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Spring Walleye

Understanding Pre-Spawn / Spawning Walleyes by Mike McClelland

Much debate has occurred over the years about fishing and [walleye](#) activity during the pre-spawn and spawning period.

Unfortunately much of the information that has been passed along has been based upon misinformation or just plain ignorance. Understanding walleyes and the proper techniques to use during this period will help you greatly improve your fishing success.

Many well intended anglers nationwide have questioned the ethics of catching walleyes during the pre-spawn. Remember this: It doesn't matter whether a female [walleye](#) is caught during this time period or in the summer, the net effect is much the same. Simply put, provided that anglers don't overharvest the key spawners, (the three to six pound females) during any time period throughout the year, fishing pre-spawn walleyes won't have a negative impact on your favorite fishery.

Always practice good conservation skills not only during this time period, but through out the whole fishing year. Now let's get into understanding this calendar period.



Walleyes spawn in rocky areas, instinctively seeking places that receive large amounts of [wave action](#) which does two things: oxygenates the eggs and keeps silt from covering them. These areas should be sought out in the early spring on lakes, reservoirs and rivers. The spawn begins when water temperatures reach 40 degrees and lasts until the water warms beyond 45 degrees. In the period leading up to the spawn, look around. You can use rip-rap, skull-sized rocks or other known spawning areas as your points of reference when searching for pre-spawners.

The quickest and easiest way to find spawning areas is to simply ask. Since walleyes spawn in the same locations year after year, someone will know where the spawn occurs. If you can't learn this information at local bait shops, contact the local conservation officer to put you on the right track.

Pre-Spawn

Once the spawning area has been located the fish staging for the spawn is easy to find with the help of a few simple rules. Begin at the spawning area as walleyes spawn in the same area year after year. Proceed from the spawning area and locate the closest 30-foot level of water on the flattest bottom possible. Whether this depth is found in the backs of bays or the bottom of the lake, 30 feet is the key. If the lake doesn't have 30 feet of water, move to the closest, deepest part of the lake and begin looking there.

The fish can be easily found and are unmistakable. On your electronics, they'll mark as big hooks a foot or two off the bottom. It may not be on a red-hot bite, so fish them with confidence and big baits. Eventually a few will bite and two or three fish on any pre-spawn day is considered a great day.

Once you have located the fish, move your boat to the up-wind side and drift through them as slowly as possible. The best method for taking pre-spawn fish is either Lindy rigging a large minnow four to six inches long or vertical jigging with a 1/4 ounce to 3/8 ounce jig using a large rubber body and a big minnow. My preference is both presentations at the same time. Let the Lindy rig trail 75 to 100 feet behind the boat and set the rod in a [rod holder](#). Always keep an eye on the Lindy rig rod. When a hit is made, open the bail and give the fish a good deal of line and time before setting the hook. Remember these fish are somewhat lethargic and you're using a large minnow, give them some time.

With the Lindy rig rod is in its holder, vertically jig with the other rod. Jigging is easy - simply bounce the jig off the bottom, keeping it as close to vertical as possible. Unlike the Lindy rig, set the hook as soon as you feel a hit. For that matter, set the hook as soon as you think you feel a hit.

One key to catching walleyes during the pre-spawn is to use big baits. The young of the year haven't hatched yet, so the main food for walleyes are the adult bait fish that have made it through the first year and are now fully grown. Add the biggest body you have to your [jigs](#) and cast or troll bigger [crankbaits](#).

Slow Is The Key

Once you've located fish with electronics, remember fishing slow is the key. For jigging or rigging, you can't go too slow. Use your [bow mount electric motor](#) on the slowest speed. The slightest breeze will push you fast enough. Use a sea anchor to slow you even more if there is any wind.

Spawning

Walleyes spawn in water from one foot to over 20 feet deep. Rocky and gravel covered shorelines are the most typical spawning sites; however, if habitat is lacking walleyes will also spawn on sand and in other less desirable areas. An abundance of broken rocks and gravel in water three to 10 feet deep will normally attract the largest concentrations of fish.

