

Rivers Bend Outfitters

Fishing & Hunting in the Columbia River Gorge

Columbia River Walleyes

June is one of the best times of the year to target walleyes while trolling the Columbia River

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I could feel the questioning looks from my clients as I urged them to continue to let their lines roll off their level-wind reels. The constant chop of the 3-foot waves on the Columbia River rocked the boat as we idled upstream, just below the John Day Dam.

"Yeah," I said. "Let 'em out till you hit the second black streak marked on your spools." I told them that they needed to get those Wiggle Warts out about 120 feet behind the boat, along the gravel bar where they were deep enough to tempt finicky walleyes. "Deep enough" was about 15 to 18 feet down. That would put our lures within 1 1/2 feet of the rocky bottom -- right where ole walleye is most of the time.

The bottom undulated here as it does anywhere in the Columbia. But our Wiggle Warts would drag rocks and be a foot or so above the bottom the rest of the time. This is a technique I've used to catch walleyes for better than 30 years, and it's a consistent producer in the early summer months in the Pacific Northwest. The guys in my boat were old hands at salmon and steelhead fishing in both the Pacific Ocean and coastal streams, but they were new to walleye fishing on the Columbia River.

My techniques seemed extreme to anglers used to fishing for silvers 20 or 30 feet behind the boat. With light lines that test 10 pounds or less, I've found that trolling lines out more than 100 feet will drive even shallow-diving lures like Wiggle Warts down to 15 feet or deeper.

TROPHY-CLASS GAME FISH

Earlier that morning, the sun was just starting to rise over the Columbia Mountains as we launched my 20-foot Duckworth sled. This was our first turn up the river, trolling crankbaits.

I was just beginning to enjoy the crimson-streaked sunrise when I saw the tip of a client's rod take a dive toward the water. "Grab that rod, stand up and set the hook!" I shouted above the wind and trolling motor. Coaching a bit more I said, "keep your rod tip up, and your line tight. Everyone else stay seated and crank your lures in just as fast as you can to get 'em out of the way of that fish."

Looking at the straining 8-foot rod, I knew we had one of those wall-hanging 'eyes the Columbia is famous for. As the fish came to the boat, it dived deeper and began to bulldog its fight to the depths.

Walleyes made their reputation on the dinner plate, but aren't known for being great fighters. I think that's because most walleyes caught are in the 2- to 4-pound class.

When an angler finally hooks a 15-pound walleye, it brings on a change in attitude in a hurry.

My guy pumped the fish to within 6 or 7 feet of the boat. I saw a huge female walleye with the fire-tiger Wiggle Wart buried in the side of her mouth. These anglers had told me they wanted to catch a trophy-class walleye to mount. Walleyes up to 6 pounds make the best eating, and I discourage keeping the big females unless they're going on the wall.

"Just a little bit closer, and we'll get her in the net," I urged. Soon I reached the fish with my 10-foot, long-handled net, and she was in the boat. The scales said this was a nice 12-pound hen -- a beautiful iridescent gold and green Columbia River walleye. We all did a round of high-fives and eased the fish into the cooler.

That fish would go to a Portland taxidermist, and Chet would have a mount that would memorialize his fish and provide him with a lasting memory of a cold, blustery June day on the great Columbia River.

SHUT DOWN

I cut away about 10 feet of line from the lure, sharpened the hooks on that Wiggle Wart, checked all of the other hooks on the client's lures and drifted back down the river to make another run.

This pass produced only one hit that failed to hook a fish, and my sonar screen showed only a couple of other fish at the 15-foot depth where on the run before, we had seen several. We ran back down to set in for another pass, and I moved the boat out into 18 feet of water.

This pass, we let out 140 feet of line and almost immediately had a double hookup. Yes, 20 feet more line can make all the difference in the number of fish caught. At that depth, we picked up four more fish before those fish quit the bite. The fish were still showing on the sonar screen and on my paper burner, but they suddenly didn't like the lures we were using, or else they just went off the bite. Walleyes do that, you know.

I decided it was time to alter the speed on the trolling motor. Going from a slow idling speed in stages up to about 2,000 rpms can make all the difference in the world. But at that point, trolling speed seemed to make no difference. I started going through the tackle boxes, exchanging lures for favorites that had a lot of teeth marks on their little butts. But nothing seemed to work.

Right here, let me interject a little basic walleye lore. One of the perplexing problems of fishing for walleye is that sometimes, and for no apparent reason, those marble-eyes will just stop feeding.

Three basic natural factors can cause walleye to stop biting:

- Low barometric pressures,
- Too much light, and
- Too much noise.

But that day, there'd been no drop in barometric pressure to cause those fish to shut their mouths. The storm front was well past us. The normal mid-Columbia wind was flat-out howling, and there were plenty of wind-kicked waves to disperse the sunlight, so too much light wasn't the problem. Those fish weren't headed to deeper water or a

basalt shelf to get shade for their eyes. And at the depths we were fishing, noise was not a contributing factor.

Those fish just quit feeding. My 35 years of experience in walleye fishing and guiding tells me that catching walleyes is limited to those times that the fish are on the cusp of starting to feed, feeding or on the cusp of going off the feed. Walleyes can readily be caught at those times, but can be almost impossible to catch at any other times.

