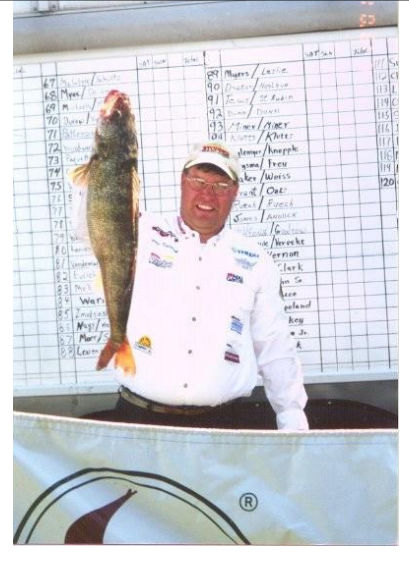


HOW TO PLAN A TRIP AND CATCH MORE FISH



WRITTEN AND PUBLISHED BY:

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A few notes from 2023!

In the following pages is information I first shared in our “Walleye 101” Seminar Series that began in 1998. This booklet is part of the Study Guide series we published as study companions to each of our seminars. While some of the references and links may be outdated, the information is as relevant now as it was when it written. Actually, the information on the following pages has been necessary for successful fishing ever since man started trying to catch fish!

I reviewed this booklet over and over, and made some minor tweaks, but decided to share it with you in its’ original form, with the original information, references and links. I did this for two reasons; first, the information is solid and really never changes and second, I thought it was important that the reader was able to see the evolution of what we do, how long we have been doing it and how the foundation and basics of catching more fish does NOT change with time. The way we collect, store, analyze and view data may change with advances in technology, but the data we need to collect and why we need to have it never changes.

If you have been around Teachin Fishin at all, you have heard us speak about the “8 Steps”, “pattern fishing”, “trip planning” and more. This booklet is where all those concepts, and more, started to take shape and you may notice some small changes from when this booklet was originally to today. Reviewing this booklet was like a journey back in time for me. Reading the words, seeing the pictures, looking at the links and seeing the roots of what Teachin Fishin would become was fun, and honestly a little emotional!

So, enjoy the information in this Study Guide, study it, apply it and I promise you will catch more fish, more often.

If you need to contact us you can do so at teachinfishin@gmail.com and be sure to visit our website www.teachinfishin.com for all of you fishing education needs.

Tight Lines

Lance

Introduction

Every year as I meet fishermen of all skill levels at my seminars and on the water, I am surprised by how many approach a day of fishing without any type of plan. Fishermen come to my seminars every year all excited about some new “secret” lure, a new fish scent, invisible line, expensive rods and all types of other things they think will help them catch more fish in the upcoming season. Now don’t get me wrong-those things are great- and sometimes essential to catching fish. But they are not as important as having a systematic way to approach a lake, eliminate unproductive water, identify good locations, choose the best presentation for the conditions and duplicate things that did work.

None of us get to fish as often as we want, so we must maximize our chances of catching fish each minute of every fishing day. If you drive to the lake in the morning without at least a basic knowledge of the body of water you are fishing, where the fish should be located and which presentations should work, your chances of a great day are lower than they should be. Think of this scenario. You are a deer hunter going to an unknown area. There is a 200-acre mowed field in the middle of the area you are hunting. Go stand in the middle of the field, close your eyes and begin spinning slowly in a circle. Whenever you feel ready,

pull the trigger. Bang! What do you think your chances of shooting a deer would be? Sounds ridiculous! But that is how most anglers approach a day on the lake. They hit the water with no idea of cover and bait options in the water they are fishing, where the walleye should be located at this time, and other basic information critical to successful fishing trips.



Limit catches are usually not an accident. Start with a plan and limits will become the norm!

Ask any successful angler and they will tell that most good fishing trips are made before they hit the water. Making on the water adjustments is a very critical step to fishing success, but a basic knowledge of what is happening and what should be productive is an important step when beginning the process of looking for fish and putting together a pattern to catch the most fish any day.

Luckily, the process of planning a trip and catching more fish is simple. All it takes is a little knowledge of the gamefish you are after, the cover and bait options available, water temperature and other simple things. Add to that a very quick conversation with a local bait shop or other anglers combined with a good lake chart and you are on the way to a great day.

Before We Get Started

Although this study guide is meant to deal with gathering detailed information for a specific fishing trip or tournament, I want to take a few minutes and talk about getting basic knowledge. Like anything else in life, being a successful fisherman is dependent on having a good base-knowing the basics. A few books, magazines and videos are what I would consider “must have” and have been a huge help in my growth as a fisherman. Read, watch, attend seminars and talk to anyone you can find about walleye fishing-never assume you know it all!

First, there are some books that I consider critical for getting a good start on the basics. I am a very enthusiastic reader and have a large library of walleye books in my office, but a few I go

back to several times a season for refreshing and looking over important basics. The first title is from the In-Fisherman Critical Concept Series and is entitled “Walleye Fundamentals”. This book covers walleye behavior, baitfish behavior, lake types and other detailed information. This book goes with me on every fishing trip and is dog-eared and highlighted like a textbook. The second book is also from the Critical Concept Series and is book 2, “Walleye Location”. This is another book that makes fishing trips in my briefcase and gets a lot of use throughout the season. This book covers basic and advanced walleye location in lakes, reservoirs and rivers throughout the entire season and is a must read. There are 3 more titles in the Critical Concept Series but read and understand these two titles first and you will see your fishing success begin to increase.

Videotapes are another great way to increase your knowledge of fishing in general and walleye fishing specifically. Again, I have a very large collection of walleye videos (over 60) but there are a few that you need to look at. Four tapes that I would not be without are from In-Fisherman. The titles are “Advanced Walleye Systems I”, “Advanced Walleye Systems II”, “Advanced Walleye Systems III”, and “Way of The Walleye”. I would also add “In-Fisherman Secret Teachings”. This video outlines the decision-making process and explains how lakes are classified, seasons and basic fish behavior.

