

Wandering Eyes

Keys to
Bagging
Suspended
Walleye

*Have you ever been out on a lake
and found oodles of suspended fish on your sonar
but couldn't touch 'em?*

*Sure you have,
since it happens every year.*

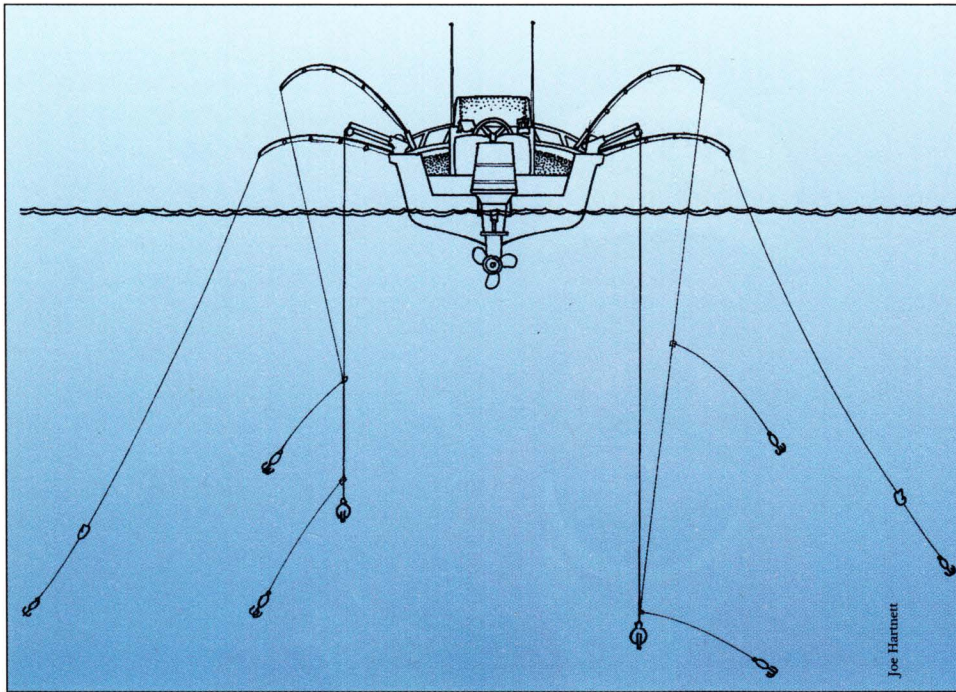
*It's frustrating, but not hopeless.
Now what if I told you they were big walleye
and quite catchable ... if
you take the right approach?*

Interested?

Good!

*Now sit tight and
take notes because
catching suspended walleye
is a combination of art and science.*

by John L. Field



Covering Water

The combination of downriggers and diving planers is tough to beat when it comes to covering water for suspended walleye. Fish spoons or minnow baits off downriggers, with spoons on either fixed (left) or sliding (right) stackers.

Complete the rig with a pair of diving planers adjusted to run out and away from the boat, to avoid tangles. Run either minnow baits, spoons or fat-bodied crankbaits off the planers.

Not only does this spread cover the right depths, but it allows you to experiment with different lure types while covering a wider lateral band of water than you can by fishing with downriggers alone.

Joe Harriott

Walleye Movements

One of the biggest misconceptions about walleye is that they are nocturnal and can't stand light. But that vampire image isn't necessarily so. In fact, walleye are motivated by three basic things: feeding, reproduction and survival.

Here's an important point — walleye activity and location changes with environmental conditions and seasonal cycles. For example, let's say you're fishing a lake with inadequate deep water oxygen levels. In this situation you would likely find walleye suspended where they could meet their needs. For feeding, they go where the forage is. Light levels and the effects of the warming sun cause plankton to move, water to change temperature and in turn, the depth those forage fish hang out also changes. Walleye move right along with them.

