



Wintertime River Walleye Tactics

by Jeff Knapp

photos by the author

As water temperatures cool down in late fall and early winter, Walleye action on Pennsylvania's rivers heats up. From early December through the season's temporary closure in mid-March, fishing for river-dwelling Walleyes is often at its best.

With fish confined to select habitat niches that provide optimal conditions over the cold months, there's the strong potential to be fishing over high concentrations of Walleyes. Expect to find Walleyes in areas of slack or reduced current. Examples include deeper holes tucked behind natural barriers such as rock bars, outflow areas below dams, and near the mouths of incoming streams and smaller rivers.

Deeper, sheltered pools allow Walleyes to escape the stronger force of the river's current, particularly when river flows are up. Low current conditions permit the fish more freedom of movement. On river sections that feature dams, expect to find good numbers of Walleyes stacked below the dam provided there's not too much current. Fish will gather in spots off the main current such as the mouths of lock chambers on navigational dams. Dam outflow areas often provide good options for shore anglers. Junction holes—spots where incoming streams join the main river—can be Walleye magnets as these areas tend to hold a lot of baitfish. It's common for foraging Walleyes to move into the shallows during the evening twilight period providing fast action for both shore and boat anglers.

In general, wintertime river Walleye anglers deal with fish displaying two distinct attitudes. "Daytime" fish that are somewhat neutral yet catchable. And, "evening" fish, ones actively feeding. Obviously, this can differ on a



day-to-day basis. Sometimes, you attack them during the day, especially during cloudy conditions. The night bite doesn't always happen, but it's a good guideline.

Boat anglers have the edge for daytime Walleyes, as the fish tend to be in deeper water less accessible to shore anglers. A typical scenario is a sheltered pool below a rock bar formed at the mouth of an incoming stream. The prime Walleye holding water stretches about 75 yards, and a mild current seam is found within it between the main river and the pool, as well as a slight back current that runs tight to the bank. It's likely that Walleyes are scattered within this area.

The boat angler can seek out fish by drifting through the pool, paying particular attention to the current seams. If the depth is over 15 feet, it's often best to simply hang the presentation vertically, placing it within inches of the bottom. In shallower water, short casts can be best.

Generally, if the fish are somewhat active, they will respond to a bucktail jig, twister tail grub and even a Ned Rig. Often, though, it takes a jig and minnow or metal



Blade baits are often effective when Walleyes ignore other jig style presentations.



Walleyes often respond to colorful bucktail jigs. Bucktail jigs can be fished with or without the addition of minnows.



Twister tail grubs are effective when Walleyes are aggressive.

blade bait to get a response. Be willing to experiment with various lure options and colors as Walleyes may be particular.

The game often changes as the sun gets ready to set. During the twilight period, these same negative-to-neutral Walleyes make short feeding binges into the shallows. This can be toward the shoal at the mouth of a smaller stream, an ideal scenario for the shore angler, or up into the mouth of a larger incoming stream or river, which can be better for the shore or boat angler depending on the size of the area. Edges of shelter holes—such as where the depths give way to the shallows—can attract Walleyes, locations often better accessed by boat.

Twilight Walleyes can be approached with the same options, but add a couple more to the mix, such as suspending jerkbaits and soft swimbaits. Present these lures slowly, with just enough movement to keep them working. Often, the biggest bites come on larger profile baits.

Naturally, the availability of wintertime river Walleye fishing is dependent on the weather during this time of the year. But, even during harsh winters, there is usually a window of opportunity that occurs during the last few weeks of the season. □



Suspending hard jerkbaits work best during twilight or cloudy days, and may result in bigger Walleyes.