It may seem like I am doing a commercial for In-Fisherman, but the information they provide and the way they present it is the best in the business. When I read or watch fishing information, I want something I can take with me wherever I fish, not a “me and Joe went fishing” story. Give me hardcore information that will make me a better fisherman and In-Fisherman provides that. Saying that, never turn down a chance to read an article or watch a video of any type. There may be a small tidbit that turns your next trip into the trip of a lifetime. And remember, when you come across that tidbit, **WRITE IT DOWN** for future reference!

Another important aspect of fishing knowledge is the collection, use and interpretation of lake charts. It has often been said that 90% of the fish live in only 10% of the lake. While this may be a little drastic, only small parts of a body of water hold catchable numbers of fish throughout the season. A quality lake chart can help you not only find good spots, but also eliminate areas of the lake that will not produce. Most bodies of water will have more than one chart available-buy as many as you can. You will be surprised the amount of information that appears on one chart but is non-existent on other charts. The best lake charts will also include boat ramps, bait shops,



towns, points of interest and some fishing or lake information. If available, my favorite charts are made by LakeMaster. These charts contain everything you need to plan successful fishing trip. Also contact local or statewide organizations that offer lake charts. In Michigan charts for most inland lake and the Great Lakes are available from the Michigan DNR and they may be your only source for charts if you are fishing smaller inland lakes. Most other states and provinces have charts available for sale.

Always have good lake charts available!

If you are going to be fishing on a reservoir there are several options for obtaining charts. Most reservoirs that maintain a consistent water level will have normal lake charts available. If, however the reservoirs water level changes drastically or quickly a lake chart may not be available. If this is the case, you have a few options. In most areas the Army Corp of Engineers

or local water departments control water levels. Contact these agencies for lake charts. If you are lucky enough, you may be able to find topographical charts that were used before the area was flooded. With these charts and knowledge of water levels, you can see what the land looked like before it was flooded.

The larger a body of water is, the more important a chart becomes. On larger bodies of water, it becomes extremely critical in your pre-trip planning to determine which area of the lake will be the most appropriate for the time of year you will be fishing. A high-quality chart will show the structure available in different areas of the lake and help narrow down the areas of a lake that will be the best producers during your trip. For example, if you are planning a trip for spring or early summer, choose a part of the lake that would have attracted spawning walleye. Look for incoming creeks, shallow hard-bottomed bays or shoreline points, gradually tapering flats with sand or weeds that attract baitfish.

In the past few years, charting chips have become available for use on your GPS while on the water. These charts are available from many sources, but the best I have used are the LakeMaster Series of charting chips. Over the past few seasons these chips have become invaluable tools to my fishing success.

All charts will show the same basic information, but the detail shown will vary greatly. I like charts with depth contours at 5-10 foot intervals. This gives the best detail and helps determine what the bottom looks like. Some charts have recently come out with 1-foot contour lines. Invaluable if you are fishing small areas on specific structures-especially on bodies of water with lots of fishing pressure.

When looking at a chart's contour lines, understand that the closer together the lines are, the steeper the drop-off will be. Widely spaced contour lines show a gradually tapering bottom that will usually produce better in spring and early summer. A mid-lake hump will be shown as a collection of depth contours with the shallowest point on top, whereas a hole will show the deepest point at the bottom of the lines.

Most lake charts will also use some type of markings to show such things as submerged weeds, emergent weeds, bottom type, rock piles, fish cribs and other submerged items. Check the legend of the chart you are using to be sure what you are looking at. Also check the distance scale of the chart. Most high-quality charts will also have an overlay of Latitude/Longitude to help in using the chart in conjunction with a GPS unit.

If you come across a very good chart of a body of water, be sure to purchase two copies. Get one copy laminated to use in the boat and keep an original copy in your file folder. Now you can write notes and other information on the original and not have to worry about it getting wet and ruined. Although the Fishing Hot Spots charts are waterproof, I still buy two copies. Be sure to spend quite a bit of time getting your hands on the right lake charts before your information gathering process goes any farther.

Information-Here, There and Everywhere

I don't want to get ahead of myself, but on the next few pages you are going to be introduced to a proven system to gather, interpret, use and save information to increase your fishing success. Maybe you have already saved a few articles about a lake or river you would like to fish at

someday or notes from a seminar or television show. It is important to have an organized, easy to use system to store this information so it can easily be retrieved.

Before you can store the information, you must get it on paper. One of the best things you can do for your fishing success is to begin writing down EVERYTHING that happens in the boat. Productive waypoints, successful fishing patterns, unsuccessful days, changes in weather and anything else you observe during the day. Believe it or not writing down all this information makes you think about what is going on around you and what you need to pay attention to. You will also start to see mistakes you are making in your decision-making process on the water as well as what is working. Later in this study guide we will take about what to do with the information but be sure to start writing down all your fishing experiences, good or bad, immediately.

A few winters ago, I came up with a way to keep fishing information categorized and organized for easy reference. A few 3-ring binders, a 3-drawer file cabinet and some file folders were all I needed. Now finding general information about a presentation or lake, or even specific information like when, where and how did an angler win a tournament takes only a matter of seconds. You can be as general or specific with the information you keep, but here is the method that has worked for me over the past few seasons.

The heart of this storage system is a 3-drawer file cabinet. This file cabinet stores file folders that contain specific information on different lakes. Using 3 different color file folders further categorizes your information. Blue folders indicate lakes that host PWT, FLW, MWC and/or Michigan Walleye Tour tournaments. Yellow folders are waters that I fish but host no major walleye tournaments and red folders hold information on lakes I have never fished but would like to or have good information about.

