

A man wearing a blue cap with 'FISH' on it, a red and white plaid shirt, and yellow waders stands in a river. He is holding a large walleye fish in his left hand and a fishing rod in his right. The background shows a wooded area with bare trees and a clear blue sky.

Crankin' for Walleyes

by Mike Bleech

The sun was just disappearing behind the hills while we slipped the boat off its trailer. Ten minutes later, I cut the motor to idle speed and steered to the windward side of a narrow point. Wind had been blowing against this side of the point constantly for a couple of days. About 100 yards from where I planned to fish, I turned off the gas motor and let the wind push us the rest of the way while I steered with the electric motor.

Allegheny River

"This is my favorite walleye fishing pattern," I said in a soft voice to my wife, Jeri. "Walleyes are really aggressive in shallow water. But they're skittish. Don't make any more noise than you have to."

I lowered the anchor and turned to see Jeri's rod bowed. "It was just there," she said. "I thought I snagged a weed."

Jeri's "weed" was a 5-pound walleye. That is the way they often strike in cold water. And they are usually lightly hooked in the lip. Walleyes move into shallow water at night to feed. I have watched by the wake as a walleye attacked a lure from at least 30 feet away. Yet, they often just nip at the tail end of a lure.

Probably the most famous shallow-water walleye pattern in the state is at Pymatuning Reservoir during spring. However, this pattern can produce walleyes at most of our lakes that hold walleyes, and it lasts well into summer, to varying degrees.

The reason this pattern works is because shallow flats are rich feeding areas. Minnows are often abundant. Walleyes usually avoid such shallow water during daylight hours. But they move in under the cover of darkness.

The best feeding flats for walleyes are often associated with points, for a couple of reasons. Points often extend into relatively deep water. Immediate access to deep water is a quick escape route. This is important because walleyes are decidedly unnerved in shallow water. But deep water access applies to many flats that are not adjacent to points. The real reason points are popular hotspots is because they are so easily recognizable to walleye anglers. And for this reason, walleyes that feed around points are quickly fished out. You are more likely to find good walleye fishing at flats that are not revealed by anything above the waterline.

Floating minnow lures

Crankbaits shaped like slender minnows, which I term "floating minnow lures," are the perfect lures for fishing shallow water at night because they closely resemble the reason walleyes are there. Depth control is another important reason to use crankbaits. Some floating minnow lures dive just 2 to 3 feet, some dive 4 to 5 feet, and some dive a bit deeper. If you know how deep your lures dive, you can use lures that won't hang on the bottom. However, I have found that using a lure that runs close to the bottom is usually not necessary in shallow water. Actively feeding walleyes won't hesitate to attack a lure running a few feet above them.

In the cool water of spring or late fall, the best retrieve for floating-minnow lures is usually steady and very slow. Sometimes the best retrieve is one that moves the lure so slowly that it leaves a wake on the surface. So it is important to use lures that have adequate action at slow speeds. Some jointed floating minnow lures perform perfectly in this situation.



photo-Mike Bleech

These floating-minnow lures are probably your best choice when walleyes are in shallow water. They closely resemble the walleye's principle prey, and they don't get snagged on the bottom.

Muddy water sometimes causes shallow walleye action during daylight. On lakes, watch for mud lines where waves have been pounding a point. On rivers and creeks, rain often roils the water enough to put walleyes on the feed in shallow water. In warmer water, faster retrieves are often better than slow. But in muddy water, use a slow, steady retrieve just as you might in cold water.

Floating minnow lures are also productive in rivers and creeks, where walleyes often hunt in shallow water, even during daylight. The reason, I suspect, is that swirling water cuts light penetration and visibility from above.

Suspending minnow lures are a better choice, though. Suspending minnow lures generally dive slightly deeper than floating minnow lures. They are essentially the same, except that suspending lures do not bob to the surface when you pause the retrieve.

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photo-Mike Bleech

Crankbaits usually hook walleyes lightly in the lips when the water is cold. Unlike most gamefish, walleyes seldom inhale crankbaits.

