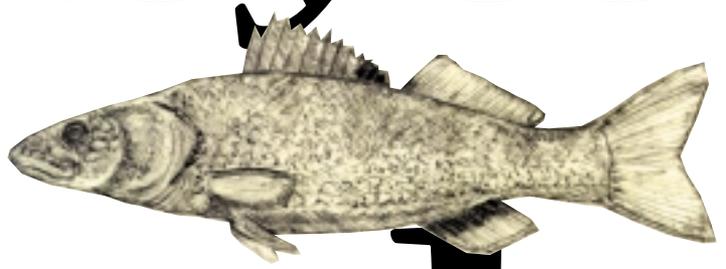


Walleyes in the Weeds



by Mike Bleech

Largemouth bass anglers often learn one of the best walleye fishing patterns before most walleye anglers do. Fishing a plastic worm or weedless jig-and-pig through deep, sparse weeds, they are surprised to see that what they supposed was a lunker bass turned out to be a hefty walleye. In typical natural lakes, or any lakes with extensive weed beds, if there are walleyes, some of them will probably be in deep weeds. Ignored by most walleye anglers who prefer to fish deeper, open water, and fed by the relative abundance of the weed beds, these are often some of the bigger walleyes in any lake.

Like most game fish, all walleyes do not behave the same. A radio-telemetry study in a New York lake showed three main behavior patterns: Those that traveled around the basin, those that moved from place to place at the edges of weed beds, and those that spent most of their time at one area in the weed beds. So do not assume that just because you can catch walleyes in deeper water, that is the only thing going. If conditions are right, there are probably walleyes in the weeds.

Walleyes might be in the weeds whenever the weeds provide a suitable environment. This is generally whenever they are green and producing oxygen. Weeds may be high enough to provide cover by the time walleye season opens in May. By mid-September, some weeds are beginning to die. As they die, they lose their appeal as walleye habitat. Finding the last green weeds of fall often leads to fabulous fishing. Look for this action from late September through October.

Walleyes hunt in the weeds for the same reasons as other predatory fish. They are there to eat. Not shaped for tight maneuvering, walleyes are most likely to be in

sparse weeds or along the deeper edges of weed beds. But do not judge weed beds by their appearance at the surface. During summer, weeds often mat at the surface even though they are sparse underwater.

To fish weed beds successfully for walleyes, you should be able to form an image of the way they look underwater. Unless you dive underwater, you always look at weeds from above, seeing their widest circumference. The purpose of leaves is to catch sunlight. Plants do not waste much energy on growth in the shade. So while the leaves may form a dense mat close to or at the surface of the water, close to the bottom there may be only a few scattered stalks (see Figure 1).

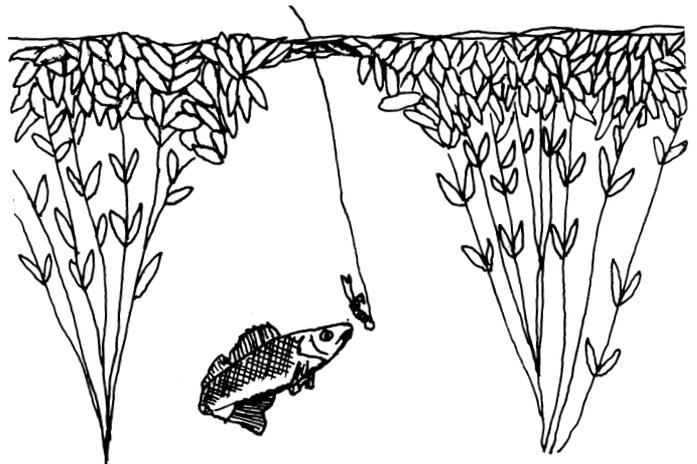


Figure 1. Even though viewing from above you might see a thick mat of weeds, underneath there are only the thin stalks of the weeds. This is where walleyes live. Even during midday, light is dim, the way they like it. This is one of the better patterns for midday fishing.



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Blasting through heavy cover

Sometimes the only way to get to walleyes is to blast through a thick mat of leaves. This takes some weight, and a shape to pass through the thickest part of the weeds without snagging. Bait might be out of the question because weeds are too thick, and it probably would not survive many trips through the weeds. Fishing this situation is nearly identical to flipping for bass, except for the lures.

Walleyes prefer more slender lures than the typical bass-flipping jig-and-pig. Use an “Arkie” jig head, which has a weed guard, but instead of tipping the jig with a pork frog, use a more slender pork strip. And instead of the black or brown pork preferred by bass anglers, try white, yellow or lime green. The same goes for the jig colors. A lime-green jig with a yellow pork trailer is an excellent combination. A brown jig with an orange trailer can also be productive.

The Arkie-style jig is most often dressed with a lively rubber or plastic skirt. Sometimes it is dressed with bucktail, and this might be the better choice for walleye fishing because it is more slender when it gets wet.

Another minor variation from flipping for bass is distance. Flipping through thick weeds works best when the line is right under the rod tip. In this position, the jig drops straight down, and if a fish does not take it, it comes straight back up the same way. But walleyes can be more

skittish than largemouth bass. Usually you should fish a little farther from the boat. The jig and line will hang on more weeds, but there is no way around it. If this were too easy, maybe too many anglers would do it.