What should the files contain? Lake charts from several sources, lodging and dining information, a state road map, bait shop contacts, local guides and any other local information that will make a trip more enjoyable. Along with this general information are some specific locations and presentations. Whenever I read an article, see a show, or watch a video about a body of water, I simply summarize the key points, write them on a sheet of legal pad and then insert them into the folder. After each fishing trip productive waypoints and fishing patterns are also entered keeping the file constantly up to date.

Obviously, the blue tournament folders fill up the quickest. Along with the items listed above, the blue folders contain some very important extras. Both the Walleye In-Sider magazine and In-Fisherman videos recap the season's PWT tournaments, and both sources provide detailed information on how, when and where the top anglers put together their catch. This information is priceless and needs to be included in the folder. Good quality lake charts are a definite necessity for fishing success. Always obtain as many different charts of the area as possible. You will be surprised with the things missing from one chart that will show up on another chart.

Yellow and red folders hold the same material as the blue folders, without the tournament information. The "Trip Tips" section of the In-Sider and In-Fisherman magazine provides most of the information that goes into the red folders. If the destination looks good enough to try soon, I will obtain maps and contact local chamber of commerce offices to get

information regarding fishing, lodging and dining accommodations. I try to hit at least one of my red folder destinations each year and some have become my favorite fishing holes!

What makes a complete folder varies from lake to lake but as an example my Lake Erie Western Basin folder includes 4 different Hot Spots charts, 3 nautical charts and a chart bought at a local tackle shop. Filling out the folder are county visitor guides with lodging and dining contacts, an Ohio state map, information of all the PWT and MWT tournaments ever held on Lake Erie, and a updated list of the waypoints and techniques that have personally been successful over the years. When heading off for a trip, simply grab the folders you will need and take off. All the information you need is in one, easy to carry file folder.

For information of a more general nature such as lures, presentation techniques and general location patterns use a 3-ring binder with dividers to organize the information. Summarize the information from books, videos and magazines the same way you did for the file folders. Break the information down into categories such as river fishing, natural lakes, reservoirs, trolling and presentations for quick reference. At the top of each page include the magazine issue number or the video title for complete cross- reference. Now you have all the walleye information you ever knew contained in an organized, easy to carry notebook you can take anywhere, even in the boat!

Now that we have a general idea of what is to come in the following pages, let's look deeper into the process of planning a trip and catching more fish!

The 5 P's for catching more fish

Step 1: Preparation

“Spend more time fishing where there are catchable fish” is a slogan I use in my seminars all the time. Catching more fish is really that simple-or that hard depending on the day and the location. Let's look at how we can put this plan in effect.

The 1st “P” in the process is preparation. After we have our lake charts the work can really start. Preparation includes many parts and should be done far in advance of the trip and most of it can be done during the off season. During the preparation stage your job is to gather as much general information as possible about the body of water you are going to be fishing.

Where can you get the information you need? Luckily the last few years has seen an explosion in the ability to access information. My first call is always to a local Chamber of Commerce or Business Association. Use this call to get a listing of all the bait shops that service the area, local lodging and restaurants, guide services in the area and some local attractions that could keep the family busy on a fishing trip. Also ask for a state and local road map to have just as reference. Always check for the dates of festivals or special events that may crowd the lake at certain times of the year.

One of your goals during the preparation step is to determine the “best” bait shop in the area you will be fishing. Be careful, because it may not always be the closest to the lake you will be fishing. How do you determine the best bait shop? A few things can help you decide. First, I look for a shop with a varied live bait selection that caters to hardcore anglers. Try to avoid shops that only sell one species or minnow or crawlers only by the dozen. A shop like this usually doesn't get a lot of traffic from hardcore, knowledgeable anglers. Look for a bait shop

with several minnow species, which sells crawlers by the 100 pack or flat, leeches by the pound (preferably separated by size) and a mixture of other live baits such as crickets and waxworms. Although you may not need any of these products, having them available invites the most serious fishermen in the area, and results in good fishing information from the shop.

Second, the shop needs to be neat and clean. Don't confuse messy with dirty. Smaller bait shops look cluttered, especially if they have a small space and large inventories. Avoid shops with dust on lure packages, smelly minnow tanks and unhealthy-looking crawlers. Again, shops like this rarely get the best fishermen to visit and share their success. Another thing I like to see in a bait shop is a "Bragging Board" or photo gallery. By looking at these pictures you can get a good idea of the potential of the lake for both numbers and size of fish, as well as what seems to be the prime time for fishing the lake. And fishermen like to talk when they are successful! A full wall of pictures means the bait shop owner has heard a few stories that he may pass on to you.

If you are going to a large resort area, a bait shop that offers guides will have access to up-to-date information that may be invaluable. I will cover hiring a guide later in this study guide, but for now understand a few things. Don't expect a guide to mark charts or give out very detailed information—they make their living taking people fishing for pay. On the other hand, most guides are easy to get along with, and if they can tell you you have done your homework before coming, they will usually be glad to help you with some basic locations and patterns.

I have a few other thoughts about guides. If you will be spending a fair amount of time on a new lake, DO NOT hire a guide on the last day to help save the trip! More often than not, this backfires. If you want help learning the lake you will be fishing, contact several guides far in advance and find one that understands that you are willing to pay for a day of fishing if they will help you make your stay a success. Some guides are more than willing to help—some will flat out refuse. Do your contacting early, be honest with the guide and find one that is right for you. Lastly, NEVER follow a guide or return to a spot you fished with a guide unless you get their permission—this is just rude and lacking for respect.

A few more words about dealing with bait shops. Remember that they are in business to make money and most are staffed with only 1 or 2 people so the time they spend must be productive and not wasted on the phone. Make your calls short and to the point. If they begin to chat, feel free to expand the conversation, but initiate the call with a short list of precise questions to ask them. Never call a bait shop on Friday, Saturday, Sunday or Monday mornings. These times are the busiest for a retail store and sales opportunities in the store need to be maximized. Make a call mid-morning during the middle of the week and you should have some time to talk.

