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FISHING WALLEYE

Walleyes on the Columbia

September 29th, 2010

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Hunters of trophy-sized marble-eyes rarely go away from the Columbia River disappointed, and it's because they've learned these expert techniques.

by Leroy Ledeboer





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When we take you from Minnesota and Wisconsin motoring vanloads of clients to the Columbia River for a shot at monster marble-eyes, you know there's something special going on. And in the late 1980s and early '90s, the Columbia's oversized walleyes became one of our country's hottest angling items, particularly from McNary Dam to Crowe Butte State Park. Everyone, it seems, wanted a shot at walleyes that were tipping scales to mid-teen figures. The hysteria has tapered off, along with that once-fantastic population of large fish – but plenty of husky walleyes are still out there.

What it means is that on most days you won't have quite as many competing boats as you would have a few years ago, and you'll have to vary your techniques, using some blade baits and diving plugs, instead of straight spinner-crawler combos. Still, this Columbia River fishery is mainly a matter of finding a series of underwater humps, ridges and sunken islands below the dam and then working them carefully.

“Last year I caught and released between 20 and 25 walleyes that topped 10 pounds in this stretch of water,” says Bob Crow of Paterson, Wash., who lives right above this part of the Columbia and has successfully fished it since his early teens. “At least five of them were in the 14-pound class. These are quality fish we have down here. Even our males generally run 4 to 5 pounds, and of course, the females are much larger.”

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When enough water is being released at McNary Dam to create a decent current, Crow is a firm believer in weighted minnow-shaped silver lures called blade baits. They are designed to be dropped to the bottom, lifted with a sharp snap of the wrist, and then allowed to flutter back down. The action simulates a wounded baitfish and puts hungry walleyes on the attack. Colored sticky tapes add variety.

“I stay pretty basic when it comes to blade colors,” Crow explains. “Besides straight silver, I’ll use chartreuse or red. What’s more important is keeping your line as vertical as possible while you move slowly downriver.”

Although Crow has a lead mold and makes his own blade baits, sometimes bending the metal or sharpening its edges to alter action, commercial versions are readily available at large tackle shops.

When he wants to cover more water than blades allow, Crow switches to bottom walkers and spinners, always in tandem with a small float, such as a Spin-N-Glo, a Winner or a Corky – anything to keep the rig above the rocks. Behind this float he runs three beads, then his spinner, then three more beads trailed by a tandem hook baited with night crawler.

“I stick to the basics,” he says. “Last year I used lots of glows, as well as whites, chartreuse, orange and silvers. The main thing is getting your lure down where the walleyes are – that, and keeping a steady speed, around a mile to a mile and a half per hour. Except in very calm water, it’s only practical to troll spinners downriver.”

If blade baits are his primary fast-current lures and spinners are tops for calmer waters, Crow cautions that

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no one should leave home without at least a few crankbaits, which he always trolls against the current. At times it's simply a crank bite on the Columbia, and though he quickly acknowledges that a wide variety of cranks will work, Crow's favorites are Hawg Bosses.

"When I go to my Hawg Boss cranks, I'll test three colors: crawdad, metallic red, and a perch pattern," he relates. "If I can't catch walleyes on one of those, then I figure either I'm not over fish, or it's just not a crank bite."

Because he likes to fish the ridges, moving from the main channel into shallower water, at times Crow finds that even deep-diving cranks don't get down far enough. That's when he experiments with snap-on weights.

"It's just a piece of lead attached to a sturdy clip-on, much like a downrigger quick release that you can quickly detach when you reel it up," Crow explains. "If I think I need to get down an extra 10 feet, say to 30 instead of the 20 my crank will dive at a fast troll, I'll run out 40 feet of line, clip-on a 2-ounce weight and I'm in business. If I need to get deeper, I might run out 80 feet before adding that weight. The key here is to experiment, trying different combinations until you can get right down along that ridge where the walleyes are."

MORE TACTICS

Avid walleye angler Bobby Jacobsen also relies on snap-ons, but he's more likely to run one 10 to 12 feet ahead of a stick bait such as a floating Rapala, a Reef Runner or a Shad Rap.

