



Adapt To Change & Catch More Fish



Now having over 30 years of guiding under my belt, I learned long ago that the key to success is adapting to the conditions and never taking anything for granted. I am always hoping for decent weather for the start of the season. However, as usual, we were hit with a horrendous cold front on the 2011 Opening weekend of the fishing season in Northern Wisconsin. While early season cold fronts are something fishing guides just have to get used to, they also need to be able to adapt to them if they plan on staying in business.

Even though things didn't go as originally planned, due primarily to 25 mile per hour northwest winds, my clients and I managed to catch a few lunkers. Opening day Saturday one of my clients landed a 30 inch 10 pound walleye from High Falls Flowage. My original plan was to fish the typical post-spawn walleye area in 10-12 feet of water on the edge of the river channel. I scanned the area with my electronics and not marking any walleyes, told my clients that we were heading for deep water. I am no fan of fishing for deep water walleyes at any time, especially in the spring after a cold front.

Having moved over to a 20 foot hole in the river we marked lots of walleyes. My clients had smiles on their face as they looked at my locator. Even if the walleyes refuse to bite, if you are on fish, it makes your day a little less stressful. When the guides' clients have a

positive attitude the odds are greater that they will put fish in the boat. If they have a sour attitude, it only makes tough fishing worse.

It didn't take long for one of my clients to catch a 14 inch walleye and even though it was under the legal size it was a fish in the boat. We caught a few more undersized walleyes and one 18 incher. Things were looking up but the action suddenly came to an abrupt halt. About the time I was thinking about leaving, the wind picked up and it started to rain making already bad fishing conditions worse yet. I decided to stick with the spot we were fishing since we were on walleyes.

We continued to fish the hole but could not even coax a light strike. I knew it was time to move but with the high winds, there were few options. I told my clients that I had one spot that might be slightly out of the wind and still hold a few walleyes. Following a short boat ride we entered my honey hole and even though the locator did not mark any fish, I was confident we would catch something. We had to find some company for the one walleye in the livewell.

I told my clients that we were in 25 feet of water, that there was a pile of logs and brush over a pile of rocks and that we would have to get right in the thick of things. We tied on a number four Aberdeen hook, hooked a minnow under the dorsal fin and placed a split shot up about 16 inches from the hook. I dropped my line down to the bottom, raised it up eight inches and let it sit. After a few seconds I lifted the rod up a few inches and continued to let it sit. I told my clients that this technique would take concentration and patience but to hang in there.

As we were rigging up I told my clients how the walleye fishing on High Falls Flowage has been excellent and it seems to be getting better with each year. Recent stockings have enhanced the fishery and due to the excellent natural reproduction over the years there is trophy potential. I stressed that the spot we were fishing has not only produced limits of walleyes but a few wall hangers as well. The best part is that I have all these honey holes to myself since the walleye pressure on the flowage in the spring is very light.

My clients got rigged up and after about 10 minutes, I had a light pick up and set the hook on a nice fish. One of my clients grabbed the net but before he could use the net we watched a 26-28 inch walleye drop my fathead minnow and swim away. Even though the walleye dropped my minnow, we all agreed that things were starting to improve.

A few minutes later one of my clients said he had a light pick up but it felt like a small fish. I told him not to set the hook too quickly and that even though we had medium fathead minnows, due to the cold front, the bite was light. After about 30 seconds, my client used a soft hook-set and said that he was snagged. However, that snag ended up being a 30 inch 10 pound walleye! If my client had set the hook too hard the big walleye would have dropped the minnow.

The next day we headed for the Menominee River looking for a trophy smallmouth. The typical pre-spawn pattern is to work the shallows or staging areas. The cold front pushed the smallmouth deep and by adapting to the conditions my client was able to land a massive 21-inch smallmouth in 20 feet of water.

By the second week of May, the weather improved and the smallmouth went wild on the Menominee River. With the water temperature at 50 degrees I found smallmouth stacked up in their staging areas as they were waiting for the water to warm and invade the shallows. The hot bait was the Case Salted Minnow. We would cast out the Case Salted Minnow and let it sink for about 10 seconds, give it a short twitch and again let the minnow drop. When you feel a strike, the key is to let the smallmouth engulf the bait for a few seconds before setting the hook. If the smallmouth drops the bait, let it drop for a few seconds. If the same smallmouth does not come back and hit the bait again, there is a good probability another smallmouth will. This deadly tactic allowed us to catch 10 Smallmouth over 19 inches in one staging area.

Most anglers can figure out where the smallmouth spawn but they have trouble locating the staging areas, resulting in poor fishing. They will pound the shallows with a variety of baits not realizing that the pot of gold is only a short distance from their boat. The difference between a successful and fruitless day on the water is not necessarily in the anglers' choice of bait but in their choice of location.

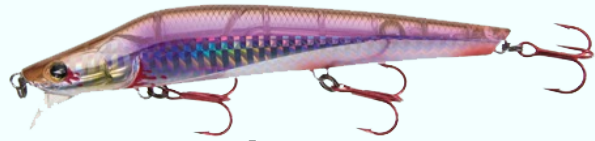
On stained water reservoirs (flowages) these staging areas are the first transition area from the spawning area. The transition area can be a transition from rock to sand or muck, a drop off to deep water, a few stumps or scattered weeds. Just prior to the actual spawn these areas can be stacked with big females on their way to the beds. If the big smallmouth are holding on the spawning beds they will return to these staging areas after a cold front.

When the smallmouth are in the staging areas waiting for the water to warm, they will scatter and be on the prowl, often suspending halfway between the bottom and the surface. During this time they will respond to a variety of presentations. Since they are scattered, the angler will need to keep on the move until he finds a concentration of fish. Once you connect with one fish, slow down because more are likely close by.