Okay, we know whom to contact but what do we need to find out with our phone calls? At this point we are looking for general information about the lake and the fish population. Ask questions that will help you determine the types and depth of weed growth, types of bait in the lake, normal water clarity, thermocline depth and the average and maximum size of fish in the lake. Remember, at this time we are just trying to get an overview of the lake and what it has to offer.

This is also a great time to contact the local DNR or Fisheries office. What types of information are we looking for from the fishery department? Water clarity, weed growth, thermocline depth, water level and bottom compositions are all things you need to know. After getting answers on

lake makeup start asking questions pertaining to fishing. Baitfish types and populations, gamefish types and populations, planting and netting records, spawning habitat, average fish size and growth rate are all important pieces of the puzzle.

What can all these answers tell us about a body of water? Water clarity and weed types can tell us a lot about water quality, depth of fish, depth of sunlight penetration and time of day when fish will be the most active. If the body of water has a thermocline in the summer, you will be able to forget about fishing below it, thus eliminating lots of water right away. Bottom composition can give you clues as to the prospect of naturally spawned fish, how fast an area will get warm in the spring (dark soft bottoms hold heat better than clean, light colored bottoms) and bottom dwelling bait species.

Netting and planting results will show if the lake has too many, too few or the right amount of bait and game species to support the type and size of fish you are after. You will also be able to see if certain year classes are present in catchable numbers and what to expect as far as numbers and size of fish during your trip. Be aware that a lake's makeup and population dynamics can change quickly so use the most recent data available, but also look at old data to see if trends are present-you'd be surprised how consistent 6-10 year cycles can become on a body of water.

Baitfish types and numbers are a key to starting to figure out how and where gamefish will be located. If the body of water has a good population of open-water baitfish such as shad, smelt, Cisco or whitefish expect at least a part of the walleye population to spend a good part of the season suspended in open-water areas. If perch are available in large numbers, you can bet on walleye using shallow to mid-depth weed beds all season long. Along with likely areas of walleye/baitfish interaction the type of available baitfish will also give you a hint as to which time of day the walleye will be most active.

Another important aspect of the preparation step is to start gathering lake charts. As stated earlier, get as many different lake charts as possible. It is amazing how much information can be missing from one chart but show on another. My favorite charts are those from Fishing Hot Spots and these are almost always the best charts available. Be sure to ask all the bait shops you talk to as well as the DNR office if they have a lake chart they can provide you. Some may have a small cost but are well worth the expense.

Step 2: Planning

If the preparation step is used to gather general information, the planning stage is for getting much more detailed information to use in putting together a primary plan for successful fishing areas and patterns. During the planning stage we need to use the knowledge gained in the preparation step and add some more detailed information of current conditions to come up with a fishing plan. This step should be done a couple days before leaving on your trip so you can have the latest information.

With your charts on a table use the information you have regarding baitfish, cover options and seasonal behavior patterns of walleye to begin eliminating poor areas of the lake and determining areas that should produce under the current situation.

Hopefully you took some time during the preparation step to develop some type of relationship with the best bait shop in the area. Now is the time to call them back and ask some very specific

questions regarding current conditions. If you have done your research and found a good bait shop, and ask the right questions, it should be easy to get the information you need to plan a successful trip.

Knowing what questions to ask is extremely important. Most anglers ask the standard “What are they biting on?” Although not a bad question, knowing this answer can waste a lot of time and lead to a poor trip. It also gives the bait shop employees a chance to unload some lures that have not been moving. Remember that the right lure in the wrong place will never catch any fish, but the wrong lure in the right place will at least have a chance to catch some fish.

What questions should you ask? Here are the 6 questions that have been the most helpful for me over the years.

1. What part of the lake is best? The answer to this question will allow you to quickly eliminate large chunks of a lake. Make a copy of your best lake chart and use a black marker to cross off all but this part of the lake. Now you have a manageable sized area to focus your search.
2. How deep of water are the fish in? Again, this will eliminate huge chunks of water from your chart and should start to bring possible locations and presentation into your head.
3. How deep are the fish? By knowing the depth of water the fish are using, and what depth they are holding at you can determine the most likely activity level of the fish and from there some possible effective presentations. The closer fish are to the bottom the less likely they are to be active and will need a slower presentation. Fish that are 4 or more feet of the bottom are usually moving and active and aggressive presentations will probably work.
4. What size are the fish? This answer will give you an idea of what type of fish you can expect to catch. If you are looking to catch trophy fish but the locals are catching lots of average fish, you may want to change lakes or dates of your trip. Don't let the wrong answer to this question discourage you though. Just because most anglers are concentrating on smaller fish, larger fish may be available-ask the bait shop.
5. How many fish per day are being caught? This answer will help you set expectations for your trip. Maybe another species would be better for a family vacation if the walleye catch rate is low. If lots of fish are being caught, expect lots of local anglers on the water and be prepared to deal with pressured fish.
6. What presentation is best? Just a quick question to verify your instincts. You are just looking for an answer such as drifting, jigging, trolling etc. You may even get a clue as to what lures are working the best, but this is not as important as a basic idea to what is working

At this point you should have some very solid ideas about locations, presentations and lures/baits. If the person at the bait shop is still friendly and not too busy, now you can ask about lures and colors. If they sound like they need to get off the phone, thank them and get started putting together your own patterns. Don't be hesitant to call other bait shops in the area and ask the same questions. If you are getting the same answer from several sources, the more faith you

can put into it. If you need to, pull out your books, videos or articles that cover the type of situations your answers presented you with and do some studying, or better yet check your files for other lakes like this one and compare notes from previous fishing trips under the same set of conditions.

Step 3: Perception

The first 2 steps of the planning stage could have taken place over the phone or Internet, but the perception step needs to be done in person at the bait shop and on the water. Now is the time to start putting all the information we have collected to some use.

