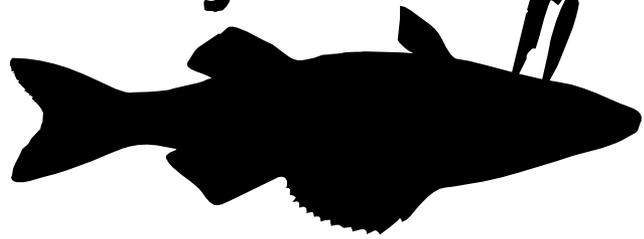


Raystown Lake Walleye Poachers

by WCO Corey L. Britcher,
Southern Huntingdon County



Raystown Lake is known for its large population of walleyes, which are often hard to catch. What is not known by many is that early in the spring, these fish seek a place to spawn. Many walleyes travel up Great Trough Creek only to find their plight hampered by an old dam in Trough Creek State Park. This barrier creates a marvel for many onlookers, who come from all over to see the hundreds of fish pooled there every night. Occasionally, the temptation of these large fish is just too much for some people, so we spend many hours watching over this great resource.

We had already apprehended a few people for taking the trapped fish. However, because we knew that there were some hardcore poachers, and based on information we had heard from concerned sportsmen, we planned one last detail for Saturday, April 6, 2002.

A cold front arrived on that Saturday night. With temperatures dipping, Blair County WCO Craig Garman and several Game Commission deputies set up the area's surveillance. Shortly after midnight on April 7, the second shift, comprised of WCO Alan Robinson, DWCO Chris Skipper and me, took over. WCO Garman had indicated that not one person came to look at the walleyes from 9 p.m. on.

It was cold and dark that night, and around 4 a.m., we were discussing the idea of calling it quits. But we didn't want to leave and miss any potential poachers, so we decided to stay. It was the right choice.

Just before 6 a.m., we noticed headlights entering the area. As we watched from our location, the vehicle traveled to the gate below the ice mine, a cave where ice used to be stored, deliberately checking for vehicles. The vehicle then entered the parking area. One of the occupants got out and crossed the bridge, again checking the area for potential hiding officers. Then, as quickly as it had arrived, the truck departed with all its passengers. We were worried that they may have seen something and would not be back. We sat patiently for what seemed like an eternity, but after five minutes, the truck returned. Again it checked the gated area before entering the parking area. This time, two occupants carrying what

appeared to be nets headed to the stream.

Now, with the adrenaline keeping us warm, we began to act. I had DWCO Skipper return to the patrol vehicle in case the poachers reached their vehicle and ran before we could stop them. Then WCO Robinson and I circled the truck to make sure there wasn't a third person acting as a lookout. With this accomplished, we took up a position where we could stop the two as they returned to their truck.

We watched the two appear out of the darkness at 6:10 a.m. carrying feedbags over their shoulders. One was also carrying a frog gig. As they placed their overloaded and still-flopping bags into the truck bed, WCO Robinson and I came out of the darkness and identified ourselves as state officers. We ordered both individuals to show us their hands. As we neared the truck, WCO Robinson noticed a rifle on the front seat of the truck and yelled "gun, partner." We then quickly handcuffed and searched both men. Both had mobile radios that they probably used during their first trip into the area. After securing the area, we recovered 18 illegal walleyes, all gilled right behind the head. The biggest fish weighed about 10 pounds, the smallest, about 6 pounds.

We cited the two individuals for the illegal fish. Both received additional citations for fishing in approved trout waters during the closed period, and for using an unlawful device. Both

pleaded guilty, and each paid over \$300 in fines and costs. Both individuals also had their fishing privileges revoked for two years.

This detail was a perfect example of time and effort paying off. Unfortunately, we as conservation officers do not catch every poacher. However, we will continue to put forth the time and effort. □



photo courtesy of WCO Corey L. Britcher

Illegally caught walleyes recovered from Raystown Lake prosecution. Each individual paid more than \$300 in fines and costs, and both had their fishing privileges revoked for two years. At left is DWCO Chris Skipper with WCO Corey L. Britcher.