Suspending minnow lures are at their best using a jerk, or twitch, retrieve. This is very effective from late spring through summer and into the fall. Try it in rivers or larger creeks where walleyes feed in swift water that is 5 to 8 feet deep. The retrieve can be either a long series or jerks, or intermittent jerks in an otherwise steady retrieve. The jerks give the impression of an injured minnow, making it seem to be an easy meal. This sometimes triggers strikes by walleyes that are not aggressively feeding, or where natural food is abundant.

Even though walleyes move a few feet up or down to strike a crankbait, there are undefined limits to how far they will move. Depth control is increasingly important as the depth of the water increases. When walleyes are in shallow water, they are almost always actively feeding. But they are more likely to be less aggressive in deeper water. For example, if walleyes are congregated along the bottom of a dropoff that begins at 8 feet and drops to 12 feet, a floating minnow lure is a poor choice. You should use a lure that gets right down to 12 feet. But if they are at the top of the dropoff, they are probably more aggressive and are far more likely to attack a crankbait running a few feet above them.

Several floating/deep-diving minnow lures will get down 10 to 12 feet on a cast. These crankbaits are really not a very efficient use of time for casting in most situations. They run in a U-shaped path, roughly, so they are at their maximum depth for just a short portion of the retrieve. If you find walleyes at a depth of 12 feet, jigs or live bait are usually more efficient.

The best use, other than trolling, is when you do not know exactly where the walleyes are, or when they are scattered along steep slopes.

One advantage of floating/diving crankbaits is that using them is very easy—just cast and retrieve. Jigs and live bait that are bounced along the bottom can be very frustrating to novice anglers, especially kids, because they snag so frequently. Avoiding snags with jigs or sinkers requires an educated touch. Anyone who can cast can use crankbaits.

Even experienced walleye anglers appreciate crankbaits when walleyes are holding over a snag-infested bottom. There are good walleye areas where snags make bottom-bouncing virtually impossible. Crankbaits are quite expensive, though, so it is critical to retrieve crankbaits very close to the bottom but not so close that they snag. The

long lips of deep-diving crankbaits tend to bounce off rocks. But even one lost crankbait might set you back about six bucks!

Casting floating/deep-diving crankbaits parallel to the steep banks is an effective walleye fishing method at the Allegheny Reservoir and other lakes with steep banks. Using a crankbait that dives to 12 feet, move forward with an electric motor on its slowest speed, keeping the boat over 12 to 15 feet of water. Because the banks are so steep in most areas, the crankbait will be within sight of bottom-hugging walleyes throughout the retrieve.

This is a summertime method, so relatively fast retrieves are in order. In the course of a day, or even just a few hours, you can cover miles of shoreline, so the odds of finding hungry walleyes are good.

Floating/deep-diving crankbaits dive deeper and deeper through most of the retrieve, so one of the more effective uses for these lures is casting from a boat toward a moderately sloping bank. The crankbait will roughly follow the bottom until it reaches its maximum depth, which will be almost below the boat.

For this same reason, floating/deep-diving crankbaits are usually not suited to fishing from shore. They will not be near the bottom during part of the retrieve. Then, from the point they contact the bottom, they will be trying to get snagged.

Few minnow-shaped floating-diving crankbaits get any deeper than 12 feet on a cast. Any crankbaits I have seen that claim to dive 20, 30, even 40 feet are not shaped like minnows. They are generally stubbier. Crankbaits that are large enough to dive more than the deepest-diving minnow-shaped lures are too large for most walleyes. They are not too large for big walleyes, 6 pounds and larger. But like other deep-diving crankbaits, only a short portion of the retrieve is spent at maximum depth. And cranking them is tiring. They are more useful as trolling lures.

Sinking crankbaits

Sinking crankbaits are another matter. They can be counted down to virtually any depth. The problem with many sinking crankbaits is that it takes a fairly fast retrieve to give them the proper action. Use a light-wire snap—not a snap swivel—to attach these lures to the line to allow maximum freedom of movement.

