



Opening Day Walleye

Fishing below dams in spring is one of the most popular methods of early season walleye anglers. However, that usually results in crowds, and not being a fan of crowds I choose to fish elsewhere. While I might have to work a bit harder to locate walleyes, when they are found you will find them in large numbers, and a trophy walleye is always a possibility.

While fishing below dams can be very productive it can also be tough fishing. It is surprising how many anglers don't fully understand the way all fish relate to a dam. In spring, many anglers will toss out the anchor and start fishing without analyzing the current situation. Adapting your presentation to the current will make the difference from a few fish to steady action.

Over the years I have had my best success fishing on the edges of the main current flow. Not only does the current break attract fish but with less current the fishing will be easier. Walleyes relating to faster current will hold tighter to the bottom and you will need to drop a jig on their nose to trigger a strike. The swifter the current the tighter the large walleyes will be holding to the bottom. You may find the largest fish in this area but fishing for them can be frustrating.

I have found that current breaks below a dam tend to be a holding area for both pre-spawn female and male walleyes. It is common to catch a few small walleyes and suddenly stick a big

female. What happens is that larger fish are on the move and will use the current edge as their direct route to the spawning areas. Spawning areas in the vicinity of a dam can include rubble, gravel or another hard bottom.

Both a jig and minnow or a jig and plastic trailer are effective. When choosing plastics I use both curly tail grubs and shad style baits. If the walleye are active the jig and plastic is easier to use. However, if the bite is light I rely on a jig and shiner or a large fathead minnow. Cast upstream towards the shoreline and the slack water area and slowly retrieve the jig into the current. Once the jig enters the current break I raise my rod tip to about 10 o'clock and keep a tight line. If you detect a strike, lower the rod slightly and then set the hook.

Many walleye anglers rely heavily on vertical jigging but others never really master the technique. If the angler does not keep the line vertical, you will not connect with many, if *any* walleyes. Use your bow mounted trolling motor to hover slowly over your targeted area, slipping slowly downstream, slightly slower than the current. Keep in mind that the current on the bottom where the walleyes are holding is slower so you will need to adjust your slipping speed accordingly. Depending on the depth of the water, you can use anywhere from a quarter ounce to a half ounce jig, so bring lots of jigs along.

It is important to watch both your line and rod tip since a strike can often be hard to detect. Many of my clients want to set the hook home with the slightest twitch of the rod or rod tip and they end up fishless. One tip I give my clients is to test the bite before setting the hook. If you feel any resistance on the line, raise your rod tip a few inches. The trick is to confirm the bite before the walleye feels pressure and drops the bait. This will take patience and persistence, but if you master this technique I guarantee you will catch more walleyes.

One reason anglers have trouble mastering vertical jigging is due to their poor choice in rod. If the action of the rod is too slow you won't be able to feel bottom contact. I tell my clients to let the jig ride 1 to 4 inches off the bottom, and with the bottom usually being erratic, if they are in contact with the bottom too long they will get snagged. A lighter action rod will allow you to feel the bottom quicker and besides avoiding snags it will keep you at the desired depth. A six foot six or seven foot medium-light action rod is ideal if the current is not too swift. My favorite rod is a Grandt Cuda CUS170ML. If the current is too swift for the medium-light action rod you will need to upgrade. I spool my spinning reel with eight-pound Fluorocarbon. I feel the fluorocarbon allows the jig to drop faster in the water column than monofilament or braid.

Another presentation that has caught many big walleyes over the years, especially under tough conditions is a floating crankbait fished on the bottom. I have been using this presentation for over 40 years. The only way you can fish this rig wrong is to move it too fast. First off, attach a slip sinker on your line and tie on a quality barrel swivel on the end of your eight-pound test monofilament, braided or fluorocarbon. Next, attach about three or four feet of six- or eight-pound fluorocarbon leader, then attach a three- or four-inch floating minnow imitation crankbait.

You will need to experiment with both your slip sinker weight and your crankbait. The weight will sit on the bottom but your crankbait will ride a few feet off the bottom. The current will give the crankbait a slow movement as it sweeps from side to side. The longer your leader is the longer your sweep will be but if you are dealing with a restricted area you will need a shorter leader. The color of the crankbait that you choose will depend on water color. If the water is stained with only fair clarity I prefer black/silver or a highly reflective crankbait. If the water is heavily stained, brighter fluorescent crankbaits are preferred. Regardless of the water color the more reflectivity in the crankbait the greater your odds are to trigger a strike. A floating crankbait that rattles will also trigger a strike when all else fails.

Deep holes downstream from dams are notorious for holding both pre-spawn and post spawn walleyes. Pre-spawn walleyes can be very active and with the exception of a drop in the water temperature they can be counted on for consistent action. While there is no such thing as a sure thing, fishing the first deep hole downstream from the dam will hold walleyes from late winter through summer. In fact, I have fished several holes on my home river that hold big walleyes throughout the entire open water period.

The key is to find the first hole downstream and not the second or third. The hole creates both a staging area for spawning bound walleyes and a resting place for them to avoid the current after spawning. The only problem I have when fishing the honey hole is in deciding when to fish it; not what period but what time of day. When I am guiding I never like to make my first stop the honey hole. I like to get a read on my clients and get some sense of their ability and the bite of the day. So we usually start out fishing secondary areas first. Additionally, if the fishing is good I don't have to reveal my honey hole to my clients.

Most of the time by the time I get to a downstream hole it is mid-morning or even afternoon. Contrary to the belief of many walleye anglers you don't have to be on the river at sun up, you just need to know where walleyes are going to be at mid-day. Not only do you know where to fish at mid-day but you need to know where the walleyes will bite at mid-day. The thing about a downstream hole is that walleyes tend to be most active at mid-day. Remember that the walleyes are on the back side of a lip out of the current. The increased light penetration later in the day sparks some movement and many times this movement indirectly results in walleyes going on the feed.