



The School of Fish

by Duane Ryks

Hunting Fall Whitetails

Gorcha! I'll bet you are asking, "what does a fishing guide, like Duane, know about deer hunting?" Well, while I do deer hunt in the fall, I am talking about the white-tipped tails of walleyes.

I confess, I am a fall walleye fishing fanatic. Every time I hook onto my boat for a fall fishing trip, my adrenaline starts rushing. This is the best time of the year, in my estimation, to be on the water. And, because of where I am fortunate to live, I get my fix often. I just keep on fishing until the lake freezes over.

In this article, I want to zero in specifically on walleye locations in deeper, natural lakes like those I am acquainted with in Minnesota. Certainly, the same types of areas may hold fish in lakes and reservoirs all over the Midwest.

In the fall, the walleyes that have been buried in the weeds all summer start to move out to where we can locate them easily. And, when we find them, they are usually hungry. They seem to be bulking up in time for the cooler water to come. However, they are not everywhere. They may be holed up in some unlikely areas where you probably haven't looked for them in the last 12 months; in fact, you may never have looked for them in some of the spots where they are found in the fall.

As the air temperatures cool in the fall, many lakes go through a turnover. Usually in deep clear lakes, a thermocline (a steep temperature gradient marked by a layer above and below which the water is at different temperatures) develops throughout the summer. Using an underwater camera, we have witnessed a thick layer of dense milky matter that forms at the thermocline level. Low oxygen and poor light levels below the thermocline prevent much fish activity in deeper water. As the surface water cools, it starts to sink causing a turnover action with the warmer water immediately below. In shallower lakes, it usually causes decaying weeds to float to the surface. Once the water clears, it is "game on!"

Daytime Locations.

Fall is the one time of year when we catch walleyes all day long. They can now move deeper than pre-turnover, and seek out lower light levels throughout the day. It may

be more than that; walleyes may simply feed more often during the day.

"Okay, Duane, get on with it. We want to know where you are fishing?" Think deep water and steep drop offs. Look for areas on a lake map with the steepest drop offs into deep water. I will talk about night fishing later, but for now, understand that most fish, including walleyes will spend most of the lowlight hours in shallow water, and then retreat to deeper water during bright conditions. Sharp drop offs mean that they don't have to travel very far to do that.



Fall is prime time for big walleyes. You just need to know where to look. Pictured above is Randy Zimmer from Raymond, MN.

Many deep, clear walleye lakes in Minnesota have ciscoes, or tullibees as they are sometimes called. Ciscoes spawn in the late fall on shallow gravel shorelines and long underwater points. They may start showing up in these

areas long before they actually spawn in late November to early December. Tight inside turns near shore, with deep water nearby, are likely places to look for staging ciscoes. Hungry walleyes follow any time the pickings are easy. Since ciscoes are fairly large prey, guess what size walleyes congregate nearby? Big pike tend to take advantage of an easy meal also.

Other areas overlooked by anglers are inside turns along mid-lake bars, flats or reefs. During the summer months many walleye anglers concentrate their efforts on points. However, in the fall, tightly schooled fish will take up residence in the slightest indents in the bar away from the beaten up locations.

The Night Bite

During the daylight hours I suggest deeper water for walleyes. When it gets dark, think the opposite. Walleyes could be feeding with their backs out of the water right near shore. At some point in the late fall, frogs start migrating back into lakes to bury in the mud to survive throughout the winter months. Which many would do if not for those dang walleyes. Yep, there they are, waiting for an easy meal. Fishing in waders may be more productive at this time than from a boat. Plus, you don't have to try and load the boat in the dark. When I see frogs crossing the road, I go night fishing.

Bait.

Without question, the best bait for walleyes in the fall has to be redbait chubs. They are hard to find and expensive. You'll pay more for a dozen redbait than a pound of choice steak. But, they work. Redbait are very hardy and won't die the first minute you drop them down. In fact, if it weren't for those hungry walleyes, you may be able to fish with one the whole day. Since they are so strong, they will let you know when big eyeballs are nearby. I like to use larger bait in the fall. Even smaller walleyes will suck down a four-inch redbait. Anglers think because they are using larger bait, they need to wait longer to set the hook. I find that walleyes will swallow a redbait almost immediately. We have caught walleyes on river chubs as well. I have caught 16-inch walleyes on 7-inch chubs. Use a #1 or #2 hook and hook through the minnow's nose only. Some anglers will hook large minnows just ahead of the tail with good hook-setting results. I use a shorter leader when walleyes are less active. A heavy weight, up to one ounce, is necessary to keep a big minnow from swimming away from a lethargic walleye.

In lowlight conditions, I switch to shallow-running lures and soft plastics. I like to fish a jig with a curly tail to catch walleyes huddled up to greet frogs along shore.

Book a fall fishing guide trip early. These peak days fill fast. www.ifishmn.com.

