

Lower Allegheny River
Warm-Weather
Walleye Tactics

by Jeff Knapp

The navigable portion of the Allegheny River provides excellent walleye fishing, though the sport is commonly thought of as an activity best pursued during the cold-weather months.

Indeed, when the water is cold and running a bit high, a classic scenario unfolds in which big numbers of fish concentrate in highly defined areas.

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The cold water can provide big numbers of fish, so it's not surprising that from late spring through early fall, Allegheny River walleye fishing is a widely overlooked pastime.

The fact that walleyes don't receive a lot of angler attention this time of year does not imply that they are uncatchable. However, walleye fishing is definitely a different deal now. When water temperatures are low, walleyes and their closely related cousin the sauger seek areas of reduced current, making locating them a much easier task. Higher water flows, which typically occur during the fall, further simplify the location equation. Many fish "run" upstream during these conditions, putting lots of fish in the first mile or two below a dam.

When water temperatures are warm, current isn't a limiting factor for walleyes, and flow rates tend to be low. Figure in such aspects as sharing the river with recreational boaters, and the added fishing opportunities afforded by small-mouth bass, muskies, channel catfish, flathead catfish, and carp, and you have an under-used angling opportunity.

"Winter" walleye fishing on the river means locating slackwater holes—deeper areas of reduced current—usually in the upper third of the navigational pool. The fish may be hugging the edge of the current, but they rarely can be in the current when water temperature is less than 45 or 50 degrees. During the warm months, however, this isn't the case. The fish are more spread out, and fishing tactics need to reflect this difference. Tactics that allow for faster presentations, ones more in tune with searching out a fish here and

there, are more in order. Still, walleyes are a schooling fish, and when their location is nailed down, more methodical presentations can be effective.

An added presentation difference between the two seasons is the use of natural bait. Live bait, minnows in particular, can be a must in cold water. Such a requirement is often unnecessary during the warm months. Straight artificial presentations are not only effective at this time. In some situations they outproduce natural bait or bait-tipped lures.

With river walleye fishing providing such an important niche in the state's walleye fishing picture, it only figures that some of the area's walleye fanatics would take advantage of the sport it provides. Craig Mason, of Export, is one of those diehards. I've spent a lot of time on the river for over a decade, and Craig is one of those guys you see there regularly, in good weather and in bad. Even though Mason chases walleyes year-round on a wide variety of waters, the lower Allegheny gets a portion of his attention year-round. He's highly adept at understanding the relationship between predator and prey, and he enjoys good success by focusing his efforts in areas holding baitfish, and then "matching the hatch."

Dave Adams, of Arnold, grew up on the Allegheny. Walleyes receive the bulk of his angling attention. Adams varies his tactics according to the season, and consistently puts magnum-sized walleyes in the boat.

A unique presentation is what skilled multi-species angler Andy Vetula brings to this party. Vetula, of Homer City, learned his walleye fishing on the middle Allegheny River, in Warren County. During the past few years, however, he has joined me on many forays on the lower Allegheny. On some of those summer trips, he has shown me the effectiveness of what he calls his "black rubber nightcrawler," a specially rigged plastic worm that has accounted for river walleyes bigger than 30 inches.

One of the keys to locating warm-weather walleyes is finding the baitfish. In the lower river, this means locating emerald shiners, gizzard shad, and in some instances, suckers.