"At a 2.2 mph troll it usually takes a 1 1/2- or 2-ounce snap-on to get a floater down to those 25- to 30-foot

humps,” he explains. “Floaters simply give you a different look, a more streamlined plug with far less vibration and a slower wobble. I’d say they look more like an actual minnow than the diving plugs, particularly in the chrome or gray with black backs, or the perch colors.

“To keep a floater’s nose down so I’m getting a horizontal presentation, I run a single split shot about three feet in front of it. But, again, this is simply a way to give a stubborn walleye a different look, something maybe they haven’t seen as much. Far more often I’m also fishing blade baits or deep-diving plugs.

“No matter what baits you’re using, though, it’s important to remember that river fishing is a lot different than lake or reservoir angling,” continued Jacobsen. “Instead of being weather-related, where the bite turns off when a front moves through, the river bite is current-controlled, especially close to the dams. At night and early in the morning they usually release the most water, sending chopped up and stunned baitfish through the turbines, triggering a bite. Then, around 10 or 11 the next day, they’ll shut it off, and just that fast your bite is over.

Jacobsen says he fishes deeper on the river, from 20 to 45 feet, than he does in lakes. He determines fishing depth by the water’s temperature.

“In the early spring, say at the end of March or early April, cold water pushes the fish deeper, and it’s a great time for blade baits,” he says. “As it warms in June and July, we’re more likely to pick up walleye in 20- to 25-foot depths. The blades still work, but by then I’m just as likely to be running plugs.

“On the first day of a July tournament my partner, Rick Sawyer, and I took three walleyes on blades, including Rick’s 9 1/2-pounder, but because most of the fish were in 22- to 25-foot water, the second day we went to a Hawg Boss and a 1/4-ounce Baby Hot Lips and picked up our six-fish limit.”

JIGGING UP MARBLE EYES

Gordie Steinmetz, who breaks away from his Banks Lake tackle shop often enough to tackle the river, agrees that the Hawg Boss and Hot Lips can be dynamite plugs on the Columbia, but he’s just as likely to use DC-16 and DC-13 Timber Tigers in crawdad, chartreuse or blue back, or a shad tone Rapala Tail Dancer. When it’s not a crank bite, Gordie also might switch to blade baits, but at times he prefers his jigs. “If the current isn’t too strong, I’ll go to 3/8- or 1/2-ounce leadheads,” he explains. “In faster water you may have to use weightier ones, but just remember this basic rule: Don’t use anything heavier than it takes to comfortably stay in contact with the bottom.

“A lot of lead-head styles will work, but on the Columbia I’ve had real success with the Northland Whistlers, the ones with a small spinner attached under the head. Add a plastic skirt and half a crawler to the hook, and you’re in business. Again, most of your typical plastics colors will work at times, but on the river make sure you have chartreuse skirts along. I’d say they’re the most consistent.”

COLUMBIA RIVER HOTSPOTS

Crow and Steinmetz recognize that location is even

more important than the lures they select. Both are willing to share their general fishing grounds but caution that each angler has to do his own search within these parameters.

“In the early spring, all the way from the beginning of February until April, I really like to fish Boulder Alley, directly across from the Irrigon boat launch,” Crow says. “But don’t look to pick up a lot of walleyes on your graph charts. In this river they hug the bottom so tight that most of the time you’ll miss spotting them.

“Whenever we’ve marked many fish up off the bottom and then run an underwater camera down, they turned out to be carp or suckers. That’s OK, though, because if you’re marking those two species, walleyes will be in the same vicinity, so go ahead and work that area. But I’ve hit spots where I couldn’t graph a single fish and then picked up 10 to 15 walleyes in a fairly short stretch. That’s when you know there has to be a huge school down there, simply blending into the rocks.”

Of course, good sonar is still essential because you have to locate the sand humps, sunken islands and ridges where hungry walleyes lie in wait for their next meal. Starting at McNary Dam and then moving downriver, Steinmetz spells out his key markers.

“What we call the Green Can Area, the buoy right by the bridge into Umatilla, is a good place to start,” says Steinmetz. “Look for the break line, around 20 to 25 feet, where it drops off into the main channel. If the current isn’t too fast, this is a good place to test blade baits.