When you arrive at your fishing destination, make it a point to stop in at the bait shop you spoke to on the phone. You will probably need to get some bait, but this visit also gives you a chance to finalize your plan of attack for the day or the entire trip. Most bait shops will have a copy of a lake chart on the counter. Most are copies of low detail charts but BUY IT! Now spend a few bucks on some local “hot” lures, bait, snacks and pop. Information isn’t free and if you spend money in a shop your chances to get good information increase dramatically.

After you buy this chart, ask the bait shop worker to perhaps mark some spots that are currently producing fish. Ask a few follow-up questions from your list to see if the answers have changed. Ask about lures and colors. Listen to what the bait shop worker is telling you-even if you think you have a better way to catch fish! Let him think he is the expert and helping you. If you did your homework well enough, the patterns you put together at home should be really close to what is working on the lake.

Take a peek at the photos on the wall and check out the size of fish shown and the dates on the pictures. Is now a better time to be concentrating on numbers of fish, or trophies? Are the pictures telling you that it might be fun to fish for a different species of fish for a day or two? Also check out the store’s inventory. If the owner is telling you to buy an item and his stock of this item looks old and outdated, politely pass on buying this item. On the other hand, if the lure the owner recommends is stocked in large amounts, in a prominent location, and in new packaging with new price tags, the information is probably right on.

Check out the selection of live bait to be sure it is cared for properly and is fresh. If you are in the bait shop at what should be a busy time, be sure there are other customers coming in. Don’t be afraid to strike up a conversation with another shopper-especially if you have done your homework. Ask specific, detailed questions and be prepared to share any information you may have gathered before coming.

Now is also the time to ask about boat ramp locations and conditions. If possible, try to launch as close as possible to where you will be fishing. I also like to ask about restaurants, gas stations and lodging. If you are interested and haven’t yet checked, now is the time to ask about a guide. Be friendly and you will be surprised how easy it is to get good information.

Well we are finally on the water, but it’s not time to start fishing just yet. Here is another time when most anglers make a mistake and just start fishing. Spend an hour or two learning the “layout” of the lake. With your charts in hand, run around the lake to verify locations of major drop-offs, humps, creeks, points etc. Get yourself oriented with the chart and major structure in

the lake. Check your sonar to verify the depth of hard/soft bottom transitions. Check for a thermocline. Look for the presence of open-water baitfish and suspended walleye.

Once you have spent some time getting familiar with the lake or section you will be fishing, start concentrating on the precise area you will begin fishing. If you choose a point, run the point with your sonar to find the exact spots on the point that will hold the most fish. Look for changes in bottom hardness, isolated wood, weed or rock areas, steeper drops, inside turns etc. By searching out these key areas before starting to fish, you can hit the highest percentage spots of a major structure and determine if there are any active fish present. If there are, start refining your presentation to catch them. If no fish are present, simply move to the next spot on your list and start the process over again. Don't sit on one spot waiting for the fish to bite at this point. Remember that there are always some fish biting somewhere. Stay on the move until you find some!

The importance of this part of the perception step became very clear to my brother and me while pre-fishing for the 1999 Michigan Walleye Tour State Championship at Hubbard Lake. Kirk and I had never fished on Hubbard Lake before and all of our information pointed to using live bait rigs and spinner harness close to the bottom in 30-40 feet of water, just above the thermocline. When we first hit the water, we had all our rods rigged to fish on the bottom with a slow presentation. As we were spending our first couple of minutes on this unfamiliar lake, we went to deep water to verify the depth of the thermocline. While we were checking out the thermocline depth, Kirk noticed several small "blips" on the sonar screen between 20 and 40 feet down. After zooming the sonar unit in to focus on these "blips" we immediately recognized them as suspended fish! We went back to our information and noticed that there were whitefish in the lake that would be spending a lot of their time suspended over deep water. The marks looked like walleye, not whitefish so we decided to try and catch these fish the next day. After a little tweaking of our presentation we began catching suspended walleye on crankbaits that were heavier than those we had caught the day before on the bottom with live bait. We spent the 3 days of the tournament fishing by ourselves on unpressured fish and finished 3rd less than ½ pound behind the winners!

Step 4: Pattern Fishing

One topic that is often spoke and written about is "pattern fishing". Well, just what is pattern fishing? In its simplest form pattern fishing is simply the DUPLICATION of factors that have begun to produce fish. Patterns can be very simple or extremely complex depending on the situation. These factors can be classified into seasonal, structural, daily, and presentation. The more detailed you can get with each of these factors, the more successful your trip will be and the easier it will be to find and catch fish. All the steps above will help you determine both seasonal and structural patterns. Using the information, you have gathered as an outline, figure out daily and presentation factors on the water.

Let's examine seasonal patterns first. All fish have basic needs that change based on the time of year. Remember this, walleye are concerned with only 3 things eating, reproducing and not getting eaten! That is the extent of their life and the only thing that determines where they will locate and how they will act. When walleye reach about 20", becoming prey is not really a concern, so their whole existence revolves around eating and for a short time in the spring, reproducing. This basic nature of the walleye helps us determine seasonal patterns. For example, walleye will be located very near the best spawning habitat in late winter through

spring. At this time of year it is very easy to eliminate large parts of a lake, river or reservoir. After spawning is completed, walleye will simply follow forage around the lake. This is why it is so important to understand what forage is available in the body of water you are fishing, and where these forage species will be at different times of the year. By knowing what options are available for a walleye to eat, it will become quite easy, with a little experience, to eliminate areas of the lake that probably will not be holding any fish. Our first part of determining a pattern is now complete.