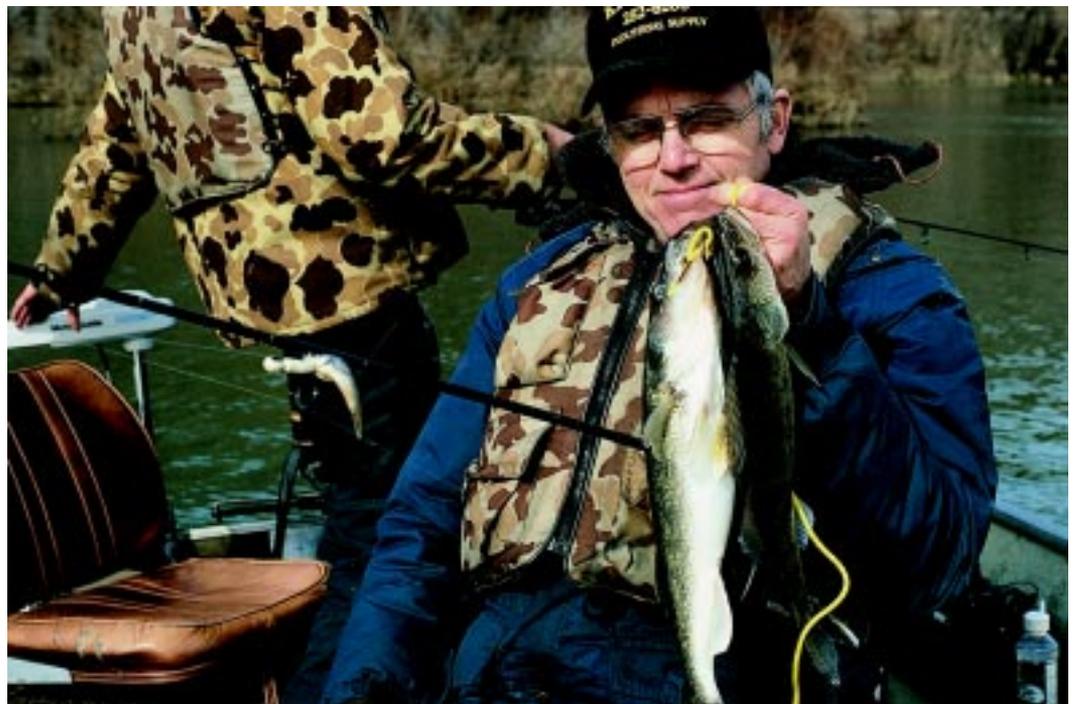
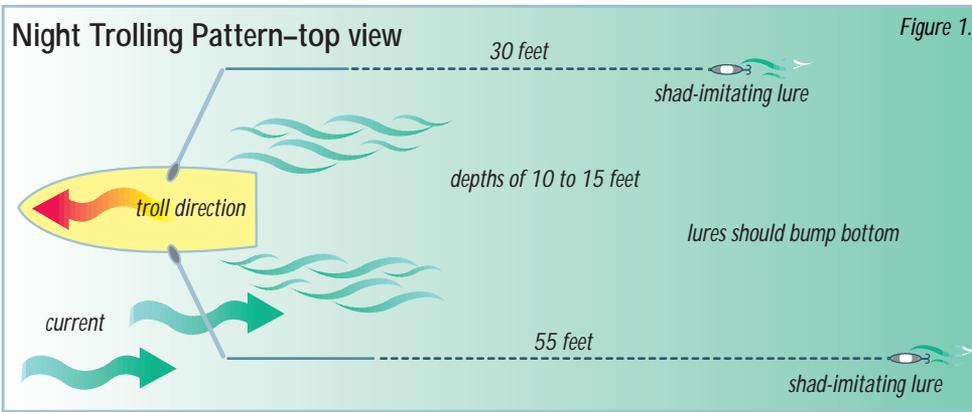


photo-Jeff Knapp



Night trolling is a tactic that can produce large walleyes. Try it from the season opener in May into July. The peak time is about a half-hour before sunset to 1 1/2 hours after dark, although flurries of activity can occur later.

graphic-Ted Walke

“The warmer months are my big fish time,” said Craig Mason. “This is when we catch almost all of our big fish.” Craig shares most of his fishing time with his father, and the two have taken many walleyes in the 28- to 31-inch range during this season.

Finding the baitfish

According to Mason, one of the keys to locating warm-weather walleyes is finding the baitfish. In the lower river, this means emerald shiners, gizzard shad, and in some instances, suckers. The abundance of these forage species, the first two in particular, can vary from year to year. Emerald shiners and gizzard shad are pelagic, which means they prefer open water. Finding shad and shiners on a sonar unit isn’t difficult. Shad in particular show up as “clouds” on a picture-type sonar unit.

In the late spring and early summer, Mason concentrates his efforts in the areas near the tailrace, places such as holes, eddies, and the scour pool below a dam. But even though he would look for walleyes out of the main current in the winter, he finds them using that same current in the summer.

“When the water warms up, it seems the fish are right in the current when they are feeding,” noted Mason. The 5- to 20-foot depths produce best for Mason, and he tends to catch larger walleyes in the shallower water.

“It seems there is a kind of pecking order taking place,” said Mason. “The shallower areas of a certain hole may be

the more desirable feeding locations. When a big walleye is pulled off that spot, it doesn’t seem to take long before another has taken its place. In a given area you may catch smaller walleyes in deeper water, but the big ones get the shallow locations.”