Reservoir walleyes typically migrate to the upstream end of an impoundment to spawn. In large reservoirs, such as those along the Missouri River, walleyes have been known to [travel 100](#) plus miles to reach prime spawning sites. Fisheries' biologists have tracked walleyes tagged with radio telemetry transmitters from one end of Lake Oahe in South Dakota to the other. Although this long distance may be an isolated incident, walleyes are nomadic creatures that won't hesitate to migrate many miles to find suitable spawning habitat.

Rip-rap shorelines near the dams are often prime spawning areas. Trolling [crankbaits](#) along this rip-rap edge can prove absolutely deadly on big fish. The best action usually takes place after dark and continues until about midnight.

Although many walleyes prefer to spawn just downstream from dams, the rocky shorelines and tributary streams also attract spawn-laden fish. Not all the fish spawn at the same time or in the same places. This is Mother Nature's way of ensuring that an entire "year class," those particular fish that are born each year, isn't destroyed by floods or other natural disasters.

Walleyes that spawn in rivers are the most predictable of all. Clearly, 99 percent of the fish that enter the river to spawn will physically swim as far as they possibly can before stopping to deposit their eggs. Low head dams, waterfalls, or natural and man-made diversions, usually stop the upstream movement of fish and often cause the concentration of tremendous numbers of big fish in amazingly small areas. At times, the walleyes will be so thick you can feel your lure bouncing off the backs of the fish. Fishing under these conditions can be easy and rewarding.

Walleyes that spawn in natural lakes are often the last fish of the season to deposit their eggs. It usually takes a week or two longer for the sun to warm these large inland lakes to the magical 40 to 45 degree spawning temperature that walleyes prefer.

Trolling rip-rap areas

Troll the spawning areas with shallow diving [crankbaits](#) such as a Rebel Minnow or Rattlin' Rogues. Trolling is by far the most effective method I have found for taking spawning walleyes along rip-rap or rocky shore lines. Long-lining [crankbaits](#) with eight to ten-pound test monofilament line will produce the best results. Troll at a fairly brisk pace and use a combination of long and short rods to stair-step lure depths to match the angle of the structure. This will keep all your baits in the fish zone.

Set the rods on the side of the boat closest to the rip-rap. Use a long rod (eight to nine-foot) to reach out from the boat and present the crankbait along the edge of the rocks. A shallow diving Rebel Minnow is the ideal lure for the outside rod. The Rebel Minnow only dives two to three feet, but that is enough to keep the lure ticking the stones near shore. Next, set up a shorter rod with a slightly deeper diving lure like the [Rattlin' Rogue](#). Set an even shorter third rod with an even deeper diving bait such as a [Wally Diver](#) or one of the new Shad-R baits. By following this procedure, you'll effectively cover the sloping rip-rap edges.

Water Temperature

In the spring, ignoring water temperature can be a costly mistake. Since walleyes spawn in the same places every year at predictable temperature levels, it is a simple matter to determine where the fish are in their spawning cycle. You can tell by temperature if the fish are close to spawning (pre-spawn) in the middle of it, or finished (post-spawn). This information, in turn, gives you a general idea of where the fish will be.

Peak Walleye Activity

Your best chances to catch a spawning [walleye](#) are definitely between dark and midnight. The telemetry studies we've reviewed show a definite trend with the majority of the fish arriving just at dark and spawning until about midnight.

We've also found that fish spawn primarily for about four hours. One fish might pull in and spawn for four hours and be done all in one night. Another may come four different nights and spawn an hour each night. In between these nightly visits, she'll make large movements, sometimes up to five miles as the staging areas can be a long way away from the actual spawning bed. Again, a key to big walleye success during pre-spawn: "Be there at dark and don't stay any later

than midnight."

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