Sinking crankbaits, also called countdown lures, are at their best in depths of 15 to 25 feet. Any deeper and you waste too much time counting them down. Most sink at a rate of about a foot per second. Since they are heavier than floating crankbaits, they can be cast far-

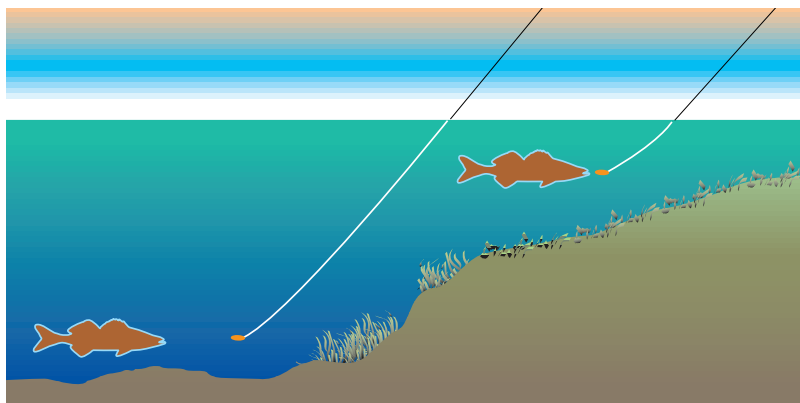


Figure 1.

Walleyes are usually aggressive in shallow water. They will attack a lure running a few feet above their position, as at the top of this dropoff. But in deeper water, as at the bottom of this dropoff, walleyes often won't move as far to strike a lure. Lure depth control is usually more critical.

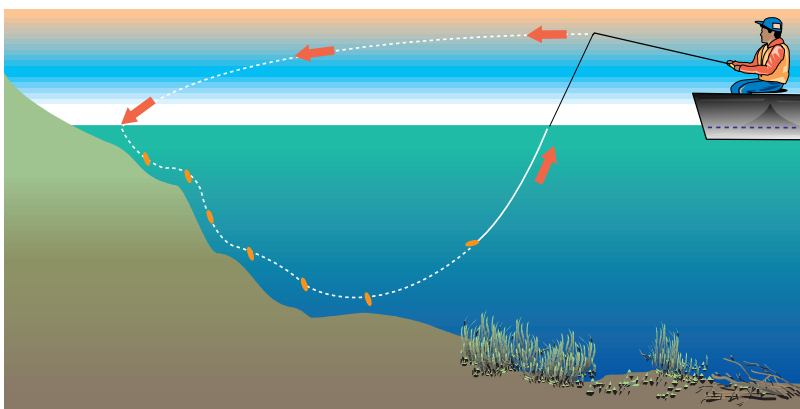


Figure 2.

Cast floating/deep-diving crankbaits toward shore. The crankbait will follow a moderately sloping bottom toward the boat.

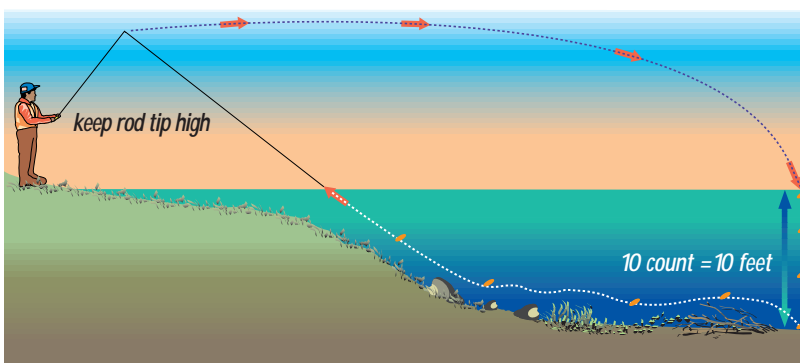


illustration-Ted Walke

Figure 3.

Countdown crankbaits can be very useful for walleye anglers who fish from shore. Count the lures down to the bottom, typically at a drop rate of a foot per second. Then keep the rod tip high during the retrieve so the lure swims up the gentle slope.

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ther. This makes up for some of the time consumed in counting them down.