I have little faith in the concept that they can be triggered into biting at any time of the day or night, week or month. I have discussed -- and cussed -- this concept with a couple of well-known walleye experts over the past three decades. I've listened to their seminars at sports shows, and they've yet to convince me they can catch walleyes any time they want to.

Sure, it's possible to catch one walleye just about any time. A couple of years ago, someone caught a couple of marlin off the coast of Oregon. But that was a fluke, too. If they could catch walleyes at their whim, I wouldn't see them fishing the Columbia every day over a two- or three-week period to produce just a 45-minute video for their marketing projects!

CUT THROUGH THE BULL

Let's discuss methods for catching walleyes on the Columbia River, and most other places I've fished, during the early-summer period of June and July.

First is the Columbia standard of trolling crankbaits upriver. I want to stress the "upriver" part of that, even though I know the universal system for catching walleyes is to troll downstream. True, when you fish the Columbia River, you're fishing impoundments -- but these impoundments have flow of a moving current. And for that reason, the Columbia is justly infamous for eating lures and tackle. Anything that hangs on the bottom stays there, held down by pressure from the current.

That gravel bottom on which you've been dragging bait walkers and worm harnesses can turn into a corrugated, multi-crevassed basalt rockpile in seconds -- much too quick to retrieve and save your gear or lures. There are places where you can drag crankbaits, weight-forward spinners or worm harnesses downstream and get away with it, but you have to know exactly where you are on the river. And even then, it doesn't hurt to have Mandrake in the boat with you.

Trolling crankbaits upriver is a viable technique that can be used almost everywhere and offers many possibilities. Lures for 12 to 15 feet of water depth are best exemplified by Wiggle Warts, Rapala's Tail Dancers and Bomber Model A's.

To go deeper than that, you'll need lures like Reef Runners, Bomber Long A deep runners, Bagley's deep runners, big Thundersticks, Rapala Down Deeps or Tail Dancers and Rattlin' Rogues. With light lines, the latter will get you to 20-foot depths, maybe more.

The best colors for any given day are the ones the walleye bite on.

If you locate fish on your sonar that are deeper than 18 to 20 feet, then you have a choice of going to bait walkers and 3-foot leaders in front of Wiggle Warts, Bomber A's or small Rapalas, or pulling your lures behind a diving plane. You can also revert to the old-time rig of a bank sinker off a three-way swivel with a couple of feet of light mono, and dragging your lure on 3 or 4 feet of leader off the back swivel.

Lures can be interchanged with weight-forward spinners/worms or worm harnesses, though both of those rigs are best used while trolling downstream on gravel. I've had good luck fishing for walleyes at depths of 20 feet or more by dragging 2-ounce bait walkers on the bottom while trailing floating Rapalas on a 4-foot leader. This works whether you're trolling upriver or down.

On another day in the middle of June, we were dragging crankbaits across the top of a submerged island. This underwater structure lies along the outside curve of a bend in the river near the John Day Dam.

Soon I reached the fish with my 10-foot, long-handled net, and she was in the boat. The scales said this was a nice 12-pound hen -- a beautiful iridescent gold and green Columbia River walleye.

We had several strikes and caught three fish. But for the number of fish that I was reading stacked on that island under the boat, the action was slow. We moved to another location that has produced fish for me during the early summer and set in again. We were working fish 15 to 20 feet deep using Smithwick Rattlin' Rogues, concentrating our efforts with green and bronze colors.

We picked up a couple of fish, had a couple of short strikes and a slow hour or two of trolling, trolling, trolling. Changing lures to known producers didn't seem to change our luck much.

Deciding it was time for drastic action, I switched everyone over to 6-foot light spinning rods and jigs and jigs with worms. I pretty much stick with Mr. Twister bodies for jigging, but sometimes vary that presentation with Fuzz-E-Grubs or Whistler-type jigs with worms, but no bodies.

We tried all sorts of jigs, mostly with worms. Finally we reverted to dragging worm harnesses downstream for the rest of the day. Everyone had fun and caught plenty of walleyes, with some going to more than 8 pounds. But these were not wallhangers.

While jigging, one client hooked a big walleye. But as often happens with those big, easy-biting walleyes, it came off the hook. Those guys were all from Ohio and weren't looking for eating fish; they can catch all they want back home.

They were looking for some of those huge Columbia River walleyes. But they had been walleye fishing before and knew the guide's lament: "Sometimes you catch 'em, sometimes you don't."

But June walleye fishing on the Columbia River from McNary Dam down to Hood River offers the opportunity to hang a walleye of tremendous proportions on your den wall.

I predict that the middle section of that chunk of river -- that portion from the mouth of the John Day River down to the section of river near Mosier, Ore. -- holds the promise of a new world-record walleye. That's the section of the river where Arnie Berg caught the Oregon state-record walleye of just over 19.5 pounds.

In February, Mike Hepper set a new Washington record with a 19.3-pounder he caught above the dam. But Arkansas' 22-pound-plus fish is still the biggest.

I know it's going to happen here because every winter, the tribal commercial fishermen gill-net fish bigger than the current angling world record. One of these days, someone fishing for salmon or steelhead is going to be trolling a Wiggle Wart through that region of the river and hook a big salmon. But when that "salmon" comes to the boat, it's going to be -- surprise, surprise! -- a walleye of such tremendous proportions that it's going to make the walleye world set up and take notice.

And I hope that angler is me!