The walleye's diet consists largely of shiners, shad, ciscoes, alewife and perch. If perch are feeding on alewife or shiner fry in the mid-depths, the walleye will follow them there. Walleye will also follow adult alewife. When fishing in lakes where alewife are a big part of the walleye's diet, remember that alewife seek comfort in water around nine degrees C. If that happens to be at 40 feet, then that's where to look for walleye.

When conditions are easiest, walleye feed randomly until satisfied. These conditions vary by the species of forage. Perch, for example, can't adjust their vision to the changing light at dusk and dawn nearly as well as walleye can. This dusk and dawn activity is called diurnal activity. So in waters like this where

they co-exist, walleye hunt perch diurnally with considerable advantage.

When walleye find their prey in a dark location, such as deep water or in water with poor light penetration, they may feed continually throughout the day. High winds can induce daytime feeding as well, by diffusing surface light or stirring sediment which clouds the water. As a general rule of thumb, look for walleye to be deep during the day, and shallower on dark days, in windy weather or at night.

Tactics

If walleye suspend in clouds of fattening forage, you might wonder why to expect them to bite one particular offering out of the thousands all around them. I'm referring, of course, to the painted wooden one with hooks on it, being towed around by what must surely look like rope! But if it passes as food and looks injured, a hungry fish will usually hit it. Most suspended walleye are conditioned to eat other fish, as opposed to terrestrial foods like worms, larvae or frogs. Give them what they want. When the choice is to troll minnows or troll lures resembling fish, go with lures. You can cover more water and provoke strikes with the vibrations of crankbaits or spoons. The exaggerated action of these lures indicates injure and panic.

When things are really slow, go to a slow presentation, such as drifting or trolling live bait on spinner rigs. If that doesn't work go to a stationary presentation with a minnow below a slip bobber or hung on a jig. The idea is to literally hold the bait in front of their hungry faces. Sooner or later one will snap.