Next, we need to look at what type of structure is available in the areas we have determined to have the ability to be holding walleye at the time of our trip. When looking at a chart for structural pieces, remember these few things. Large, complex structures that cover a large range of depths will usually hold more fish than a small, isolated element with few options. If you are lucky enough to find a complex structural element in a prime area of the lake, the next step is to break that large piece of structure into smaller pieces. Look for points, inside turns, bottom hardness changes, weed, rock or wood cover, steeper drop-off areas and other fish attracting “mini structures” or “spots on the spot” as they are commonly called. Mark these spots on your chart and use a set of dividers to get the general Latitude/Longitude of these spots. Write down the Lat/Lon in your notebook with a little note, and then enter it into your GPS so you will have it already entered when you hit the lake the first day. Now that we have our choices narrowed down, we can start doing some on the water investigation!

The next part of the pattern puzzle, daily patterns, is one that will probably be adjusted several times during a day of fishing. Depending on the weather, sunlight penetration, available cover, water clarity and fishing traffic, a walleye’s location on a piece of structure can change several times a day. Active, feeding fish are usually a little shallower and on the outside edges of cover, whereas inactive fish are usually deeper, closer to bottom and tighter to cover. Adjust your position on the structure according to the activity level of the fish. I usually begin checking areas that will hold active fish first, and then move to areas that hold inactive fish only if there are absolutely NO active or neutral fish on the structure. I may even leave a structure with no active fish and check out another area for active fish before settling to try and catch inactive fish. While still in the planning stages of your trip at the kitchen table, mark several locations on each structure that will hold either active or inactive fish so you can quickly move during the day.

How do you put together a pattern with this information? Actually, it is quite simple. The more pieces of your presentation puzzle you are aware of and write down, the more detailed your pattern will be. Remember that pattern fishing is simply duplication of as many factors as possible after a fish is caught. Again, here is a stumbling block that most novice anglers can’t ever get over. As soon as they catch a fish, one of two things happens. Either they are so surprised they caught something they have NO CLUE what they were doing when they caught it, or they immediately want to put the exact same lure out on a second rod. Both reactions are wrong! Even though pattern fishing is duplication, getting the BEST pattern is a compromise between immediate duplication and elimination of factors.

A lot of things must be right for us to catch a walleye. Some of these factors are much more important than others and should be given much more attention. In the “Open Water Walleye” study guide I cover putting together a pattern in detail, but here are the factors that make a fish bite, in the order of their importance. Take a look-you may be surprised!

1. LOCATION- I know I've said it a hundred times before, but you can't catch fish if you aren't fishing where they are. Use your sonar to locate either walleye or baitfish and don't start fishing until you see some sign of life on your sonar. When you locate fish, save the spot on your GPS and begin fishing around the area until you can pinpoint the best spot, then use your GPS to stay on that spot.
2. DEPTH-. It is important to determine the best depth of water and the depth of the fish. Remember, fish can't see directly at their level or below them. Once you have located the fish be sure to keep your lures running about 2-4 feet above suspended fish, and about 1' above walleye close to the bottom.
3. PRESENTATION SPEED- Speed is an important trigger when fishing. Active fish near the surface will hit a faster moving bait than fish that are close to cover or inactive near the bottom. Start with a moderate speed and adjust from there. By using "S" turns you can be fishing different speeds at the same time. Once you find the right speed, use the Speed Over Ground on your GPS to duplicate that speed.
4. LURE SIZE- Although not as picky as trout, walleye can be specific about the size of prey they are feeding on. Choose a lure or live bait that closely matches the size of prey the fish are currently feeding on.
5. LURE SHAPE- Almost as important as size, pick a lure shape that closely matches the forage. Smelt and Cisco are long and thin, alewives are short and thick, and shad are a little longer than alewives but also have a thick profile.
6. LURE/BAIT ACTION- Try and match the lure action to the swimming motion of the prey you are trying to imitate. Again, baitfish are more active in warmer water, and shad seem to move in quicker spurts and turns than the other open-water baitfish.
7. LURE COLOR- Surprise! I saved color for last because it is the LEAST important of the questions you need to answer. The wrong color will catch some fish if the other answers are right, but the right color will catch nothing or very little if some of the other answers are wrong. Change colors AFTER you start catching fish to determine the best color for the day. Keep the other factors the same and change colors-this is the only way to positively determine the best color.

Did I catch some of you by surprise by listing color last? After several hundred of days fishing against the best walleye fishermen in the country on some of the best walleye waters, I have concluded that color affected the amount and size of my catch only about 2 out of 10 trips. When the fish "aren't biting" are you quick to change colors or do you reevaluate your other pattern choices and adjust accordingly?

Now saying that, I don't want you to ignore color changes. Just make sure that you are in the right place, with the right style and size of bait that should be getting bites before experimenting with color. A few seasons ago I got a firsthand lesson in color making a difference. My friend George Barrach and I fished the Cabela's National Team Championship on Lake Mille Lacs in Minnesota. Mille Lacs is famous for being a body of water that helped launch most of the walleye tactics used today, especially live bait rigging or "Lindy rigging". A simple slip sinker, hook and bait are used to tempt the cautious fish that see literally tons of sinkers each year from

the hundreds of thousands of anglers that fish Mille Lacs. These fish have become so finicky that the color of hook you were using determined your success for the day! That's right; the color of a #8 leech hook would determine if you caught no fish or 20 fish.

How precise you must determine these factors will change by the day and sometimes even by the hour. I have fished on days when just getting a crankbait into the water would produce a fish, and I have fished when fish were holding at a specific depth and would only hit a certain type and size of minnow, presented in only one direction! It is up to you to figure this part out on each trip and is, in my mind, the most exciting part of walleye fishing.