As has been pointed out, gizzard shad are an important food species for lower Allegheny walleyes. Mason commonly trolls shad-shaped crankbaits. This practice is common throughout the day when the fish are scattered. Toward evening, a casting approach can be directed toward high-percentage areas where walleyes feed during the twilight period.

Another presentation that has worked for Mason has been a large, white curlytail grub dressed on a leadhead jig. This combo, and also a white bucktail jig tipped with a smaller white grub, takes big walleyes feeding on the river’s suckers. The white grub works especially well in late spring and early summer, when post-spawn suckers concentrate near tailrace areas.

Mason finds another peak for big fish in the fall, when shad become stressed and start to die off from the stress of the cooling water. He again uses trolling tactics to present shad-imitating lures.

The lower Allegheny has been a home water of Dave Adams for over 25 years. During that time he’s seen the fishing improve dramatically, with the walleye fishing coming into its own during the early 1980s. Adams lives next to the Allegheny, and as such spends much of his time fishing there.



graphic-Ted Walke

From the early May opener until about the Fourth of July, Adams considers night trolling to be a top tactic for taking walleyes, big walleyes, in particular. He lays claim to catching 10-pounders regularly by pulling crankbaits in the darkness.

Adams, who regularly fishes Pool 3 and Pool 2 of the Allegheny, trolls crankbaits in a black/silver pattern. Rigged on casting equipment, he runs one lure back about 30 feet, another 55 feet back. Dave prefers to troll in an upstream direction, keeping the boat in about 10 feet of water with the lures regularly touching bottom. He considers the peak time to be from about a half-hour before sunset to an hour-and-a-half after dark, though he sometimes runs into a flurry of activity about one o'clock in the morning (see Figure 1).

Daytime pattern

Daytime, during the heat of summer, isn't when one would expect to cash in on good river walleye fishing, but Adams has come up with a pattern that consistently works for him.

"Whenever I'm hungry for a fresh walleye, I know I can come up with one using the 'bridge pattern,'" said Adams (see Figure 2). Dave anchors his boat 50 to 75 feet upstream from a bridge pier. Using a Lindy rig with a quarter-ounce to half-ounce slip sinker, he casts the rig so that the bait nestles in front of the pier (see Figure 3). Effective baits can be tail-hooked shiners or jumbo ribbon leeches. These areas are snaggy—wood and debris tend to lodge around these piers. Adams soaks the bait in front of these craggy lies, and eventually a big walleye will be teased into taking it.

Another summertime tactic Adams has found effective is casting a lip-hooked minnow toward the white water below

Lindy Rig

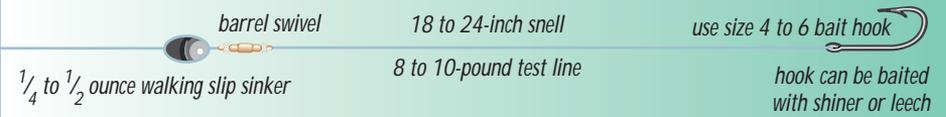


Figure 3.

graphic-Ted Walke

"These areas are very rocky and snaggy, so you are going to lose a lot of hooks and bait," noted Adams. "But you will catch a lot of nice walleyes, too."

The tailrace areas can often be fished effectively from shore. Fishing piers at the hydro-electric plants are located on dams 5,6,8, and 9, and they make popular platforms for summertime walleye anglers.

Black rubber nightcrawler

When Andy Vetula began joining me for trips on the lower Allegheny River, he spoke often of the success he had enjoyed using what he termed a "black rubber nightcrawler." He was introduced to the rigging by a fellow angler near his Warren County camp. It's accounted for three walleyes over 30 inches, as well as lots of big smallmouth bass, a few muskies, and bonus carp and catfish (see Figure 4).

When rigged properly the "black rubber nightcrawler"—actually a six-inch black plastic worm—spins gently in the water during the retrieve. On trips to the lower river, Andy has proven its effectiveness, once on a day when buying a walleye strike was tough on other tactics.

Andy rigs this plastic offering on a one-foot leader of 6- or 8-pound test. He starts by snelling two size 4 hooks onto the leader, one on the end and the other about 1½ inches up. He ties in a loop on the other end of the leader. Using a threading needle, the kind one would use to thread a minnow for trout, he threads the leader, via the loop, through the worm from the collar and out the tip of the nose. Continuing to pull the leader through the worm, the first hook is pulled into the collar of the worm with the bend and point exposed.

