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FISHING WALLEYE

5 Hotspots For Columbia River Walleyes

September 29th, 2010

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One of the best ways to fish the Columbia River is to cherry pick its best spots for catching ol' marble eyes during the heat of summer





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Summer on the eastern stretches of the Columbia River can be scorching. Temperatures rarely cool below 70 degrees at night, and sun-scorched daytime highs can hit triple digits, leaving you as red as a Lund boat by day's end. Ordinarily, this kind of heat can be miserable, but for walleye anglers, hot days are as welcome as a big fish in the boat. Warming water temperatures translate into active spinyrays. On the Columbia, it's the time to catch a lot of walleyes.



Photo by Tom Evans

One of the best places for marble eyes on the Columbia is directly below McNary Dam. This is hallowed bugeye water. Washington's record walleye was caught here, and it's where anglers catch 15-pounders every year. Highway 82 crosses the river here; looking south toward Oregon from the bridge, the dam is to your left and the best water is immediately to your right.

You'll find boat ramps just over the bridge on the Oregon side at Umatilla and Irrigon. From Irrigon it's a short run up the Oregon side to a long, flat shelf at river mile markers 62 and 64. This shelf has probably produced more big fish than any other part of the river. To fish it, stay between the markers and on top of the shelf. Work it by jiggging a blade bait or a roundhead jig with a nose-hooked night crawler. You can also troll it

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upstream with crankbaits, or troll downstream with bottom walkers and worm harnesses. Locals fish a glow/chartreuse roundhead jig with a nose-hooked 'crawler, then above that run a worm harness and a whole 'crawler off a three-way swivel.

If there's significant current from McNary, the walleye will flare to the sides of the river, get behind structure and settle on the inside of current seams. In mild current they congregate atop mid-river shelves.

Across from the Irrigon ramp is Boulder Alley. This water can be tough to fish because of a rock-strewn, tackle-grabbing bottom, but lots of big walleyes live down in the rock humps. Here again, pay attention to current. Kimo Gabriel, the Washington state walleye record holder, pointed out to me, you can be in Boulder Alley and not hit a fish all day, while only a boat length away you can pound them all day. The keys here are to find the inside current seams and pay attention to electronics. Summer walleyes will stay just inside a current break and at one depth contour.

For information about this area, call Rod McKenzie at the High Desert Marine in Umatilla, (541) 567-8419.

It's tough to beat the summer fishing just below John Day Dam. Launch on the Oregon side at Giles French Park near Rufus, or on the Washington side at Maryhill State Park, and the most productive walleye water is from the dam down to Miller Island below the bridge at Highway 97. Typically, as a strong current comes down from the dam walleye move up to intercept food. Night fishing for bugeyes is popular here, but don't try it



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unless you're familiar with the water and comfortable with night fishing. The current that's so attractive to walleyes can be treacherous for inexperienced boaters.

Trolling stickbaits off bottom walkers in deep water is popular in this stretch (particularly at dusk and at night). Also try roundhead jigs, blade baits, worm harnesses and crankbaits. There's a range of depths here, from five feet near shore to 60 feet in the main river. Look for humps, underwater rock formations, shelves and flats, and especially look for deep rock in current where summertime 'eyes wait to ambush food. Pay particular attention to the long shelves and flats along the Oregon side — perfect structure for trolling crankbaits and worm harnesses.

Another hotspot is the north side of Miller Island, which splits the river. The incoming Deschutes River is on the south side of this split.

There's a significant channel on the north side of the island, and the sloping bottom as that channel begins to come up to form the island can hold concentrations of walleyes. Trolling deep-diving stickbaits and crankbaits and digging up mud along the slope is the ticket.

For conditions, tackle and lodging, contact Jim Stroud with Dinty's Market in Biggs, (541) 739-2236.

MOVING DOWNRIVER

Fishing is slightly different on the Columbia as you move closer to the Portland/Vancouver area. Walleye activity here tends to run later than upstream sections because snowmelt and hard, cold currents from upriver dams keep water temperatures down. Summer fishing doesn't really get rocking until the end of June, and

sometimes not until July. Then fishing can be ferocious. Lower river walleyes aren't as big on average as east-side walleyes, but you can catch 30 to 40 fish per outing.

One of the most popular spots **YOUR WALLEYE** is Ough Reef, just upriver from **TACKLE ARSENAL** the public boat ramp at Camas.

This is an extensive flat adjoined by deep water. It can be tough to fish, with strong currents, twisting current seams and lots of tackle-grabbing rock on the bottom. Also be prepared for a stiff westerly wind. Successfully fished, this long shelf can hold excellent numbers of walleyes that fall to vertical jigging and roundhead jigs.

Upriver from Ough Reef is lengthy Reed Island, which can be accessed by launching at Crown Point or Sundial on the Oregon side, or by running upriver from the Camas ramp on the Washington side. Extensive flats and shallows surround the island. Trolling worm harnesses in only a few feet of water during summer will result in big numbers of fish, as will tossing the crankbaits around the island's shallow edges.

Planning to fish the Columbia for walleyes this month? Don't leave home without these must-haves in your tackle trays.

Jigging: Use chrome blades in clear water, chartreuse for dirty water. Also carry glowing chartreuse light green roundhead jigs and night crawlers; hook

a crawler through the nose and bounce the jig along the bottom. Also try Whistler jigs tipped with a plastic Pulse worm, football-shaped jigheads threaded with a chartreuse black flake Yamamoto Super Grub, and Rock Dancer hair jigs tipped with a chunk of night crawler.

Harness Trolling: Carry bottom walkers and worm harnesses

Downriver, you'll want to fish at the I-205 bridge, both sides of Government Island and the railroad bridge near I-5 with blades baits and roundhead jigs with night crawlers.

For information and tackle on the lower Columbia, call Larry McClintock at Critter Gitter Custom Walleye Tackle in Portland, (503) 257-0553.

CURRENTS & MOON PHASES

Moon phases are important for walleye fishing. Portland-area walleye expert McClintock swears by the three days on both sides of either a full or new moon. "Those tend to be the best days of the month in the summer," he points out.

Washington-Oregon Game & Fish carries Dan Barnett's Feeding Times, which includes moon phases, within the front pages of each issue.

It can't be said enough: River walleye are current creatures. Where they are and what they're doing is a consequence of current or the lack of one.

equipped with Smile Blades. Hot shades include scale chartreuse and sparkle red.

Crankbaits: Hot Lips, Hawg Bosses and Timber Tigers are the most popular cranks on the Columbia. Troll them upriver, digging the bills into the mud.

Add snap weights as needed to get the lure down. Use Blue/chrome for clear water, fire tiger and chartreuse for strained water. Cast-and-retrieve cranks in shallow water at first light, dusk and at night.

Stickbaits: A properly presented Bomber Long W behind a bottom walker or three-way dropper rig (use hollow-core pencil lead) can be killer. Try Cultiva or Lucky Craft perch pattern in holographic foil finishes. Be sure to have some Luhr-Jensen Power Minnows. —

Dusty Routh

Be sure to fish current breaks, current seams and deep-water holding places out of the current. Fish close to structure and to the sides of the river during periods of heavy flow, and more to the center and mid-river shelves during lighter flows.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Columbia River walleye guides:

- Kurt Sonderman (Washington Walleye Circuit Angler of the Year), (509) 948-0763;
- Alan “Touche” Clark, Fly By Nyte Guide Service, (541) 298-2770;
- Ed Iman Outfitter, (503) 685-3753;
- Hook Up Guide Service, Jack Glass, (503) 665-5370;
- Larry Page, Page’s Northwest Guide Service, (503) 760-3373.



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