



Big River Summertime Walleye Tactics

by Jeff Knapp photos by the author

There's an understandably strong connection between Walleyes and rivers. After all, the Walleye is by nature a river fish, naturally maintaining its numbers in many of our larger flowing waters, most notably within its native Ohio River drainage basin.

River-dwelling Walleyes get much of their angler attention from late fall through the following spring, when concentrations of fish are found in well-defined areas. However, Walleyes are certainly catchable during the summer months, though fish tend to be widely scattered, from low river levels and warm water temperatures.

Such a scenario is ideal for trolling, a tactic that quickly and efficiently covers the water, increasing chances of putting lures in front of active fish.

Delivery method

It's been my experience that there's no better way of trolling for river Walleyes than with lead core line. Not that exceptional depths need to be achieved. Most of

the fish I catch on the lower Allegheny River are taken in 14 to 18 feet of water. Lead core line assists in the precision needed to trigger Walleye strikes, keeping the lure within 12 or 24 inches of the bottom. When farther off the bottom, you may catch Channel Catfish and Smallmouth Bass, possibly muskies, but probably not Walleyes.

I recommend 18-pound-test lead core line joined to a 10- to 15-foot section of 10-pound-test fluorocarbon line serving as a leader, terminated with a quality snap for quick lure exchange. While lead core line is color metered every 10 feet, I feel the use of line counter reels greatly increases the level of precision. Moderate action trolling rods in the 7½- to 8-foot range completes the setup.

Lure choices

Larger rivers tend to be murky during the summer. I've had my best success with visible color patterns, vivid ones that include chartreuse, lime green or orange, often with the inclusion of UV (ultraviolet) in their description. In general, aggressive action lures such as Storm's Hot 'N Tot® and Wiggle Wart® as well as Bandit Lure's series 200 and 300 crankbaits are often the most productive. Their "hard" actions also transmit well back to the rod tip, telegraphing any pickup of bottom debris.

However, don't exclude the more subtle minnow- or shad-shaped profiles like those provided by Rapala Husky Jerks®, Berkley Flicker Shads® and Cotton Cordell Wally Divers.

Presentation details

Boat control is paramount since it's the boat that is making the presentation. First, troll upriver, against the current. This achieves a couple of things. Speed control is one. The lures described here—particularly the shorter, aggressive-action lures—require at least a modest pace to activate them. When trolling upriver—against the grain if you will—it's easy to accomplish this as both the current and boat movement are fueling lure action. When trolling downriver, with the current, it's often necessary to move at too fast a speed to get the lure to “bite.”

As mentioned, it's important to keep the lure close to the bottom. This is easy to achieve with lead core line. Keep in mind that lead core line sinks. As you let out line, while moving forward at trolling speed, the line will carry the lure toward the bottom. While doing so, occasionally engage the reel momentarily to allow the line and lure to tighten up. Once the lure hits bottom, as revealed by the throbbing of the rod tip, regain line.

With a little experience, you'll quickly come to anticipate the approximate distance. For instance, when trolling upriver at 2 miles per hour (mph), I expect to put out around 60 feet of line to reach 13- to 15-foot depths with a Hot 'N Tot®. Productive speeds generally fall within 2- to 2½-mph.

Be sure lures are tuned and running correctly. Untuned lures plane to the side, potentially fouling with other lines and resulting in nightmarish snarls. I limit trolled lures to two, one on each side of the boat with rods placed in rod holders.

Rivers are not uniform in depth. Expect to regularly let line out, bring it in and adjust it for changes in contour. Also, switching out lures and reading rod tips for evidence of fouled bait is also to be anticipated. Trolling—successful trolling at least—is not a passive tactic.

Location details

When exploring a river section, consider breaking things down to manageable lengths, a half mile to a mile. Troll upriver to a designated point, motor back downriver, then repeat. Experiment with various depths. Drop waypoints where you catch Walleyes and determine why the fish are at that location. Changes in bottom composition or depth, perhaps?

If mapping is available where you're fishing, use it with your track history to better understand the river bottom, how Walleyes are relating to it and the most productive areas. This information can assist you when scoping out new areas.

Keep in mind that these are nomadic fish, potentially here today and gone tomorrow. But, the challenge of consistently catching Walleyes is a big part of what makes them so attractive. □



Short, square lures provide an aggressive action that often triggers Walleyes.



When Walleyes don't respond to hard action lures, show them less aggressive minnow- or shad-shaped lures.



The dingy water of big rivers often lends itself best to brightly-colored lures.