



The School of Fish

by Duane Ryks

Dog Bone Tactics for Dog Day Walleyes

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Every year I hear anglers complaining about the “dog days” in mid-to-late summer. The number of boats on the water diminishes as fishing success drops. Anglers are referring to a period of warm water temperatures when seemingly the fish stop biting. Some folks speculate that the fish have sore mouths and have quit feeding. I have heard old timers say, “fish lose their teeth”.

I have never heard or read about any scientific or biological evidence of either of those theories. I do know this: Fish are cold-blooded creatures that must eat to survive. The warmer the water, the more they need to eat. The reason anglers aren't catching has little to do with whether the fish are feeding. Believe me, they are eating a lot. Walleyes put on most of their weight during this time.

Smart anglers have good success during those “dog days”. At walleye tournaments, throughout the Midwest, anglers continue to weigh hefty limits of fish. That leads me to believe most anglers simply aren't applying the right methods to catch fish during the warm water periods.

What typically happens during mid-summer is that the baitfish population explodes. There are abundant dining options for walleyes. Forage is plentiful, so walleyes can be selective. The key is to “trigger” fish into biting. Pick up your speed, and switch tactics.

Thermocline.

One of the first things I do this time of the year is to look for thermocline. Deep clear lakes often form layers of warm and cold water separated by a silt layer. Warm temperature periods with little or no wind can accelerate the formation of a thermocline. Move out over deep water and turn the sensitivity up on your sonar. You should be able to identify the depth that the thermocline exists if any. We have also witnessed this cloudy silt layer on an underwater camera. Typically, walleyes and other gamefish will prefer to stay at or above the thermocline. Finding that depth is often a key to finding feeding fish.

Locations.

Once you have determined the depth of the thermocline, if any, the next step is to search out locations on a lake map that offer

walleyes the best concentrations of baitfish. Deep humps and mid lake structures tend to be best.

On the water, look for inside pockets in weeds. Often there will be hard bottom areas of gravel or rocks that do not support much weed growth. These tend to be fish magnets. If you find walleyes in one of these areas, you can be pretty certain that here are other spots just like it, in the same depth range, that will also hold fish. I prefer working over the top or through a school of walleyes, if I



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can find one, versus trolling mindlessly all over the lake.

Trolling.

Walleyes will chase fast moving lures during this time period. Trolling techniques will out-perform slow moving live bait tactics. Many times walleyes will be suspended well above the bottom. I have caught walleyes ten feet below the surface, suspended over 40 feet of water. Many new methods have been developed by tournament anglers to catch these willing feeders.

Some of these new methods involve using planer boards that move your presentation out away from the boat to keep from spooking these high riders. Planer boards are relatively inexpensive and easy to use. Some states allow more than one line per angler. Planer boards will help you spread out your lines.

Line counter reels are a must for trolling in my estimation. They allow precise line measurement for lure placement and make it easy to duplicate successful patterns.

The smaller line counter reels work well with small diameter super braids; while the larger models are necessary for lead core line.

How fast do you troll for walleyes? Most anglers stay in the 1.5 to 2.5 mile per hour range. I have done much better this time of the year by picking my speed up to 4 to 5 miles per hour. We have caught most of our largest walleyes, the last few years, speed trolling for northern pike.

Spinner Rigs.

I don't need to explain these rigs to Missouri or Columbia River anglers. Spinner rigs have been a staple for many years on reservoirs. They work well in natural lakes at this time of the year as well. Anglers typically use heavy bottom bouncers out ahead of a wide variety of beads and blades. When walleyes are in shallow water, spinners with bottom bouncers will trigger a "reaction bite" from finicky fish.



Match size and color to conditions. The fire tiger pattern tends to work the best on clear lakes under bright light conditions. The shad colors tend to work best under low light conditions.

Tournament anglers have come up with some very innovative ideas applied to the old standbys. One that I have seen work very well is a clip on weight system. Anglers use clips normally used on planer boards to attach weights ahead of their spinner rigs to reach walleyes higher in the water column. By using line counter

reels, you can experiment with different depths, and the length of your set back lines until you find the right combination. When you hook a fish, reel up to the weight, unsnap it, and continue to land the fish.

Crankbaits.

Trolling crank baits has evolved tremendously over the past few years as well. The huge variety of crank baits available at your sporting goods retailer can be daunting. Which ones do you buy, and for which applications? Unless you own a gold mine or an oil field, you probably don't want to buy one of every size and color. Besides, most lures probably catch more anglers than fish.

In general, the larger the lip compared to the body size, the deeper the plug will run. Other factors such as rattles, and lure shape also play a role in choosing the right bait. A favorite color of many walleye anglers is the fire tiger pattern. Shad and perch colors often work well no matter where you fish. Reservoir and Great Lakes anglers like trout patterns.

The best advice I can give is to "match the hatch". Often by zooming in on baitfish schools you can get an idea of what the fish are feeding on. The only way to know for certain is to open the stomachs of fish you are cleaning and see what falls out. You may be very surprised. Also look in the bottom of your livewell. Often, I have run back to the bait shop to find something that looks like what fell out of the fish's gut.

Getting the right size lure down to the right depth is the next challenge. You can save a lot of time by picking up a copy of *Precision Trolling* by Mark Romanack. (www.precisionangling.com). Mark has provided charts for most popular crankbaits that match lure, line weight, and boat speed to determine the depth the lure will run.

As you troll, watch your sonar closely. Use the zoom feature of your sonar to keep an eye out for high riding fish. Open water walleyes can be at almost any depth in the water column. Baitfish schools are easier to find than predators. Change lures or line length to present your bait at the depth of the best concentrations. Mark schools on your GPS so you can return to them.

When you hook a fish, put a Mark or Way Point on your GPS. After a short period of time you can establish a Trail that will bring you back over the active, biting fish.

Before purchasing a whole bunch of gear, book a trip with a fishing guide who can show you what you need to be successful. www.ifishmn.com