The key to the effectiveness of this lure is in the roll it achieves when retrieved. This is accomplished by a bend put in the worm with the rigging of the second hook. The second hook is hooked lightly through the lower part of the worm with

about a 70- to 80-degree bend in it, just less than a right angle. The leader is snapped onto the main line via a ball-bearing snap-swivel because this rig is a line twister. Andy uses the necessary splitshot to get the depth he wants by crimping it on about 1½ feet up from the snap-swivel.

This season, raise your score by using these tactics on the warm-weather walleyes of the lower Allegheny River. ☐

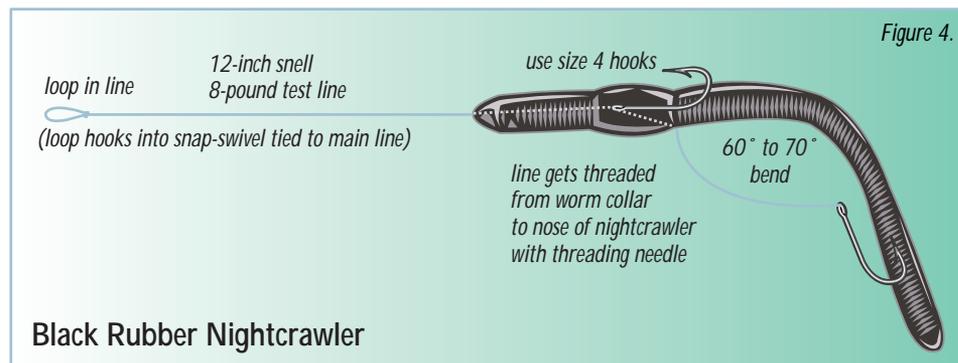


Figure 4.

graphic-Ted Walke

the dams. During the summer, flows typically are low, and walleyes hold in the well-oxygenated water below the dams. By holding the boat outside the restricted zone—indicated by buoys—he casts a minnow-baited splitshot rig toward the dams. As he retrieves the bait, he sets the hook on anything that offers resistance.

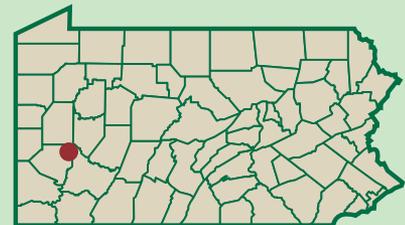
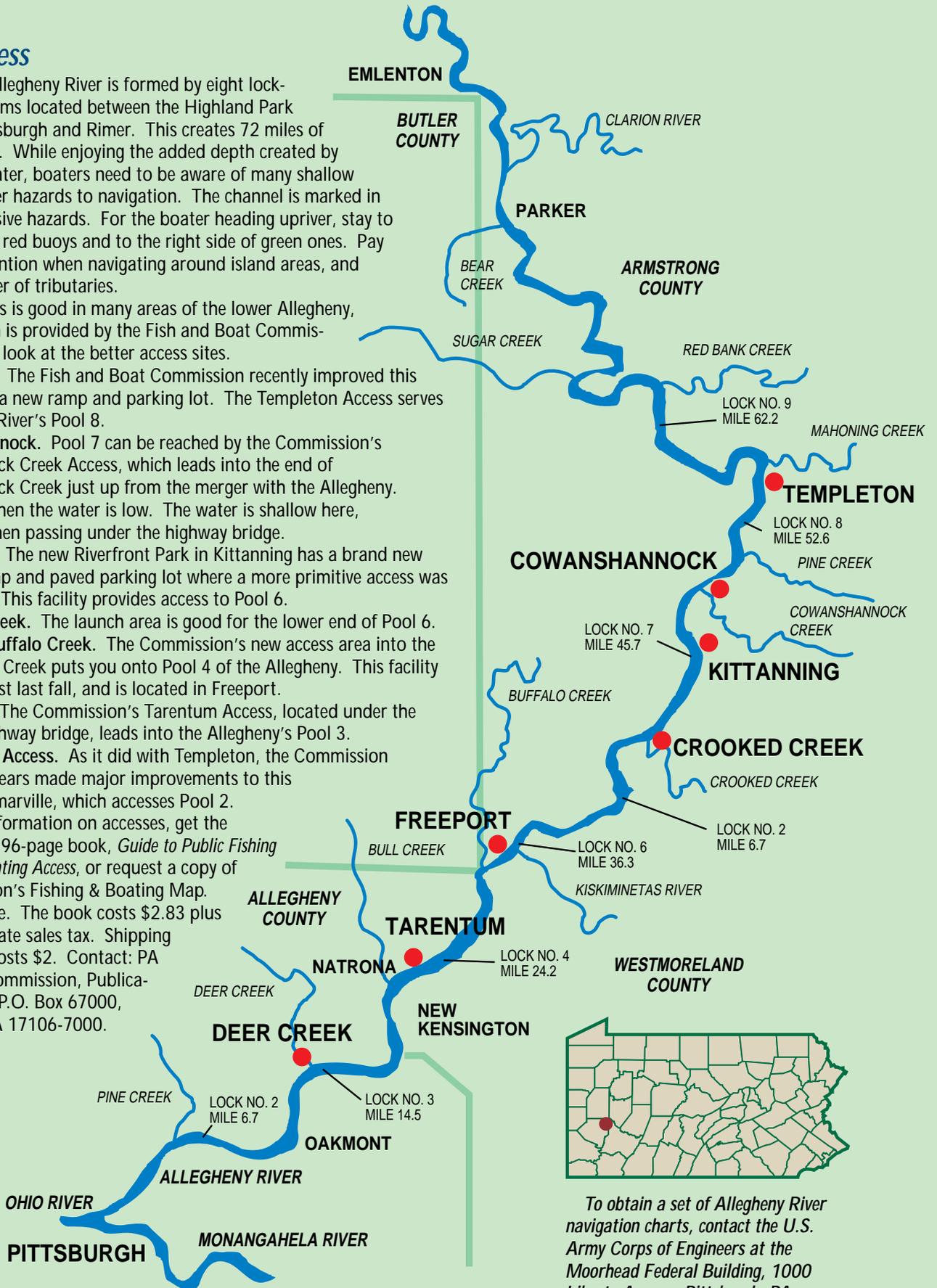
River Access