Sometimes fish will be at several depths and the angler must determine which one holds the right fish. This can be a tough situation, especially if there aren't many bites throughout the day. This exact situation faced me at the PWT tournament on Lake Winnebago in 2002. I was trolling spinner/crawler combos behind a 1.5-ounce weight 35' behind a board at about 1.3-mph. This allowed my bait to run about 16' deep over 25' of water. In practice bites were few and far between, and this was the best presentation and depth. In the tournament I put all 4 lines at the same depth to make sure I had the best odds for getting a bite. Well, I cashed my first pro check (\$1100 for 38th place) but was taught a great lesson. I was sharing the same area of water with Shannon Kehl and Jeff Taege. At times our outside boards were literally only 30 feet apart! All 3 of us were using the same set up and had determined that dark red or olive beads with #3 gold Indiana blades were the best presentation and 1.3-1.5 mph was the speed. Shannon was fishing only 15' behind the board (about 8' deep) and finished 6th with 9 more fish and 20 more pounds than me. Jeff was fishing 2-ounce bottom bouncers right in the mud on the bottom and finished with 6 more fish and 9 more pounds! I was close but didn't spend enough time checking other options-a great lesson I will keep with me for a long time!

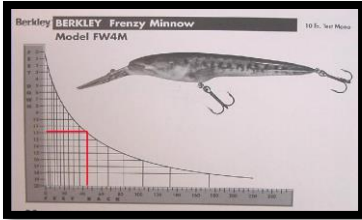
This may seem like a lot of stuff to remember but believe me when you begin picking presentations and lures based on the above 7 steps, your success will begin to increase almost immediately. Although this study guide is not meant to dig into the details of all the factors, here are a few little details to help in the initial decision-making process.

I cannot stress enough how important basic location is to fishing success. The right lure, in the right size, shape and color placed at the right depth is USELESS unless it is placed where fish can see it. On the other hand if you are fishing in an area where there are lots of fish you can get some of the factors wrong (except being too deep with your lure) and still catch a few fish to get you started on the process of refining your pattern. Use your basic knowledge of fish behavior and the information you have about the lake to determine possible good sections of the lake. Spend some time searching with your sonar to determine if fish are in the area, how deep they are and their activity level before you think about choosing a lure or presentation.

Depth of water is also a key that is based on the season. In general fish are shallower in spring, deeper in late spring and early summer, shallower in summer (always above the thermocline), and anywhere after the thermocline has disappeared in early fall. Cover, baitfish, water temperature and clarity will all play a part in a productive range of water depths.

After the first 2 obvious details of location and water depth, the next factor is probably the most important in determining your fishing success. The depth of the fish you see on your sonar will not only determine which presentation method you should choose, but also how deep your lures should run. If fish are close to the bottom or tight to cover, some type of slow presentation will

probably be best. Fish tight to the bottom or cover usually respond to slow presentations very close to them, and live bait is definitely a positive trigger. Conversely if fish are off the bottom and away from cover, they are usually active and will respond to a faster horizontal presentation. Be sure to keep your baits 2-6 feet above the fish so they can see them. The more active the fish are the higher your baits can be above them.



Let's stop for a minute and talk about "Precision" depth control of our lures. In the most basic form 2 items are critical for this precision depth control. The 2 items you will need are some way to measure the amount of line you are letting the lure out and a book called "Precision Trolling" to determine exactly how much line you need to let out to get a bait at a precise depth level (see photo at left for a sample page). This book is available through www.precisionangling.com and has depth charts for over 80 different crankbaits, snap weights, lead core line and other diving devices. If you do a lot of fishing with Dipsey Divers or other salmon tackle, there is also a Big Water Edition of "Precision Trolling" available. All of the details for precise fishing with crankbaits and crawler harnesses are covered in my study guide "*Open Water Walleye*".

Now that we know how deep to put our lures, we need to combine that with the activity level of the walleye, baitfish in the area, current water temperature and water clarity to determine the best presentation speed to use. Try to match the speed of the baitfish the walleye are feeding on as closely as possible. It is important to pick a speed range to start out with because certain lures work best within a certain speed range. To determine at what speed lures work best we need to classify them into categories based on speed.

The first category of crankbait is the "minnow baits" like the original Rapala, Berkley Frenzy Minnow or Bomber Long A. These lures are long and thin with a slow rolling action and excel in colder weather, although they work year-round. Most were originally shallow divers, but deep divers like the Storm Deep Thunderstick Jr, Rapala Deep Husky Jerk, Reef Runner and Smithwick Super Rouge have made huge catches of walleye in the past few seasons.



The most important features of the minnow baits are the long, thin shape, slow rolling action, and the ability to reach maximum action and depth at slow speeds. The shallow runners can be trolled shallow or used deep with some type of weighting system, while the deep divers have a diving lip to take them to deeper depths with no weight. Because of their long, thin shape and subtle action, minnow baits are a great choice in the colder water of spring and fall or when trolling over submerged weed cover.



The second category is what I call "Shad Baits". These baits have a larger profile, work at both slow and faster speeds, have an increased action and are a great bait for all seasons. Baits such as the Rapala Shad Rap and Reef Runner Ripshad are examples of shad baits. Thinner shaped lures that can fit into the "Shad Bait" action are the Rapala Tail Dancer and Reef Runner Deep Little Ripper.

The larger profile of these lures makes them a great choice when fishing bodies of water where shad, alewife or perch are the preferred forage. The “in-between” action also makes them great lures for cold or warm water and can be used at slow or medium speeds. While they have a rolling action like minnow baits, they also add a side-to-side “wiggle”.

This slightly more aggressive action seems to attract fish from further distances than minnow baits. Like minnow baits, shad baits come in shallow, mid-depth and deep divers and a large selection of sizes and colors. If you are in doubt of what category of bait to start fishing with, choosing a shad bait is always a safe and productive bet.

The third category of crankbaits is what I call “Zingers”. These baits excel in warm weather and medium to high speeds. Some examples are the Storm Hot-n-Tot and Rapala Fat Rap Series. Along with the “wiggle” of the lure, these baits also travel back and forth horizontally, creating a very erratic action that active walleye find irresistible in warmer weather.