Otherwise, flipping for walleyes is like flipping for bass. Move a lot, usually with an electric motor, and cover a lot of water while you are searching. There is no need to give walleyes more than a few seconds to look at the jig before moving, unless it is tipped with live bait. It might pay, though, to wiggle the jig several times. Your patience should be tempered by the area you have to cover, and whether you have found a concentration of walleyes. Be much more patient when you are confident there are walleyes in the area.

Once you have located an area that holds walleyes, live bait becomes a better option. Now you can let it sit in one place. This can be done with an Arkie jig, or with an egg sinker and a weedless hook. Use a smaller hook than you would normally use because it minimizes the odds of snagging.

Standard bass flipping rods, 7.5 feet in length and fairly stiff, work fine for walleye flipping. Even longer rods would be better.

Though walleyes can be quite line-shy in clear water, you must compromise when you fish through thick mats of weeds. Line of 10-pound test is about right—any

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photo-Mike Blech

lighter and you would lose most big walleyes. Any heavier and hits will decrease. Try a low-visibility, translucent green line. Green, understandably, is fairly easy to overlook in the weed beds.

Walleyes take advantage of weeds probably both as cover from above, since they are rarely in such shallow, clear water during daylight without weeds, and as concealment from prey. They tend to feed more often than walleyes in deeper water, perhaps because the weeds provide cover, but probably more because the shallower water is warmer. Their metabolic rate is faster in warmer water. They digest food faster and use more energy.

Walleyes are not built for fancy maneuvering in the weeds, so the best place to fish is along the outer edges of thicker weed beds. Many walleye anglers troll along these edges. This is often very effective. But when walleyes are less aggressive, you have to get your lures closer to the weeds. This can be difficult because the edges of weed beds are seldom straight. Trolling past the tips of the outermost weeds does not get close enough to most weeds. Any method that covers the edges tight enough to catch sluggish walleyes is going to get into the weeds.

Tickling the weed edges

A very effective method of fishing for walleyes along any weed edge uses very light jigs tipped with bait. Light jigs, 1/32-ounce to 1/16-ounce, especially when tipped with half of a nightcrawler, are not heavy enough to pull line into the weeds. Just as important, the small hooks are

not as apt to snag as are larger hooks because a piece of nightcrawler fills the hook gap, acting as a weed guard. This terminal rig can be cast across the weed edges and retrieved, with a little practice, so the jig slides over the weeds and then slowly falls to the bottom between the weeds (see Figure 2).

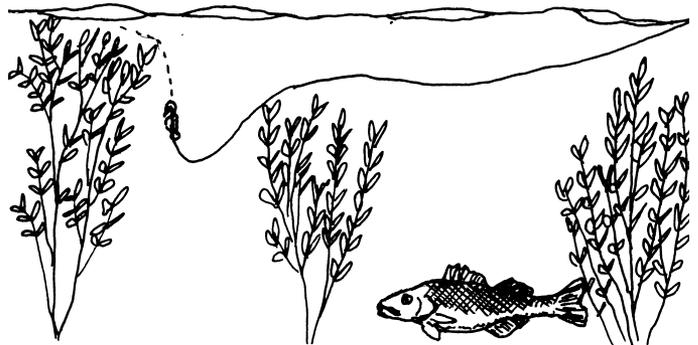


Illustration - Ron Kuhn

Figure 2. Use a very light jig head tipped with bait to tickle the weed edges. A 1/32-ounce or 1/16-ounce jig is not heavy enough to pull line through the weeds, so if it is fished carefully, the rig crawls over the weeds and then falls into gaps between the weeds.

A gentle touch is required to make this work. You have to be able to feel the jig, know when to lift, when to wiggle the rod tip, and when to give it a light snap. Sure, you will snag a few weeds. Patience is a must. But it is

this challenge that keeps down serious walleye fishing pressure in the weeds.

A long rod can be a very big help. It raises the angle of the line and improves your ability to apply upward pressure.

Complicating this situation is that the water is typically very clear. Without clear water there would be no deeper weeds. So light line is very important. Six-pound-test is a good choice. Four-pound-test might be even better. Getting a big walleye out of the weeds on such light line can be difficult, but not as impossible as it might seem.

Baits

A general guideline for choosing baits is to use nightcrawlers from late May through mid-September. Use live minnows the rest of the time. This applies to walleye fishing in or out of the weeds. Leeches can be used anytime in place of nightcrawlers. Nightcrawlers get picked apart by panfish whenever panfish are abundant. But this is also a very good method for catching larger panfish. Even though you might be fishing for walleyes, you probably would not object to catching 8-inch bluegills, or foot-long yellow perch. With a few of those in the ice chest, you might be more inclined to release walleyes.

Pennsylvania's aggressive expansion of walleyes has given most anglers opportunities to fish for this popular species. Fishing the weeds might unlock the walleye secrets of your local lake. ☐



photo-Mike Bleech