tiny

bump in the bottom in the middle of nowhere and troll over it. When I catch or mark fish, I put out GPS waypoints so I can return and work the same fish time and again.

In spring on Erie, it's incredibly important to be able to mark fish and bait. Sometimes I run with my big motor at 25 mph just looking for schools, a possibility on the X-16 but an impossibility on most other units. (Tip: Turn up the ping speed on the unit to help mark fish at high speeds.) I might cover a couple of miles of open water, and then when I mark clusters of fish, I punch in a waypoint and return later to fish them.

Nothing beats long, thin crankbaits for cold-water walleyes on the inland seas. My favorites are No. 10 and No. 12 Rapala Deep Down Husky Jerks. Most of the time I put them 30 to 80 feet behind the Church Boards to reach 10 to 15 feet, the most productive depth level I've found. At times, though, the fish are even higher, in the top five feet, which necessitates putting out a Husky Jerk a little as 15 feet behind the board. I also like the No. 9 Rapala Tail Dancer 35 feet behind the board to keep the bait at five or six feet.

Since I'm trolling slowly, usually between 1.0 mph and 1.5 mph, I'm able to use spinners at the same time.

Tie up some harnesses with #2 hooks and Northland holographic spinner blades. I've come to lose far fewer fish on single hooks than on trebles, and the Northland blades give off the right amount of flash to attract roaming walleyes from a distance. I weight them

with a 1 1/2-ounce Northland Rock Runner bottom bouncer when open-water fishing, even though I'm nowhere near bottom. (Remember, I'm in the middle of nowhere.) I'll have about a six-foot leader between the spinner and the bouncer and then experiment with the distance behind the board from 20 to 40 feet, again covering similar depths of eight to 18 feet. I put the bouncers on the inside boards and the cranks on the outside boards.

The best part of the system is that it's not just for Erie anymore. In summertime on inland lakes, I use the same technique but with higher-action cranks such as Storm Hot n' Tots and ThunderSticks and smaller Northland blades in size 3. For weight, I either stick with the bouncer or use Church clip-on weights to get the spinners down. Later in the year, though, it's a bit more difficult to fish cranks and spinners at the same time. Typically I stick with one presentation over the other, pulling cranks at 2.0 mph and spinners at 1.0-1.6 mph. Once again, look for fish and bait on the electronic and you're in business.

Trolling for walleyes in the middle of nowhere undoubtedly requires an attitude adjustment. Gone are the rock pinnacles and underwater castles that are so productive in many situations. Now is the time to start searching far and away from any underwater feature with electronics to find the fish and begin straining the water column with crankbaits and spinners. The fish are out there!