“The next major spot is the County Line, about two or

three miles down and close to Buoy 64. Here you have a whole series of big mid-river humps, just on the Oregon side of the main channel. These humps run for close to a mile, with water depths ranging from 15 to 25 feet. This is just one of several places where you can easily devote a couple of days of steady walleye angling without exhausting its possibilities.

“Then almost straight across from the Irrigon boat launch is Boulder Alley, right up against the Washington shoreline. It’s roughly the same depth as the humps, and you can fish these boulders all the way to Paterson Point, just below the Umatilla Wildlife Refuge, or even down to the Paterson boat launch. This whole stretch, all the way back to the County Line, is particularly good in the early spring when the water is icy cold, and it’s also OK right through the summer.

“The next major fishery is from the west side of Blalock Island down to Glade Creek on the Washington side and the Coyote Humps off of Oregon, between the gravel pit and Boardman,” Steinmetz continued. “After that you have to make a pretty good run, maybe five or six miles, down to marker No. 36. Right in there, look for the humps right out in midriver. You can fish those all the way to the Crowe Butte State Park boat launch, which is also a good place to set up camp for a longer walleye trip.”

AND MORE HOTSPOTS

Want more? Crow says to add these hotspots to your itinerary.

“Right off the mouth of Glade Creek is a great place to pull bottom walkers and spinners,” he says, “and it’s

probably the number-one place where I'd send a beginner, or even someone who's fished walleyes a lot but is new to this area.

"Then there's Buoy 72, roughly two miles below where the Umatilla River flows into the Columbia. It's a place where you have to locate the big sand hump, really a sunken island, with depths that run from 10 feet all the way down into the 45- and 50-foot depths of the main channel. That hump is always a good spot to work blades if the current isn't too strong.

"Plus, I'd recommend the Green Can and the mouth of the Umatilla for either blade baiting or pulling plugs. When the heat of summer really comes on, I'd move on down to Buoy 45, right up near the town of Boardman. On the north side of the main channel you'll find a sunken island that holds walleyes during hot weather. Or, starting out just beyond the Boardman launch, you can fish all the submerged sand humps and old sunken tree stumps you'll quickly pick up on your sonar."

Steinmetz and Crow stress that getting to these traditional bug-eye hotspots is only the beginning of what makes an outing successful. After that, an angler has to fish hard and be flexible.

"What we're outlining here are all the major walleye hangouts in this whole stretch of the Columbia," Crow emphasizes. "After that it's up to the individual angler to graph out his own little niches, the spots where he consistently catches walleyes. Doing this takes both plenty of patience and careful attention to detail, but the rewards can be a real trophy or a day when you catch and release a dozen or more big fish.

“The good walleye fishing starts in February and stays good until the spawn is over in mid to late April,” Crow says. “From then ’til the end of May it can be really slow, but from the first of June until the cool weather of October I’m always optimistic. I always hit the water knowing that my next trophy-sized walleye is out there. All I have to do is locate it.”

Steinmetz agrees that this is a fine place for big walleyes and strongly emphasizes the trophy aspect of this fishery. “Any angler who is simply looking for a few tasty meals of walleye fillets is better off hitting this state’s big lakes, Roosevelt, Banks, the Potholes, Moses Lake, or even Sprague. Below McNary Dam is the place to go if you’re hoping to nail that one 12-pound or better trophy, or if you just want to test your skills against bigger walleyes. Except on very rare occasions you won’t catch as many fish as you will on a good day on those other lakes, but you’ll definitely have a better shot at a trophy. In fact, that’s how we should always be looking at that stretch of the Columbia, as our premier trophy walleye water, and we should fish it accordingly.”

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Because of Washington and Oregon’s reciprocal agreements, anglers licensed in either state may fish the entire Columbia and may use any available boat ramp. However, they must obey the regulations of the state for which they are licensed.

High Desert Marine, (541) 567-8419, is two miles south of McNary Dam and is the region’s only major tackle shop. You can also call for up-to-date information.

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