

Targeting Lake Erie's Near Shore *Fall Lake Trout*



photo-Dan Graziano

by Mark Haffley
PFBC Fisheries Biologist

The drag starts to sing, the rod shakes violently, a quick sprint across the deck and the words “Fish on!” echo across the cooling lake. Another Lake Trout is on its way to the net.

Pennsylvania has two native trout species, the Brook Trout and the Lake Trout. The original strain of Lake Erie’s Lake Trout is believed to have been extirpated years ago. Thanks to a combined effort from the fisheries agencies for

Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Michigan, Ontario, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Lake Trout have been restored to great numbers. Lake Erie’s Lake Trout are raised at the Allegheny National Fish Hatchery in Warren. From 2013 to 2015, the hatchery has stocked an average of 208,000 Lake Trout into the waters of Lake Erie annually.

Location

After a short boat ride from any of Erie’s east side boat launches, you can be on fish. The Eastern basin of Lake Erie is the deepest and coldest portion of the lake and is the preferred habitat for Lake Trout. During the fall, Lake

Trout migrate to the near-shore areas preparing to spawn, anywhere from 10- to 30-feet of water. This time of the year can be incredible for fishing with an active bite. The timing of this migration coincides with a lake temperature of roughly 58-degrees F or when the lake “turns over.” Turnover occurs in the fall of the year and is a result of the surface temperature lowering and becoming closer to the bottom temperature. At this point, it doesn’t take much wind energy to mix up the lake and make one uniform temperature. Prior to spawning in that near-shore area, Lake Trout feed frequently on Round Gobies, Emerald Shiners and other small fish. The substrate is much rockier than where fish spend summer months, making for a very food-rich environment.

Techniques

When seeking Lake Trout, trolling is the most commonly used fishing technique. Varying speeds throughout the trip can be a great idea until you find what fish prefer on that day. The colder the water gets, the slower you will want your presentation to be. Colder fish are more lethargic and less likely to chase baits for a great distance.

Large bait balls are often indicators that Lake Trout are in the area. If you locate bait, it is a good idea to troll that area for a few passes to see if there are fish nearby.

Gear

Most trolling rods work well for Lake Trout. A typical 9½ foot downrigger rod spooled with 20-pound-test line is ideal. The average weight of Lake Trout is 7½ pounds with the state record weighing 29 pounds, 4 ounces. New York’s state record Lake Trout comes from Lake Erie as well, and it weighed 41 pounds, 8 ounces.

Green is always a good go-to color for Lake Trout. There are many brands of spoons, and all are effective. These fish have big mouths and even bigger appetites, so don’t be afraid to use the 4-inch standard size spoon or even the next size up. Spoons can be trolled behind downriggers, paired with a dippy diver, or to make your spread a little larger, spoons can be trolled with different lengths of lead core

line and run off planer boards. Typical trolling speed for Lake Trout is somewhere between 1.5 to 2.5 mph with an even tighter range of 1.8 to 2.2 mph. At these speeds, the lead core line will sink about 5- to 6-foot per color. To get a spoon down 30 feet with lead core, you would need roughly five colors.

A flasher can be a great attractor for Lake Trout, and pairing one with a Spin-N-Glow can be a deadly technique. The flashers are run off of the downriggers but can also be run off of dippy divers. The side-to-side action of flashers catches the attention of aggressive fish.

Lake Trout are typically found in small groups throughout the near-shore area. When you catch one, circle back to check for other fish.

Lake Trout fishing is an exceptional catch and release fishery. These fish are hard fighting fish with deep, powerful head shakes. Lake Trout are not as acrobatic as steelhead or as prone to long runs but without a doubt an unbelievably fun fish to catch by rod and reel.

During this time of the year, there are a few options if you don’t own a boat. A few charter boats are still in the water and available for fishing. If you bring your own boat, be prepared to get a little wet. Many of the boat ramps will pull their courtesy docks around this time. You may leave off the dock but come back to nothing. A pair of hip boots will help you launch and land your boat.

Lake Trout are an underutilized fishery in Lake Erie with potential for exceptional daily catches. If you like catching big fish in good numbers, give Lake Trout fishing on Lake Erie a try. □



photo-Jason Wilhman

Spoons are the bait of choice for most anglers targeting Lake Trout. Green is always a good color choice.