

Understanding The Walleye

By Jim Barta

The elusive nature of the walleye has intrigued anglers for generations. Anyone who has spent a good deal of time fishing for them knows that walleyes can be active one day, then seem to disappear for no apparent reason.

The senses in a walleye are complex when compared to many other species of fish. Once an angler is able to grasp an understanding of what makes this fish react to various circumstances, he'll discover that catching them becomes much easier.

Their finely tuned lateral-line sense, sharp hearing and acute night vision can explain much of the puzzling behavior of walleyes. They also have an excellent sense of smell. This sense, however, doesn't appear to play an extremely important role in their life.

The ultra-sensitive nerve endings that run along each side of the body can detect the slightest vibrations in the water. This lateral-line sense allows walleyes to single out a crippled or erratically swimming baitfish from the rest of the school. In situations where the water is murky, the savvy angler will use this knowledge to his advantage. The use of body baits, such as the Rattlin' Rouge, Rat-L-Trap, or similar lures with built-in rattles can prove to be extremely effective in these conditions.

Hearing plays an important role in a walleye's behavior. Seasoned anglers know that walleyes will not tolerate unnecessary commotion or noise in their vicinity. When working shallow water for walleyes, an angler will need to pay close attention to movements in the boat that will transmit noise. A misplaced step, a dropped pair of pliers or a kicked tackle box may be all the noise necessary to spook fish that would have normally been aggressive. Noise, however, can be used to benefit us. I will often place a Buck-Shot Rattle, made by Northland Tackle or similar rattling device on my jig. Even before it sees the jig moving in swift current, the walleye often hears it coming and has had time to focus in on its location. This is especially useful when the water has been muddied by a storm, water run-off or some other means.

A reflective layer of pigment, called tapetum lucidum, in the walleye's retina causes its glassy eyes. The tapetum is extremely effective at gathering light and accounts for the walleye's excellent night vision and aversion to bright light. This gives walleyes a built-in advantage: They can see exceptionally well in dim light, but their prey cannot which explains why walleyes do most of their feeding during conditions of low light.

Using this knowledge to their advantage, anglers can determine the best tactics to use. On sunny days, look for walleyes to be holding in deeper areas of the lake or river. The fish will be less aggressive in the bright light and won't chase a lure long distances. A slower presentation will produce best results on these sunny days.

On days with overcast or a chop on the water's surface, expect to find the fish active and feeding throughout the day. Whether casting, trolling, or jigging, a fast presentation can be just the key to trigger strikes.

Laboratory tests have shown that fish can detect odors that have been extremely diluted. Even with an acute sense of smell, the walleye's feeding behavior is not influenced to any great degree by it. If smell were important, the evidence would be most obvious in low-clarity water where walleyes cannot see good enough to feed. In these situations, artificial lures with rattles are superior to live bait. This evidence would indicate that the lateral-line sense is more important to the walleye.

Walleyes are able to tolerate an exceptionally wide range of environmental conditions. If given a choice, they will usually select clean, hard bottoms rather than bottoms with mud, silt or other soft materials. A combination of sand, gravel and rock will be at the top of the walleye's list for spawning and feeding.

Understanding walleyes and what dictates their daily activities isn't difficult once you understand the various senses that they rely on. Using these senses to their advantage, anglers can enjoy catching more walleyes than ever before.

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