

# Early Season Walleye



It is no secret that walleyes and walleye anglers will concentrate below dams in spring. 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.

A slough will hold walleyes not only during the spawn but during the pre-spawn and post spawn as well. Not only will these areas attract large numbers of early season walleyes but they are predictable. Regardless of the river conditions, walleyes will be present, and all the angler must do is adapt to the water levels and prevailing weather conditions. It is easier to figure out a fishing pattern once you have located walleyes as opposed to just plain trying to find walleyes.

The ideal slough will be on the bend of a river and have a small creek entering the slough. The creek itself can be the main focal point for walleye spawning. If the creek is large enough walleyes will enter the creek to spawn. How far the walleyes will move into the creek will depend on the creeks' depth and bottom content. On a small creek if gravel or rubble is present walleyes will spawn at the mouth. However, on a larger creek walleye may travel upstream until they find a suitable hard bottom to spawn.

On one of my favorite sloughs that I have fished successfully for years, walleyes will spawn in the creek during high water but when the water is low they spawn as far as 5 yards away from the creek. On one side of the creek there is a small rock island just on the edge of the main river current. Under low water conditions the walleyes will stack up and spawn along the edge of the island. It is important to keep in mind that river walleyes use the current when spawning and although they usually spawn in the same general area, the actual current will dictate spawning location.

Prior to spawning, big female walleyes will stack up in deep water on the edge of the slough. Deep water can be only six or seven feet on the edge of one slough and as deep as 20 feet at another slough. The shallower water is easier to fish but anglers will need to be a bit stealthier since the large walleyes are easily spooked. These walleyes can be very aggressive but catching one big walleye can turn the others off. On overcast days look for the big walleyes not to be quite as gun shy. Deeper water will take more patience to work your presentation on the bottom, but you have a better chance of catching several big walleyes. In fact, on one April day my clients and I boated 8 walleyes over 20 inches right in the middle of the day.

When fishing shallow water on the edge of a slough I rely primarily on a jig and minnow. If the water temperature is below 40 degrees, I use a plain leadhead jig with a minnow. In stained river water my favorite jig colors are orange, chartreuse, hot pink and yellow. Once the water temperature climbs over 40 degrees I like to tip the jighead with both a three- or four-inch curly tail grub and a minnow. I usually bring along both river shiners and fathead minnows. While a big walleye will hit a fathead minnow in spring, a river shiner will trigger a strike from a neutral walleye. The only problem with shiners is that they don't survive after a few casts. So, avoid hard fast casts and opt to flip the jig and minnow. In the shallow water, vertical jigging can be tough on these spooky walleyes. In the old days I would either anchor and cast the edge of the slough or if possible use my electric trolling motor to position my boat just within casting distance of the edge of the slough. Here again the spot lock on the trolling motor or a power pole will each make fishing easier and more productive.

The same jig and minnow presentations will work in deeper water but you will need to experiment with the size of your jig. If possible, depending on the current and wind, I prefer to vertical jig over the walleyes as opposed to anchoring. Vertical jigging will allow you to position the boat directly over the marked walleyes.

Many walleye anglers rely heavily on vertical jigging but others never really master the technique. If the angler does not keep the line vertical, he or she 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 or six-foot six light action rod is ideal if the current is not too swift. The light action rod will also be a plus in detecting light pickups. If the current is too swift for the light action rod you will need to upgrade.

Another presentation that has caught many big walleyes over the years, especially under tough conditions is a floating crankbait fished on the bottom. 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 hybrid line. 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 watercolor. 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 watercolor the more reflectivity in the crankbait the greater your odds are to trigger a strike. A floating crankbait that rattles will also occasionally trigger a strike.

Due to the current and the fact that the crankbait is floating, you do not need to do much. In fact, my advice is to set the rod on a rod holder and jig with another rod. This is one of the few times when I advocate fishing with an unattended rod. However, keep an eye on the rod since due to the treble hooks on the crankbait, a walleye is easily hooked. You will seldom have missed fish with this technique. The only negative thing about this rig is it does not work well if the bottom contains a lot of wood. Both the sinker and the crankbait will snag easily.