



Lake Erie's Amazing Perch

Fishing

by Mike Bleech

photos by the author

If you took an aerial view of Lake Erie on any summer day when the weather was pleasant, you would see several large clusters of boats off the Pennsylvania coast. Zooming in for a closer look, you would see a lot of very happy anglers catching big yellow perch. After several years during which this popular fish was all but absent from the sportfishing scene, they returned in good numbers about three years ago.

"Two reasons," suggests Commission Fisheries Biologist Roger Kenyon. "One, and it's hard to pin down why, their survival rate has increased dramatically, so there has been more carry-over from year to year. The other reason is that we've been producing some very big year-classes more frequently than we did in the 1990s."

The typical method for locating yellow perch in Lake Erie is joining a pack of boats. Certainly this is effective. But the lake is loaded with

perch. Finding them on your own isn't difficult. The keys are generally getting into the right area, which can be determined through a stop or phone call to one of the area bait shops, and then getting to the right depth range, which is usually broader than fishing reports indicate.

"They're relatively easy to find from mid-July through September," Kenyon says.

Locating fish

Spotting yellow perch on sonar is usually very easy, although it does not fit into a strict formula. Most often they are within a few feet of the bottom. But it's not at all unusual to spot them suspended anywhere else in the water column. The marks on your sonar screen might also be several other types of fish, such as white perch or white bass. Quantity is the main clue. Yellow perch are very abundant. In practice, there really is no need to attempt to differentiate between any of the panfish because they typically are in the same areas.

The sizes of the marks on your sonar screen should tell you whether you are over perch. Small marks, often single pixels, probably indicate baitfish, such as shiners. Long marks, several pixels in length and perhaps appearing as hooks, might be walleyes. Perch marks will probably be intermediate in length, maybe two or three pixels, depending on the definition of your sonar screen.

You might see individual perch scattered over a broad area, or they might appear in small clusters in which individual perch can't be distinguished. Baitfish might also appear as small clouds. This is a good sign: It often

means something is chasing them. Huge clouds are probably masses of spiny water fleas. These exotic invaders can be a nuisance because they gather on fishing line like bits of cotton. However, perch will eat them.

There has been good perch fishing off all three main boat-launch areas along Pennsylvania's coast—Walnut Creek, Erie and North East. Fishing tends to be closest to shore at the Fish & Boat Commission's North East Marina for the simple reason that the bottom drops more quickly there. Fishing was less consistent there last year, but this is a good place for boaters who are not accustomed to fishing this big lake because there's no need to get far beyond sight of the marina.

Several launch ramps are in the Erie area. Both are along the city side of Presque Isle Bay and on the peninsula at Presque Isle State Park. Perch fishing is usually very good north from the harbor entrance. It has also been excellent out of the Fish & Boat Commission's Walnut Creek Access. You can expect to run 4 miles to 6 miles from there to reach the hot areas.

Through summer, the most talked-about depths are 50 feet to 60 feet. But

we have caught perch from 40 feet to 70 feet, and often the larger perch are deeper than the more popular depths.

"Anywhere along the 10-fathom curve," Kenyon says. "You can go all the way from Conneaut, Ohio, to Presque Isle."

Methods

The standard perch-fishing method is to still-fish vertically from an anchored boat. Various terminal rigs are used. There's no need to be fussy. The old spreader rigs that use two hooks are fine, although I prefer single-hook rigs because they're more compatible with ultralight rods. Big Lake Erie perch put up a good fight on ultralight tackle. Heavier tackle lessens the sport.

Shiners are the best bait. Emerald shiners are preferred by most local anglers. Small golden shiners work fine. They are less fragile than emeralds. But keeping any shiner alive can be difficult in the hot summer weather. Instead of using a standard bait bucket, keep your shiners in an ice chest. It also helps to carry another ice chest for your food and drinks, and pack plenty of ice so you can add ice to your minnows from time to time. Changing water also helps keep the bait lively, so

carry a bucket for dipping water out of the lake.



THE OUTLOOK FOR PERCH

**FISHING IN LAKE ERIE IS PROMISING THIS YEAR, AND
FOR THE NEXT FEW YEARS AT LEAST.**

Lake Erie's Amazing Perch Fishing

SPOTTING YELLOW PERCH ON SONAR IS USUALLY VERY EASY, ALTHOUGH IT DOES NOT FIT INTO A STRICT FORMULA. MOST OFTEN THEY ARE WITHIN A FEW FEET OF THE BOTTOM.



2004 Lake Erie Regulations for Yellow Perch

<i>Seasons</i>	<i>Minimum Size</i>	<i>Daily Limit</i>
Dec. 1 through March 31	7 inches	20
April 1 through Nov. 30	8 inches	20

Fish baskets are fine for storing your catch as long as the perch remain alive, but once they die, the flesh starts deteriorating. Most people who have eaten them think that Lake Erie perch are the best-tasting fish in the state. Make every effort to preserve their eating quality. We carry a 120-quart ice chest so that we can put our catch on ice. Dividers keep our fish legally separated, and inserts keep our food and drinks above the fish.