A cold front will push smallmouth off the spawning areas and back to the staging areas. The difference will be that these smallmouth pushed off the spawning areas will hold tight to cover and the bottom. Anglers can scan the area with their electronics but with smallmouth being located so tight to cover they assume that the area doesn't hold any fish. What I do is forget about my electronics and fish the staging areas, concentrating on the available cover. Slow down and work the cover with a fine tooth comb.

As I previously mentioned, the Case Sinking Minnow is my favorite bait for staging area smallmouth. I have also had exceptional success with suspending jerkbaits with my favorite being the Yo-Zuri Edge Minnow. The Edge Minnow is a universal minnow shape with a twist; it has three sides cut into it. The shape of the edger creates specific angles which reflect light into many different directions like the facets of a gem. The holographic foil adds to the attraction, looking like scales falling off a wounded minnow. They also cut through the water like a knife, creating a hard "slicing" action allowing you to switch direction on a dime. In any water conditions this looks like an escaping minnow. When retrieved fast the Edge Minnow has a wide wobble, when retrieved at medium rate a wobbling roll, when a slow retrieve is used it has a slow tight rolling action, and when suspended it is at its best at enticing vicious strikes.



Yo-Zuri Edge Minnow



Yo-Zuri Suspending Jerkbait

Another great suspending jerkbait from Yo-Zuri is the Sashimi. The Sashimi jerkbait can be used with a stop and go retrieve and/or a twitching motion. It is the only jerkbait available that continues to attract fish even when you stop your retrieve. It actually rocks back and forth once stopped, once this action has subsided, the added feather tail hook continues to pulsate looking like a real fish's tail moving. While all this is going on, the body color is changing from one color pattern to another color pattern attracting fish from a distance, especially in clear water.

Tubes are also deadly on staging smallmouth, both on their initial migration out of deep water or after they backpedal after a cold front. Smallmouth will hit a tube regardless of the weather conditions. Drag the tub across the bottom with an occasional pause. If you have short strikes and can't set the hook on a smallmouth try downsizing your tube. Another favorite tactic of mine is to cut the tentacles of the tube in half. This will shorten the overall length of the tube bringing the end of the tube closer to the hook and increase the number of hooked smallmouth.

The old reliable Wacky Worm rig will catch smallmouth under just about any situation and an early season cold front is no exception. My favorite spring Wacky Worm rig is a four inch Case magic Stick with a number 2 Kahle hook under a red O ring. By using the Case O-Wacky Tool to place the O ring on the worm the angler will cut down considerably on the number of worms that are used in a day of fishing.



When fishing a Wacky Worm I will leave some slack in the line and watch for any movement. If you have a tight line, a sluggish pre-spawn smallmouth can sense the slightest resistance and drop the bait. When watching your line, remember that even the slightest movement is probably a pick up. When you see line movement, drop your rod tip and slowly reel up the slack. Set the hook with an upward sweep and don't try to cross the smallmouth's eyes. Too fast a hook-set will result in a missed fish.

Your choice in line will often decide how many fish you will put in the boat. Although popular with many anglers, braided line is not the best choice. Braided line does not sink and since you don't want to weight your Wacky Worm, you won't get down to the desired depth, especially if you have any current. Monofilament line is better since it will sink, and the stretch in the line can help an angler who sets the hook too fast. The ideal line is a Hybrid fluorocarbon/monofilament line like Yo-Zuri Ultra soft. The fluorocarbon sinks with the slightest amount of weight making it ideal for finicky pre-spawn smallmouth. This line is specially designed for a spinning reel. Yo-Zuri Hybrid also comes in mint green which is highly visible above water making it perfect for line watching. Trust me, this Yo-Zuri hybrid line will out fish braided line 3 to 1 while Wacky Worm fishing in the spring.



Along with your choice of line, your choice of rod is also critical. The ideal rod is a six foot six or seven foot rod, with a moderately fast action, but enough power to handle a 20 inch smallmouth. If your rod is too light, you won't get a good hook-set.

In rivers, staging areas can be the first current break away from the spawning area. One stretch of river smallmouth will stack up on the inside of a rock ledge which is only about forty feet from the actual spawning sites. The shallow side of the ledge is about five feet and the deep edge on the current side is eight feet. The seam between the moving water and calm water can be a big fish magnet. Most anglers make the mistake of holding their boat over the ledge and out of the current. The problem is that in holding on the current seam they will spook the big smallmouth. I will position myself in the current on the swift side of the seam and cast over the ledge retrieving towards the seam.

Start fishing the seam with a case Minnow or suspending jerkbait. Cast into the calm water and use a slow stop and jerk retrieve. When you come to the actual seam where the fast and calm water meet use a very short twitch and let the baits suspend or sink for at least 30 seconds. If you don't feel a strike, barely move the bait and again let it suspend or sink. The longer the bait sits on the calm edge of the seam the greater your odds are of catching a big smallmouth. Those big fish might back off from

the spawning sites but yet don't want to head back into the current.

On a natural lake staging areas are usually deeper than in reservoirs. As a rule of thumb, the clearer the water, the deeper the staging area will be. On clear water natural lakes staging areas are usually flats with scattered rock. As with the reservoir, under stable weather smallmouth can disperse across the flat but after a cold front they will hold tight to rocks. Suspending jerkbaits, crankbaits and plastics are all baits of choice in clear water.

So in 2012 the first thing on your agenda is not to be bullheaded! An angler who is set in his ways will catch less fish than the guy who has an open mind. There will be days when putting a fish in the boat will be tough, but on many occasions, the lack of fish is the anglers' fault and not the cold front.