

Western Pennsylvania's Wonderful Walleyes

by Deborah Weisberg

Anglers on western Pennsylvania rivers are hoping for an encore to last fall's walleye spectacular.

If conditions are right, they won't be disappointed, according to Fish & Boat Commission Area 8 Fisheries Manager

Rick Lorson. Heavy rains in the spring of 2003 wiped out the shad and shiner spawn, the walleye's main forage base, a scenario repeated during last spring's heavy rains. It put walleyes, including those born in the drought years of the mid- to late 1990s, on the prowl for other food and made anglers' offerings that much more appealing.

River regulars, such as "Everyday" Jay Hughes, of Verona, the most familiar face at Pittsburgh's Highland Park Dam, pronounced last fall the best walleye fishing in 15 years. His observation played out from the tailrace of Kinzua Dam to Point State Park, where the Allegheny meets the Ohio and the Monongahela in downtown Pittsburgh. A 14.5-pound, 34-inch specimen landed by Gerald Van Houton, of Warren, below Kinzua Dam last September set the tone for three months of great angling. French Creek on the middle Allegheny also yielded its fair share of fall trophies.

Though the Highland Park Dam, just two miles from the Point in Pittsburgh, renews its legendary status each fall, last year was exceptional. In less than a week at the end of October, Hughes had released a 31.3-inch, 13-pound trophy on an 8-inch sucker and an 11-pounder measuring 31.75 inches.

And it wasn't just the Allegheny. Hughes also fishes near Leetsdale at Dashields Dam on the Ohio, especially in winter, because he can work his bait with fewer snags on its deeper, sandier bottom. The mouth of Montour Run on the Ohio is another shore angler's dream, since walleyes and other gamefish hold at the dropoffs, waiting to ambush prey.

"It hasn't been this good since I opened my shop, and that was 19 years



photo: Jeff Kinard

ago,” said Wayne Lykens of Island Fire-arms on a drizzly fall day that brought anglers to Montour Run in droves. “They’ve got it surrounded—guys wading on one side and boats on the other.”

The genesis of last year’s bounty goes back to the drought years of the 1990s. Low water levels then enhanced the survival of fry and created strong year classes that showed up last year as trophy 6- to 12-year-olds, says Lorson. Low water in spring, when most species spawn, is key to their survival. Last spring, shad, minnows, shiners and other baitfish perished in the wake of heavy rains, giving fall anglers an edge with what they put on their hooks.

Similar conditions prevailed this spring, Lorson says. “When the walleye season came in, high water made for unsuitable fishing. It also may have diminished the forage base. We still have the same good year classes in there as last fall. If conditions are right, I’d anticipate good fishing.”

Most anglers fish with shiners, fatheads and crankbaits, but Hughes fishes with suckers and chubs that he seines from Deer and Pine creeks on the Allegheny, and he swears it makes all the difference. Lykens agrees. “Wall-eyes will eat pretty much anything, but the guys who get the biggest ones tell me they get them on big suckers.”



Above, Highland Park Dam regulars show off their walleye catches. Below, Pittsburgh-area anglers with a walleye caught in the Three Rivers area.



Natural creek bait is livelier around predators than the farm-raised kind that have never swum in the wild, and walleyes are more attracted to prey from their own water, says Hughes. Fishing for suckers with hook and line is like fishing for trout, Hughes says. He uses light line and a mealworm or small piece of nightcrawler on a hook, and figures on a couple of hours to fill the bucket. Seining is more efficient, though baitfish tend to hug structure and stay out of current in cold weather.

Hughes fishes with both suckers and chubs, but he prefers big suckers. Chubs are fatter, he says, but suckers are slender, “easier going down.”

Fishing with large bait takes a different technique than most folks are used to. The strategy paid off for Hughes with a 13-pound, 31.3-inch walleye he caught last October on an 8-inch sucker. “Most people make the mistake of setting the hook as soon as they get the hard bite,” says Hughes. “When you’re fishing big bait, though, you have to wait for the walleye to turn it around so he can swallow it head first.

“When I fished that 8-inch sucker, the fish hit hard the first time. I had my drag set real light. I opened the bale and let him run for a while. They’ll grab the bait and run for 20 yards. When it stopped, I set the rod back down. Every so often, I’d see it *tap, tap, tap*. Remember, that sucker’s moving, trying to get away.

“I’ll bet I waited 20 minutes to set the hook. You just get a feel for it.”

Hughes uses 8-pound test, an 8.5-foot rod, and hooks in sizes 2 or 4. He adds a little weight to get the bait to the bottom and then retrieves. It’s a slow process.

It also takes a willingness to fish in bad weather, since rain, snow and wind breaking up the surface of the water give walleyes, with their light-sensitive vision, a sense of cover that puts them on the prowl. It’s when fair-weather fishermen also seek cover, clearing the banks for die-hards like Hughes.



Biggest Walleyes in Western PA Rivers

In 2003, three of the five largest walleyes recorded by the Commission were caught in the fall and winter on the Allegheny River. View that information on the Commission’s web site at http://sites.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/Fish_Boat/bigfish.htm. The top 10 walleyes from western PA rivers reported to the Commission in 2004 appear below. This information is current as of publication.

Angler	Waterway	Date Caught	Bait or Lure	Weight	Length in inches
Todd L. Weidl	Allegheny R.	2/23/04	Jig/fathead	12 lbs.	31
Michael A. Bier	Allegheny R.	1/11/04	worm harness	11 lbs., 13 oz.	32
Albert Hunkele	Allegheny R.	7/10/04	crankbait	11 lbs.	31
Brian Libert	Allegheny R.	2/26/04	jig	9 lbs., 13 oz.	28.5
Gerald Grove	Allegheny R.	6/26/04	crankbait	9 lbs., 5 oz.	30
Heather H. Ball	Ohio R.	6/2/04	shiner	8 lbs., 4 oz.	29
Ben F. Rzicznek	Neshannock Ck.	7/17/04	crankbait	7 lbs.	26
Karlle Uzmack	Allegheny R.	8/24/04	crankbait	6 lbs.	25
Ed McCarthy	Monongahela R.	5/3/04	crankbait	3 lbs., 3 oz.	23
Edward J. Lenhart	Monongahela R.	2/20/04	jig/minnow	C&R award	23