When still-fishing is slow

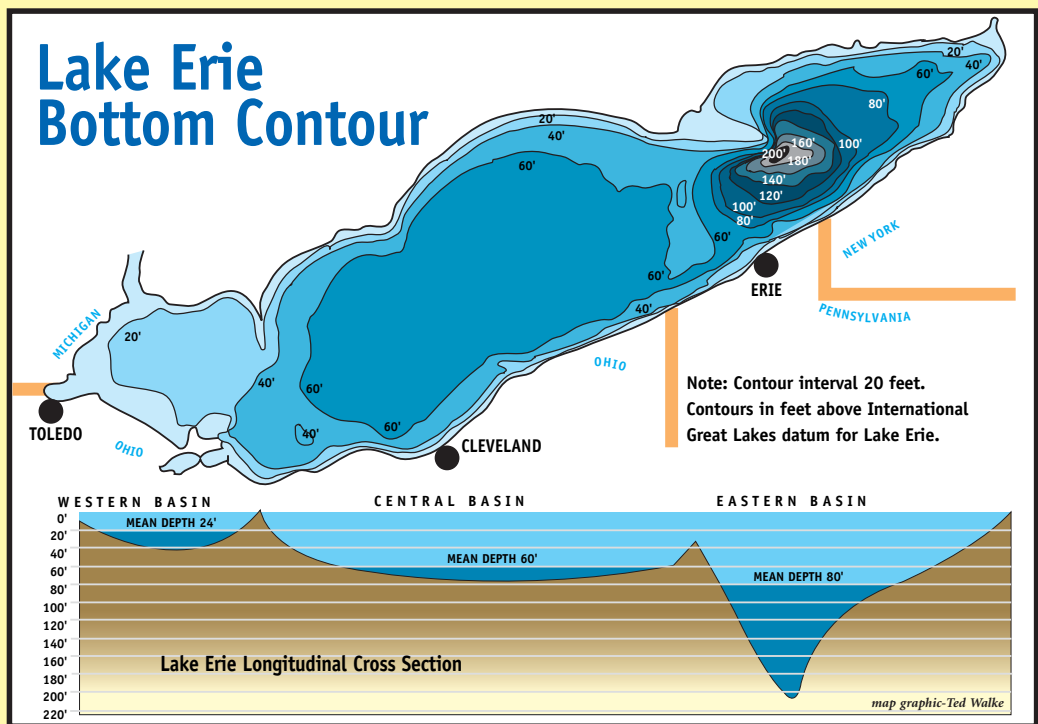
On the best days, every boat in the pack will be catching perch. But don't count on great fishing every day. A few tricks can greatly improve fishing on the slower days.

If you anchor, look for bottom structure. Perch tend to congregate most over humps, dropoffs and other irregularities.

"Perch like to linger around changes in the bottom. That allows them to change water depth quickly," says Kenyon.

Watch your sonar. Perch are not always close to the bottom. Sometimes they suspend well above the bottom, especially if there is something for them to eat up there. It's common for perch to be at various depths.

Vertical jigging often triggers more hits than still-fishing. Use a small jigging spoon or a leadhead jig tipped with a shiner. If you can't get shiners, use grubs, worms or pieces of nightcrawlers. Alone these baits are seldom as effective as shiners, but the movement of a jig makes a big difference. Try different lure colors until something works. Chartreuse, red, orange, blue or green in combination with silver are excellent color patterns for perch.



Drift-fishing increases the likelihood of perch seeing your bait. This is my preferred fishing method for perch at Lake Erie. I use small spinner rigs that I make on 30-inch leaders. The blades, either Colorado or Indiana, are about the size of my fingernails. Silver with either blue, green or red glitter has worked very well. In low-light conditions, fluorescent-red blades are better. Blades are separated from single hooks by a few small, colored beads. Tie a swivel between the leader and the main line. Add a ball-bearing snap swivel somewhere in the rig, depending on the type of weight you use. This will eliminate most line-twisting.

Using bottom-bouncing sinkers, the type that includes a wire between the weight and the line, will minimize snagging when you drift the rig close to the bottom. Weights between 1 ounce and 2 ounces are adequate. If they don't keep the rig close to the bottom in depths of 40 feet to 60 feet, the drift speed is probably too fast. Check the sonar often. Perch might be suspended far off the bottom, and when they are, they probably are feeding. When this is the case, a few large

splitshot might be enough weight, or simply shorten the line on bottom-bouncing rigs.

A drift sock, or drift anchor, is standard gear for controlling drift speed. This handy tool offers another advantage. It will keep the boat aligned perpendicular to the drift direction. This keeps lines spread.

Perch fishing is usually slow on those days when there is no wind. Keeping the boat moving then is more important than ever. Trolling with an electric motor probably will not produce a lot of perch, but it might improve your catch over remaining motionless.

The outlook for perch fishing in Lake Erie is promising this year, and at least for the next few years. According to Kenyon, there might be a slight drop-off in adult perch numbers from last year to this year, but not enough for anyone to notice. Perch survival has been very good. Probably more noticeable than any decline in numbers this summer will be an increase in the number of large perch. Then, with good spawning success in 2001 and 2003, perch fishing should continue to be excellent in the future. ☐