Minnow baits work best at slower speeds, while “Zingers” work their best at higher speeds. Shad baits work at all speed ranges and are a great first choice if you are uncertain of which speed you should start out using. Remember to not mix minnow baits and “zingers” in a trolling spread. The speed that gives minnow baits their best action will be too slow for the “zingers” to work and the speed which “zingers” need to perform well will cause minnow baits to roll out and have no action. Shad baits can be mixed in with either minnow baits or “zingers”.

Once we determine the speed that is working, it is critical to be able to both measure and duplicate the productive speed. When trolling the best way to do this is with the “Speed Over Ground” feature on your GPS. Remember that changes in speed can often trigger strikes from following fish so don’t be afraid to use slight “S” turns that will increase speed on lures on the outside of the turn and slightly slow lures on the inside of the turn. If you catch a fish on a turn, be sure to pay attention to the change in speed and try to duplicate it.

Hopefully you have realized that up to this point we had no way to select the proper lure from our tackle box. Once we determine how deep and how fast we need the lure to work at our choices start to narrow down. Remember the proper lure to use is not a question but rather the answer to the 7 factors we talked about at the start of this section.

We’re getting close to pulling a lure out of our tackle box, but we still have a few more factors to consider. After speed has been determined, we need to look at the size of the lure we will pick. Walleye can be very size picky, so come as close as possible to the size of the baitfish the fish are feeding on but also consider time of year and water clarity. A couple things need to be emphasized here. First, a walleyes preferred forage size is $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ their body length! Don’t be afraid to use large baits especially early and late in the season, while switching to smaller baits in late spring and early summer. Secondly, pay attention to using larger baits in the spring. Lots of anglers make the mistake of picking smaller baits in spring. Think about it! There is no small bait left in the lake in early spring. Any bait that survived through the summer and winter is now good sized and that is what the fish have been accustomed to feeding on the past few months.

Like size, lure shape should be as close as possible to the bait that the baitfish are feeding on. Pay attention to the complete profile of a lure as opposed to the actual shape. Open water forage tends to be long and skinny (cisco and smelt) whereas bait found close to cover tend to be shorter and fatter (shiners and perch). Look back at the speed section and you will see that the speed range that certain baits work the best in also corresponds to the bait's shape.

The final action of the lure we choose is a result of the combination of the speed range in which it needs to perform the size and shape of the lure. Again, refer to the section which speaks to categories of baits and you will see the correlation.

Okay now we have our lure choices narrowed down to 1 or 2 baits that meet all our factors and it is time to choose color. Lures come in way too many colors! Start with the basics when beginning your fishing day. Contrast is usually more important than actual lure color, so be sure your choices have a distinct contrast. Also, when choosing a lure for open water which will be fished above the walleye, pay very close attention to the bottom color of the lure since this is the part that the fish will see. A basic assortment of lure colors should include several different base colors. Metallic silver, gold and copper with some contrasting top are necessities for all fishermen. Also be sure to have some lures with a white or gray base as well as some fluorescent with high contrast such as firetiger. With these basic lure colors you should be able to cover most water color and clarity conditions.

Now we have a lure in our hand that should work based on fact not feeling. Now if we start catching fish, we can start changing factors on different baits to determine the actual best lure for the day. When altering factors always start at the bottom of the list and work upwards. If you are not catching fish with your first choice, begin changing factors from the top of the list. If you are in the right location and have lures at the right depth, begin changing speeds, size, shapes and actions until you hit a combination that catches fish, then start changing from the bottom up again.

Step 5: Preservation of Information

When you are on the water it is imperative to keep good records of what happened during the day-good or bad. Making notes during the day on the water is much easier and more accurate than trying to remember what happened later that night at the dinner table. The best way to keep records is to carry a spiral notebook in the boat. I prefer one with regular sized sheets of paper, so I have lots of room to write. Each morning note the date, lake and local weather at the top of a new page. If the weather changes throughout the day, be sure to note the changes and the time when they occurred.

Whenever you catch a fish, be sure to write down what worked as soon as possible. Note the time of day, fish size, lure type, lure size, lure color, depth of water, depth of lure or bait, speed you were moving, how much line out-everything you can think of. The more information you can write down, the closer you are to a good pattern and the more useful your data will be in future trips. If you are using a GPS, save a waypoint when you catch a fish and note the waypoint numbers in your notebook. Later in the day, or that night, recall the waypoint number and write down the latitude/longitude. Here is what a typical entry would look like:

WPT #14 1:34 PM 4 lb. ¼ oz Tot Blue/Chrome 120' back 1.4 mph downwind 20 feet of water/14' down

With this information I have created a very detailed journal for my fishing trip and notes for helping me put together the best pattern for the day. I will do some more organizing when I get home from my trip, but this information will help catch more fish on this current trip. Again, write down all this information ***as soon as your fish is released or put in the livewell and you have returned to fishing***. If you don't want to take the time to write the information down immediately, be sure to write it down as soon as you can so your memory is good. Some folks even make a pre-printed sheet with columns for each entry, so they don't forget any data. Others have even started carrying a digital pocket tape recorder to eliminate writing all together.

During the day remember to record any changes in weather such as temperature, wind speed or direction, water clarity etc. It is important to write down all 7 factors when you catch a fish so when you need to make changes during the day you will have a basis from which to work. You will be surprised how fish will be in the same place doing the same thing every year when the conditions are the same. By keeping good records this will start to become evident and give you a very good place to start looking for fish on your next trip.

How far you want to go with fishing information is up to you. I use Microsoft Excel to create a spreadsheet for every fish I have caught the last 4 seasons. I then file these in each lake's folder and have it for reference in the future. It always amazes how patterns repeat themselves every year. By using a spreadsheet, you can sort the data by any factor you want and see patterns start to develop.