



The School of Fish

by Duane Ryks

Follow the Bait

"How do you locate fish?" That's a question I get asked a lot. The answer most of the time is "I follow the bait".

Fish, no matter what species, have to eat to live. Other than the short period of time when they are occupied with reproducing; they eat, rest, and then eat again. Fish are cold blooded. The warmer the water they live in, the more they eat and less they rest. That is why fish from shallow stained lakes grow faster than those in deeper, clear lakes.

To find fish you need to figure out what they are eating and where they are dining. Their dinner table changes constantly. Early in the season fish tend to be shallow because that is where the small minnows are. Water inlets like creeks and rivers draw shiners and spawning fish. Next, shoreline structures such as points and large flats that extend out into the lake are the best bet. Later fish may move out to the weed edges and mid-lake structures such as sunken islands and humps. During early summer, bug hatches, like May Flies, may take them out to the deeper mud bottoms. Walleyes often chase bait in open water, not relating to structure at all. Oxygen levels in the summer may dictate the depth that fish will be found. In the fall fish tend to relate to the steepest drop offs in the lake. They also tend to move shallow once again until water temperatures get too uncomfortable.

Before you run all over looking, you need to analyze the lake, reservoir, or river you are fishing. I try to obtain and study lake maps. Many map companies now have electronic SD cards that you can put right into your GPS. Others make software available for your PC that allows you to enlarge and study maps at home; and then mark GPS coordinates you want to check out on the water. You can save the coordinates to an SD card, and then simply upload them to your GPS.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has a lot of information on their website about each body of water.

They can tell you what the average depth is, water clarity, bottom content, and species that are present. They also have stocking data, and netting surveys.

A few more things to consider before we hit the water: What direction is the wind from? Are weather conditions stable? Is the barometric pressure falling or rising?

Now that you are actually on the water, where do you start? When you spend as much time on the water as I do, I can usually predict what I will find based on the surrounding terrain, water color, water clarity, weed growth, and season.

The wind direction can make a difference, especially if fish are feeding in the shallows. Food sources tend to get blown into the windy side of the lake structures and shorelines. On some lakes and reservoirs the waves rolling into the shorelines will create a mudline that gives bait a



Konrad P. Schmidt

Many times baitfish schools are easier to find than game fish. However, where you find their food, the predators will be also.

false sense of security. Hungry walleyes follow and feast in the cloudy water. Even though boat control can be difficult in windy conditions, I will check those areas first. Check the down-wind side of shallow flats. Often baitfish will be carried off the top of the flat and stack up on the trailing edge.

Weather plays a huge part as well. During stable weather patterns, which may only be a few days, fish tend to gravitate to points and shallower water. After a cold front they may move into deeper pockets or inside corners on bars and flats. Each species has their preferred water temperature comfort levels. Bass and sunfish can tolerate warmer water than walleyes and pike. A temperature

gauge is a must at certain times of the year.

Back to the bait. Schools of baitfish, or clouds of insect larvae are much easier to find than the predators. When you find the bait, the game fish are probably in the vicinity. Birds, like loons, gulls and cormorants, will often give away the location of baitfish schools. Learn to recognize baitfish or clouds of insect larvae on your locator. Once you find them continue to look for larger "hooks" indicating predators. Color LCD graphs are huge advantage in finding fish. No serious walleye angler would accept anything less.

For walleyes, I usually start at the weed edge and then search deeper until I find the bait. Hard bottom areas with rocks and gravel tend to draw baitfish. Sometimes you will find these clean hard bottom areas inside the weed edge. At the right time of the year, these are fish magnets. When I am searching for walleyes, if I don't find schools of bait on a sunken island or hump, I move on. While running

from spot to spot, I watch my locator. Many times I will see suspended baitfish schools out away from structure. Walleyes don't seem to care if there is structure close by or not, as long as there is a meal to be had. I have caught walleyes ten feet down suspended over 40 feet of water.

Much has been written about bass relating to cover and weeds. However, a bass isn't going to stay under the same dock or log for very long if a meal doesn't occasionally swim by. If there are no small sunfish or minnows relating to a weed bed or structure, the bass will lose interest. A good pair of Polaroid sunglasses is a must. Watch for baitfish breaking the surface. Bass will chase bait out into open water. I have often caught smallmouth bass suspended away from structure. Remember, follow the bait.

To learn more, contact me for a guided fishing trip. Nothing beats time on the water.

