



THE BASICS OF WALLEYE FISHING - 101

Nobody knows exactly when the first walleyes were stocked in the waters of Montana and Wyoming. It was probably about 100 years ago - a time when many new fish species like brown trout, rainbow trout, bass, perch and carp were being tried in countless waters in hopes they would survive and multiply.

But even if they are a century-old resident of Big Sky Country, joining their close cousins, the native sauger, walleyes are still very much the new frontier for fishermen of Montana and Wyoming.

More and more people are making their first walleye fishing trips each year. They head to sprawling Fort Peck Reservoir, or go to the spectacular canyons of Bighorn Lake. They hope to catch the hot June bite on Canyon Ferry Reservoir, or troll crankbaits on Wyoming's Boysen Reservoir.

Many of these new walleye fishermen are actually old trout fishermen. When they felt the trout waters had grown too crowded, they opted instead for boat fishing and the wide open spaces of the big reservoirs. That's when they discovered walleyes.

Like the wildest of brown trout in different seasons, walleyes present a great and ever-changing challenge for fishermen. There's always something new to learn. There's always a new piece of equipment to buy. There's always a bigger trophy out there, just waiting to be caught.

If you've never fished for walleyes before and want to give it a try, here's my course for beginners on what you need to know if you want to become a walleye fisherman.

Know your prey

Walleyes are a member of the perch family and are a close cousin to sauger, which is a native species of the rivers of Eastern Montana and Wyoming. Walleye are sharp-toothed predators, feeding on minnows, perch, cisco and young fish of all species.

They typically travel in schools, with a number of walleyes found together, although sometimes the school may fan out over a wide area. The trick is to find a school that is actively feeding and willing to bite.

It takes about 10 years or more for a walleye to grow to 30 inches long and weigh about 10 pounds. The oldest known walleye taken out of Fort Peck Reservoir was aged at 18 years by a Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologist.

The best eating walleyes are the smaller ones, up to about 3 pounds. They're one of the tastiest fish to eat you'll ever find. You can fillet them and take a thick, long strip of almost boneless meat off each side.

Baits and tactics

There are three basic techniques that fishermen use for walleyes - with a number of variations, of course.

You can fish a jig - a hook with a lead head - tipped with a minnow, leech or night crawler on the end of the hook. These are cast and retrieved near the bottom or fished vertically over the side of the boat, just off the bottom.

You can fish a spinner and crawler harness - a colored spinner blade tipped with bait - behind a bottom-bouncer sinker. These are trolled just fast enough so that the sinker is near the bottom and the blade spins.

You can fish crankbaits - a plastic or wood minnow-shaped lure - either by casting and retrieving them or by trolling them behind a boat.

Fishing jigs is typically the best way to fish when the water temperatures are coldest because the walleyes are sluggish and you can fish jigs very slowly.

As waters warm and walleyes become more active, spinner and crawler harnesses and trolled crankbaits become the preferred method of fishing. Fish are more active in the warmer water and will chase moving objects.

Tackle

You can catch plenty of walleyes on inexpensive rod and reel combos that cost \$30 or less. It doesn't take a fancy rod and reel to troll a crankbait.

On the other hand, a more expensive fishing rod will make it easier to feel the gentle take of a walleye on a jig, or the taps of a sauger on a crawler harness.

As fishermen progress at the walleye game, they usually have at least a couple of fishing rods they use. They'll get a spinning reel and rod for jigs, using 6-pound or 8-pound test monofilament. They'll have an open-spool baitcasting reel and rod for bottom bouncers and crankbaits, using 10- to 17-pound test monofilament.

The best colors for spinner blades and crankbaits are chartreuse, perch finish and blue and silver. And real men don't fish pink. Actually, the real men fish that color, they just call it bubble gum or watermelon. Women do fish pink.

Boats

You can catch walleyes from shore or by wading and casting for them. Most often, this is done best in big rivers, although shore fishermen on reservoirs can also catch fish.

The best way you can start at walleye fishing is to find a walleye fisherman who already has a boat and go along with them.

Most walleye fishing on reservoirs in Montana and Wyoming is a boating game, perhaps because so much of the waters in these states don't have very much shore access for fishermen.

And because these reservoirs are often very big, the boats that run them tend to be big, too. Boats of 17, 18, 19 and 20 feet with motors of 100, 150, 175 and 200 horsepower are common.

Then there's the gear you must - and can - put in them. The list is endless. Life jackets are mandatory for everyone onboard. But then you can add fish locators, Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers, marine radios, downriggers, planer boards, rod holders, a smaller trolling outboard called a kicker, electric trolling motor, plus several tackle boxes full of jigs, spinners and crankbaits. It's a marine equipment and tackle dealer's dream.

But to start out as a walleye fisherman, you really don't need all those things.

Try the sport and find out if you like it. Then decide how far you want to delve into it.

Most important

Before you head for the stream or lake, make sure you get the proper fishing license, if you need one, which varies by age in Montana and Wyoming. License agents will help you get what you need.

Make sure as well that you check the fishing regulations for the particular water where you plan to fish. Regulations vary for different waters, especially for sauger.

Then go have fun. It doesn't matter if you're a beginning walleye fisherman or a veteran. The most important thing when you go fishing is to have fun.

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