



The School of Fish

by Duane Ryks

Get Skinny for Early Season Walleyes

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Most fishing experts agree on one thing: No matter what species you are after, "match the hatch" for fishing success. For walleyes in late spring and early summer, that means small lures pay big dividends.

As lakes shed their covering of ice across the upper Midwest, the shallows, which warm faster, come alive. Just about every species takes their turn spawning in shallow water. That means lots of small baitfish for hungry predators. Walleyes feed on just about anything they can swallow.

One of the first forage species walleyes seek is spottail shiners. Shiners will spawn just about anywhere in shallow water, but key locations on lakes are creek mouths and culverts with incoming water.

Lures.

Small minnow baits work exceptionally well during this time. The old standby, the Original Floater Rapala®, works great in shallow water. However, one of the very best lures I have found are the new Minnow Raps® from Normark®. The Minnow Rap is a skinnier version of the Shad Rap®, a long time favorite for many walleye anglers. The #7 size is a near perfect match to the size of spawning spottail shiners. They will dive to about 5-6 feet on a casting retrieve with 8# test line. Trolled on the same line, they will run about 9-11 feet deep.

Experiment with colors. There are several shad colors available that match shiners. I like the bright colors, like fire tiger or chartreuse during low light conditions.

Casting Tactics.

At night, walleyes will follow shiners right up to shore. Many anglers catch walleyes from docks or by casting to the shoreline from a boat. Shorelines with the wind blowing in can be awesome if you can keep the boat from beaching.

This is one of those times of the year when wading may be the best option for catching walleyes. If you can gain access to the areas where shiners are spawning, you probably won't have to wait long for your first walleye bite of the season. The key to success is to be very quiet and try to



Shad Raps® (left) have been a long time favorite among anglers for walleyes. I prefer the new, skinnier Minnow Raps® (right) for early season walleyes. Both versions are shown in #7 size.

stand still, which may be hard in cold water. I have caught walleyes within a foot of the end of my rod while wading. You can imagine how "thrilling" that can be.

When casting in shallow water, a deep diving lure like the Minnow Rap may run too deep on a constant retrieve. Try

a slow stop and go approach. Crank a few turns, pause for few seconds, and then start reeling again.

Night fishing can be frustrating without good lighting. I use an LED light that clips to my cap. Many LED lights have both white and red light switches. Red LED light doesn't seem to draw as many bugs.

Trolling Tactics.

This is my favorite time of the year to do some late evening trolling on clear water lakes. The bugs generally haven't hatched yet, and you probably don't have to worry about a lot of boat traffic. The best times tend to be the last hour of daylight to about an hour after dark. The walleyes probably feed most of the night, but I need my "beauty" sleep.

I like to use a line counter reel rigged with 8-10# Berkley® Fireline®. The line counter lets you know precisely how much line you have out so you can replicate a successful pattern, or make adjustments. The small diameter line allows the Minnow Rap to run down to about 10-11 feet with 100 feet of line back.

Start trolling at the emerging outside weed edge. Typically, I start at about 11-13 feet deep. I try to keep the boat speed at 1.7 to 2 miles per hour. At these depths I use my outboard, if I need to go shallower, I switch to my electric motor. Watch your electronics for baitfish schools and larger fish activity. I like to use an "S" trolling pattern to cover different depths until I find a pattern. Once you establish the right depth, watch your GPS to duplicate trolling runs. A lake map chip installed in your GPS unit helps to anticipate turns, especially in the dark.

Fish the windy side of the lake if possible—you won't spook the fish as easily. I like to stay close to emerging cabbage weed beds if the lake has them. Steeper drops along shore tend to be better than gradual tapers. Irregular shorelines seem to be better than long, featureless ones. The mouths of creeks or channels are often the very best.

Try to work as far into weed pockets as possible. Make quick turns and speed up the boat to get out of the pocket again without fouling your lure with weeds. Work past points and then circle back to get the best run possible. If you are not dredging weeds once in a while, you are not running close enough.

Boat control requires closely watching your sonar. Your passengers will need to watch out for other boats and structures.

I don't like to use rod holders when fishing in the dark. You can't tell if your lure is running correctly or contacts weeds. As you troll, try moving your rod tip ahead about a foot

and then go slack. This added action tends to entice finicky walleyes.

If you miss a strike, quickly drop the lure back towards the fish. Many times walleyes will come back and hit it.

As it gets darker, walleyes may move inside the weed edge. Switch to shallow running lures and use an electric



Sandy Ryks with a pair of Gull Lake walleyes caught mid-May 2009, while trolling #7 Minnow Raps® in 12-13 feet of water.

motor. I have caught many walleyes trolling in and out of a line of docks. Watch out for swimming buoys and rafts.

Be safe. Keep your life preserver on anytime you are fishing in the dark. Minnesota, and a lot of other states require running lights whenever you are under power.

If you would like to learn this technique, schedule a late afternoon or evening guide trip.