Crankbaits

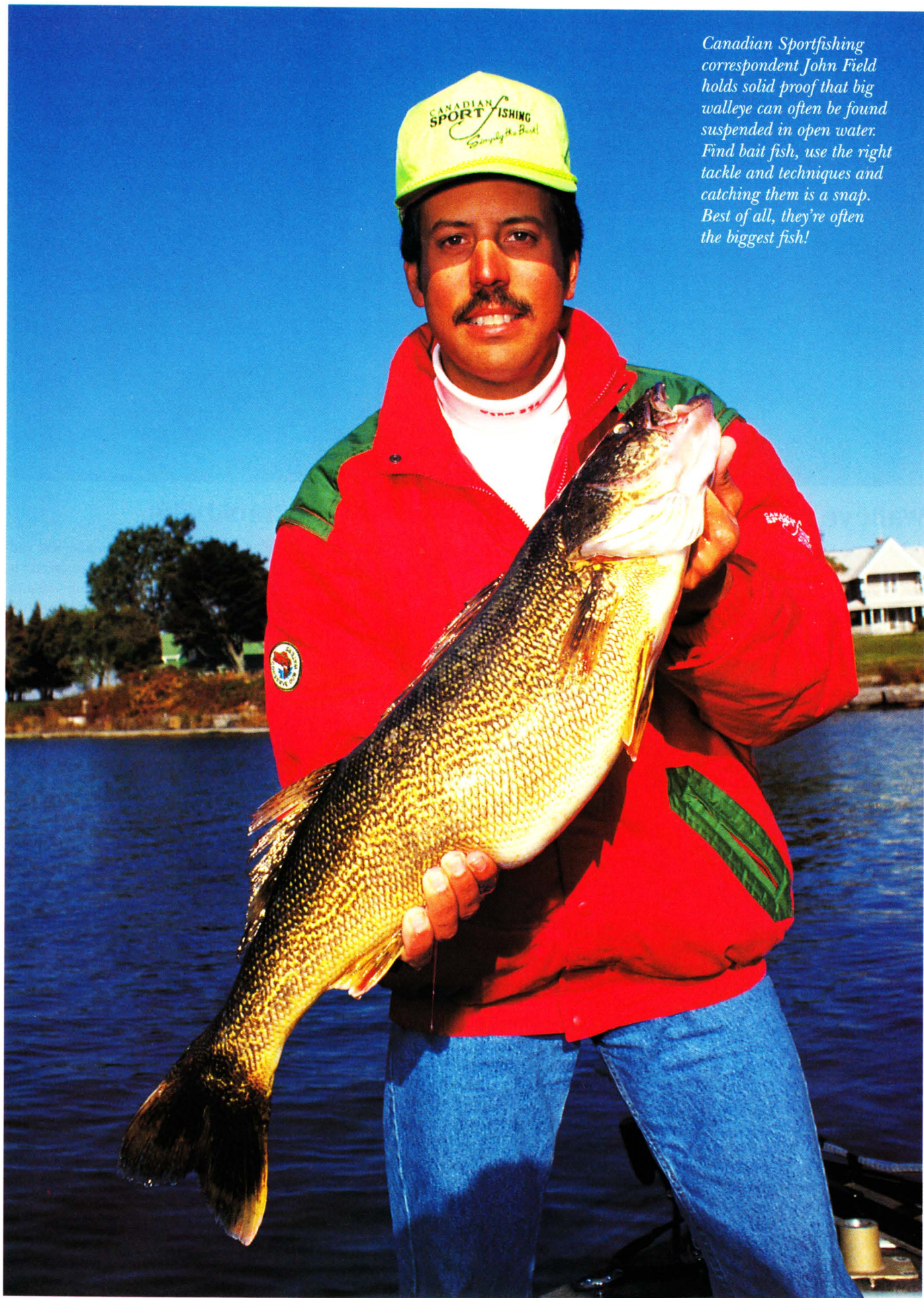
Of all the characteristics of a lure, size and shape are most important. The reason size is important is simply due to the amplitude of the sound the lure produces. Shape and design determine the lure's action. A fish doesn't always see a lure and chase it. Instead, often the response comes from vibrations picked up by its lateral line. In a spoon, the amount of cupping of the metal matters most — not the outline of the lure. Similarly, the size of the diving bill on a crankbait not only affects its depth. It's affect on the lure's action influences sound as well.

Crankbaits fall into one of two different shape categories — the thin, minnow-types that look like a shiner or smelt, and a fatter ones that might resemble a shad or perch. Within these profile groups there are lure models with various lip sizes intended for various purposes. They dive in a range from one to 30 feet. A small thin plug with a small bill offers the most subtle action and sound pattern, while a big fat plug with a huge bill wobbles all over the place making quite a ruckus. Most lures fit somewhere between these two extremes.

In general, use subtle-actioned lures in cold water and the more exaggerated action in warmer conditions. Remember that walleye are cold blooded critters and their energy levels are somewhat controlled by the water temperature. In frigid water, they simply don't have much zest and aren't as likely to chase a fast-moving lure.

Shallow diving minnow baits are best characterized by the well-known original floating

Canadian Sportfishing correspondent John Field holds solid proof that big walleye can often be found suspended in open water. Find bait fish, use the right tackle and techniques and catching them is a snap. Best of all, they're often the biggest fish!



John L. Field

Rapala or the Bomber Long A. Jointed Rapalas offer a fuller body profile and increased action. Deep-diving minnows, like the Long A Deep and Storm Deep Thunderstick offer a more violent action in addition to the ability to reach greater depths.

In fat profile lures, the Rapala Shad Rap, Shallow Shad Rap and Storm Thin Fin stand out. For a similar profile but added depth and action, try the Rapala Rattlin' Fat Rap, Cordell Wally Diver, Mann's Depth Series or Storm Hot-N-Tots.

