



Key Locations for River Walleyes

by Vic Attardo photos by the author

If the bite had been a knock on a door, I doubt I would have heard it. The walleye's strike was so light; the only real indication was when the barely bowed line twitched for a blink of the eye. It was a warm mid-September day, and I could have just as easily been asleep at the fishing wheel, but I noticed the "bump" on the line, tightened up the slack and tensed my arms.

For a good 30 seconds nothing happened, and I thought the white-eyed ghost had left the stage. Then, the fish touched the bait again—with its impressive teeth no doubt—and I snapped the rod like a mischievous rubber band. Now, the hook was set.

The walleye had been gentle on the strike, but it was not easy in the fight. Aided by the Juniata River current, the fish powered the line into an eddy of rocks, razor blades to light monofilament line. My two angling partners, Al Kantz and John Peters, Juniata River regulars, readied the net. When I finally got the fish away from the boulders, one or the other scooped it up. Both men have certainly caught their share of walleyes in flowing Pennsylvania waters, and they knew exactly how to bend its long body into the waiting hoop.

As a pleasant and honest assessment, the Keystone State has some surprisingly good walleye fishing in rivers that anglers don't give much walleye attention. Looking back, I can think of good days on the Susquehanna and Juniata rivers in the central part of the state, the Delaware River and Lackawaxen River in the east and northeast and, of course, the Allegheny River in the west, probably the most walleye publicized river of the five. But aside from dedicated sites such as south of the Fabridam on the Susquehanna River at Sunbury, the falls of the Lackawaxen River west of Hawley and downstream of Kinzua Dam, there aren't many places where walleye anglers regularly gather.

Perhaps it's just a lack of experience and exposure, but river walleyes just don't get the publicity they deserve. And, at this time of year, they deserve plenty of promotion.

Then again, dedicated walleye anglers are a secretive bunch and don't broadcast their hot spots. Unless you overhear some local tidbits, you may be at a loss finding a flowing-water walleye site on your own.

Yet, there are universal signs and indications that could lead you to your own walleye venue.



One of the most consistent places to find walleyes is the tailrace below a dam. During the late-winter spawning season, walleyes are known to inhabit the plunge pool and the churning riffle and run immediately downstream of both towering and low-head dams.



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When walleyes decide to feed, they come out of the deeper, slower water and make their way to shallower straights with moderate currents. A good place to look is the first set of gigantic boulders below the tailrace. If these boulders are both inside and along the main river channel, it can be the place to fish.

Feeding walleyes are not going to fight the current like trout, but they also rely on current to bring them food. With this method of operation, they tend to work themselves upstream towards the strong current of an outflow or dam while keeping their distance from the heaviest water. If a smaller dam has a deep plunge pool, it's common for walleyes to nose into the deep water just past the foam.

When fishing below a dam, there are usually restrictions concerning safe distances. These necessary precautions have never affected my ability to catch walleyes. I obey the posted signs and ply for walleyes below the safety limit.

Another good place to fish for flowing water walleyes is in the first deep pool below a major length of rapids, where a river cascades over submerged and emerged boulders, then widens and deepens into a massive run and pool. The cascading riffles serve the same purpose as the dam, while the downstream run and pool is the congregation spot. If sizeable rocks break the pool, look for walleyes in both the side and hydraulic eddies.

Always look to the connection between a major tributary and a river. The surging flows create deep holes and the walleye like the exchange of food.

There are no dams on the Delaware River, so the best place to find walleyes is at the bottom ends of islands.

The Delaware River has numerous

sandy-shored atolls with downstream deep, slow-moving pools. Walleyes in the tri-state river spend considerable time in the pools. When feeding time rolls around, they move upstream to the sharply inclined slopes, the tapered ends below the islands. When fishing from a boat, we anchor in the upper portion of the eddy and work the current seams where the water curls around the island and the entire eddy itself.

Sometimes on rivers such as the Juniata River, there are no apparent places where walleyes should be found. Without tailraces, churning water and many islands, the Juniata River is a hard river to pinpoint for walleyes. But, the Juniata River's walleyes still follow the simple rule of a moderate current below a faster flow and certainly there are tons of large current-buffering boulders and ledges in the river.

For many miles, a railroad line follows the course of the Juniata River and the bank beneath the tracks is often quite steep. The river has a quick tempo along the shoreline wall and while walleyes aren't tight to the bank, they often occupy the eddied rocks just off the full-steam charge, right where the smallmouth bass are located.

Certainly, walleyes and smallmouth bass don't occupy all of the same structures. Where churning water meets a long, rocky pool, it's common to find smallmouth bass and walleyes in close proximity.

In addition to major rivers, you might be surprised to learn how many walleyes occupy the tailraces below a dam in medium to large streams. To give away specific locations would put undue pressure on the fish. If you can find a stream that holds walleyes, a smaller tailrace is the place to fish. As for offerings, dedicated walleye anglers are partial to thin minnow lures such as silver and black jointed Rebel Minnows, the bulbous Bomber 4A and jigs with grubs in motor oil and smoke. Full-length nightcrawlers on a worm harness are just about unbeatable and never underestimate a three-inch shiner for big walleyes. Just pay attention for those light bites. ☐