The lower Allegheny River is formed by eight lock-and-dam systems located between the Highland Park section of Pittsburgh and Rimer. This creates 72 miles of navigable river. While enjoying the added depth created by impounded water, boaters need to be aware of many shallow areas and other hazards to navigation. The channel is marked in areas of extensive hazards. For the boater heading upriver, stay to the left side of red buoys and to the right side of green ones. Pay particular attention when navigating around island areas, and near the merger of tributaries.

Public access is good in many areas of the lower Allegheny, much of which is provided by the Fish and Boat Commission. Here's a look at the better access sites.

- **Templeton.** The Fish and Boat Commission recently improved this area, building a new ramp and parking lot. The Templeton Access serves the Allegheny River's Pool 8.
- **Cowanshannock.** Pool 7 can be reached by the Commission's Cowanshannock Creek Access, which leads into the end of Cowanshannock Creek just up from the merger with the Allegheny. Use caution when the water is low. The water is shallow here, particularly when passing under the highway bridge.
- **Kittanning.** The new Riverfront Park in Kittanning has a brand new multi-lane ramp and paved parking lot where a more primitive access was once located. This facility provides access to Pool 6.
- **Crooked Creek.** The launch area is good for the lower end of Pool 6.
- **Freeport/Buffalo Creek.** The Commission's new access area into the end of Buffalo Creek puts you onto Pool 4 of the Allegheny. This facility was opened just last fall, and is located in Freeport.
- **Tarentum.** The Commission's Tarentum Access, located under the Route 366 highway bridge, leads into the Allegheny's Pool 3.
- **Deer Creek Access.** As it did with Templeton, the Commission has in recent years made major improvements to this facility at Harmarville, which accesses Pool 2.

For more information on accesses, get the Commission's 96-page book, *Guide to Public Fishing Waters and Boating Access*, or request a copy of the Commission's Fishing & Boating Map. The map is free. The book costs \$2.83 plus 17 cents PA state sales tax. Shipping for the book costs \$2. Contact: PA Fish & Boat Commission, Publications Section, P.O. Box 67000, Harrisburg, PA 17106-7000.



To obtain a set of Allegheny River navigation charts, contact the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at the Moorhead Federal Building, 1000 Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15222.-JK.

graphic-Ted Walke