Spoons

Spoons are real favourites among many anglers because they allow quick and easy colour changes by simply adding a strip of prism tape. Many of the best are better known for their results on Great Lakes salmon, including the Yek, Evil Eye, Pirate or Northern King. Each has its best action at a slightly different trolling speed, with the Yek performing best at a fast clip, the Pirate and Northern King at intermediate speeds and the Evil Eye at little more than a crawl.

With both spoons and crankbaits, go with natural looking metallic and paint finishes in daylight and clear water, and at night or in stained water try fluorescent, chartreuse or bright metallics.

Three Dimensional Control

The most difficult part about catching suspended walleye is keeping tabs on how deep you're fishing. It's not like catching fish just off bottom, where gravity keeps your bait in the right place. Instead, imagine fish scattered across a vast lake, suspended exactly 22 feet down over 45 feet of water. Obviously, being able to fish at that magic 22-foot depth is a critical factor to success.

Flatline trolling with monofilament for suspended fish limits you to using deep diving lures only, whether you want their inherently heavy action or not. In warm, active conditions when walleye are feeding actively this may be fine. But when things are slow and you need a finer approach, you have to either add weight or use downriggers.

To add weight use either rubber core sinkers or coloured lead core line. A three colour length of #27 lead core used between a diving planer and a mono leader can sink a lure an extra 10 feet. Wire helps get a lure down but requires a home made counting system, or a line counter reel, to provide accurate repeatability. In truth, wire or lead core line would be better in situations where an angler is working right on bottom. When



Charlie McDonald's smile says it all. Think in 3-D then hold on! Walleye ho!

you feel it hit bottom, you know you're there. But for suspended fish, it's always a bit of a guessing game.

To put any lure, including shallow, subtle-action ones, to any required depth quickly and accurately, downriggers are the best bet. Need your lure at 29 feet? Just clip your line to the release and stop lowering it when the counter reads 29 feet. They're precise.

The next best way to get stuff down there is with a line counter reel and an on-line diving planer, such as a Dipsey Diver. These plane the lure down directly behind to a maximum depth of about 70 feet, depending on the model chosen. Though not as precise as a downrigger, they are neat because they can be used in addition to downriggers to increase your horizontal coverage. Have four guys fishing and just two 'riggers on the boat? Put two guys on divers, set to run to the outsides and you add 30 feet of extra coverage per rod. Extra lures set to cover more water volume usually produce a higher catch over the course of the year.

The planer board can add the most width enhancement to your spread. Boards are usually used to troll shallow lures away from the noise and disturbance of the boat. But you can use them on suspended fish by using them in conjunction with deep diving baits, possibly used behind a diving planer (such as the Big Jon Mini Disc) or a short chunk of lead core line. For fishing in calm water, clip a Yellow Bird on the line. But for fishing in a stiff chop, use a boat-mounted mast to tow a double board, which will

perform in the waves without flipping. The Big Jon or Wille are good systems to look at.

Electronic Strategies

Without expert help, most anglers rely on experience, trial and electronics to locate and catch suspended fish.

The first step is scouting your way out if the fish finder is capable of reading "on the fly", or while travelling at high speed. One that can is highly useful, since you can cover a lot of water looking for forage and walleye.

The key here is to find bait fish schools since active walleye may sit in clouds of bait and be hard to identify at any speed. Similarly, high cruising walleye may not pass directly under the transducer and hence, don't mark on the fish finder. You could literally walk across the lake on the backs of fish but still not see them! Forget about finding walleye and instead look for schools of bait fish to troll through. If walleye are scattered then fish and hunt at the same time. If the fish are in isolated schools that elude you or if the bite subsides, then you may need to pick up and find more active schools with the fish finder.

This is when a GPS or loran navigation unit can save the day. Save previously marked bait or fish schools in the machine's memory so you can return later to try them again. You can even set up a routine, going from school to school till the walleye turn on.

Remember — there's no substitute for good schooling!!