Countdown crankbaits are useful tools for wading anglers in the Allegheny, Susquehanna, and Delaware rivers. Try them where the bottom gently slopes into depths of 10 feet or deeper. Use a rod at least seven feet long to make long casts. Determining the count that takes the lure to the bottom is critical to avoid snags. Stop the lure as soon as it reaches the bottom. If the crankbait is allowed to drag along the bottom, snags are virtually certain. Hold the rod tip high during the retrieve so that the lure follows the slope as much as possible.

Walleyes are not noted as selective feeders. Slender, minnow-shaped crankbaits are generally best for walleye fishing for the simple reason that most walleye prey in Pennsylvania waters is slender minnows. One exception is during the rock bass spawn, which takes place during late May and early June. Expect it to occur in depths of 5 to 10 feet over a bottom that contains a large percentage of gravel, but with some larger rocks and boulders. This is one of the best big-walleye patterns during spring. Big walleyes, which also mean female walleyes, apparently have a taste for rock bass. Most of the walleyes you catch with this pattern will be large if you use crankbaits that are shaped like rock bass.

The matching-the-hatch concept can be more a matter of depth control than of precisely duplicating the walleye prey. When walleyes feed on shiners or shad, they generally are looking up for their food. When they are feeding on darters or other bottom-dwelling species, they are looking down. This explains why crankbaits that bounce along the bottom are sometimes so much more effective than those that travel a couple of feet above the bottom.

You can get a strong clue on your sonar/fish finder screen on which direction walleyes are looking. If you see a lot of small fish signals a few feet above the bottom, walleyes are probably looking up. If you see no bait signals on the screen, then if feeding walleyes are present, they are probably looking down.

Tackle tips

Lure color for walleye crankbaits might seem somewhat complicated. However, it is really quite simple. Color probably is not terribly important if you stick to a few basic color patterns. You could get by very well using just three color patterns—natural silver shiner, natural gold minnow, and fire tiger. This has held true everywhere I have fished for



photo-Mike Bleech

The long lips of these crankbaits make them dive deeply. They are more useful for trolling than for cranking.

walleyes in this state, and from Tennessee north to the Quebec bush. Natural silver is usually best in clear water. Natural gold is often best for retrieves very tight to the bottom. Fire tiger is a great attractor color, usually tops at night or in colored water. A natural yellow perch color pattern might be a good fourth choice, because yellow perch are important walleye food in many waters. Unfortunately, crankbait manufacturers seem to have trouble duplicating this color pattern.

But let's be realistic. We anglers are infatuated with crankbait colors. When we walk down the aisles of a well-stocked tackle shop, all of those colors call to us. "Buy us. Buy us." And we do.

Sensitivity is critically important in walleye fishing. This holds true with crankbaits. Many fish attack crankbaits with such ferocity that they usually hook themselves. Most walleyes caught by inexperienced anglers using crankbaits also hook themselves. However, inexperienced walleye anglers fail to detect most hits by walleyes because they are usually not violent attacks. Walleye anglers should react by setting the hooks to light ticks, light changes in line tension, and any change in lure action. Sensitive rods are a tremendous asset.

Use 6- to 8-pound-test line in most walleye fishing situations. Walleyes are somewhat line-shy. Also, crankbaits dive deeper on lighter line.

Keep your hooks sharp. I have never found a crankbait that comes out of the wrapper with hooks sharp enough to satisfy me. Every hook point on every crankbait in my box was sharpened before going into my tackle box. And every point gets sharpened again regularly. And when the hook point gets stubby from sharpening, I replace the hooks.

When you buy replacement hooks, I suggest tinned wire hooks with long, straight points. Sharpening them is relatively easy with a fine file. Sharpening hooks with curved points is very difficult. Hooks with short points become almost wedge-like after sharpening a few times, making it difficult to sink them into a walleye.

Many crankbaits must be tuned to run straight. Make a short cast, point your rod straight at the crankbait, and start reeling. If the crankbait runs to one side or the other, it must be tuned. Improper tuning can ruin lures. Follow the tuning directions that come with most lures.

Crankbaits are important components of a serious walleye angler's tackle box. Used properly, crankbaits can be the best things to use in certain situations. But I hope this sometimes critical look at crankbaits shows that they are far from a complete answer to walleye fishing. □