

WALLEYES ON THE RUN

RUN-AND-GUN ICE-FISHING IS A LABOR-INTENSIVE APPROACH. FORTUNATELY, THE REWARDS ARE WORTH THE INVESTMENT.

By Mark Romanack

There are two schools of thought in the investment world. One group takes the conservative approach, preferring to stick with the established norm and rarely breaking the rules. The other group lives life a little more on the edge and is willing to take some chances in exchange for a shot at higher rewards. Both approaches work, but the most dramatic success stories are usually told by those who take the biggest risks.

In the world of ice-fishing, anglers who target walleyes also take different routes in pursuit of success. Most anglers take the conservative approach. They spend most of their time at well-established spots using fishing techniques that fall neatly within the mainstream.

A much smaller group of ice anglers view winter walleye angling as a game that's mostly about location. This group believes investing lots of time in locating fish is the key to icing more walleyes.

The question is this: When does it make more sense to "run and gun," fishing aggressively, and when should an angler take the conservative approach?

In winter, when fish travel and feed less often, rarely does playing it safe produce more fish. The strategy of camping out on a spot and hoping fish will show up or start biting simply can't compete with a more aggressive approach that focuses on moving until fish are located. Location is always an element of fishing success, but during winter its importance can't be overstated.

The problem is, moving constantly in search of walleyes is a lot of work. Unlike during summer, when covering water is relatively easy, the ice-angler is burdened with the task of lugging gear over the ice, drilling new holes, tearing down and setting up a shelter and then repeating the process again

and again until fish are located. To say the least, this approach is labor-intensive. Fortunately, the rewards make this investment of energy worthwhile.

Selecting specific gear can help take some of the work out of run-and-gun ice-fishing, but in the end it's having a positive attitude and a willingness to work that drives success.

Mobility is Critical

Running and gunning works best when caution is thrown to the winter winds. Walleyes are rarely found in lakes small enough that walking is a practical means of covering water. Instead, walleyes prefer large, sprawling waters, and that means motorized mobility on the ice is a critical aspect of success. If you can't easily move your gear from one spot to another, you're at a disadvantage. All-terrain-vehicles or snowmobiles are not merely a luxury, they are a necessity for serious run-and-gun walleye fishing.

The mobility these machines provide is invaluable, but it's important to keep in mind that owning an ATV or snowmobile isn't a license to take everything you own onto the ice. Keeping the gear list lean and mean is just as important as dependable transportation.

About Shelters

Large, heavy ice shelters are cozy and comfortable protection from the elements, but they aren't practical for anglers who plan to cover lots of water. Several manufacturers produce portable shelters designed for mobility. Some use runners to make moving the shelter a painless experience. Flip-style en-





BILL LINDNER

Jigging spoons fished aggressively tend to trigger strikes from active walleyes. These lures are great for finding schools of fish that are feeding on bait.

closure allow the angler to fish in open air during mild weather or flip the enclosure closed during bitter fishing conditions.

Hardy shelters can be towed behind an ATV or snow machine, and most are small enough to easily fit in the back of a pickup truck for transportation to and from the lake. The key features to consider when selecting a portable shelter are weight, ease of movement, size and versatility of function.

One- and two-man shelters are the most practical size for running-and-gunning. Larger shelters simply encourage the users to take along more people and gear — all of which reduces the likelihood you will want to move when it's necessary.

Other Essentials

Unless the ice is only a few inches thick, a power auger is essential. Drilling holes is a lot of work, and without the help of a power auger, chances are this essential work won't get done.

For serious walleye fishing, a model with 8- to 10-inch-diameter blades is recommended.

Because walleyes live in sprawling waters, a portable global-positioning-unit is also essential. Not only can the GPS be used to save the location of productive fishing spots, mapping units can be used to navigate to potential holding structures, including

those you may not have previously fished.

A GPS unit is an invaluable tool for creating safe navigation routes to and from fishing spots. A handheld unit is adequate, but a growing number of anglers are using the larger models designed to be permanently mounted on a fishing boat. By simply mounting these units on the handlebars of an ATV or snowmobile with a RAM mount or other aftermarket bracket, anglers have instant access to fishing information they gathered during the open-water season.

Short List of Gear

The rods, reels and terminal tackle for winter walleyes makes up the short part of the list. Medium-action graphite rods in 24- to 28-inch sizes are ideal for fishing in small shelters. Match these rods with a small spinning reel loaded with 8- or 10-pound test monofilament line. Keep two or three rods handy for each angler with each equipped to fish a different lure. It's easier to switch rods than re-rig various lures on the ice.

The top terminal tackle rigs can be summarized in three tried and tested categories.

Leadhead jigs tipped with minnows are standard. For the depths most commonly fished, a selection of 1/8-, 1/4- and 3/8-ounce jigs will get the job done. Long-shank jigs are the preferred style

for winter jigging. The longer hook shank puts the business end of the hook deeper in the fish's mouth. This in turn increases the hooking ratio.

Jigging spoons are the second "must have" lure for run-and-gun walleyes. Spoons, which are fished aggressively, tend to trigger strikes from active walleyes. To achieve the built-in wobble, a jigging spoon is popped with a sharp snap of the rod tip and the lure is allowed to sink on a slack line. The most popular sizes with walleye anglers are 1/2-, 3/4-, and 1-ounce models.

While jigs cover the subtle approach and spoons permit an aggressive strategy, a third lure group covers situations when walleyes are looking for something different. Jigging/swimming lures such as Salmo Chubby Darters and Jigging Raps have quickly become a favorite among serious walleye anglers.

The best way to describe this unique lure is a lipless crankbait designed to be fished vertically. The Chubby Darter features a body with a wider head that tapers to a more slender body. A treble hook is mounted both on the tail and below the line tie attachment.

These baits sink slowly. When the rod tip is popped sharply, the lure comes to life, creating a tight vibrating wiggle and changing direction. When you let it sink on a slack line, it swims back to the bottom enticingly.

Unlike other jigging/swimming

lures that sink quickly, the Chubby Darter gives fish time to react. Also, because it's equipped with not one, but two treble hooks, the fish that bite are almost always hooked solidly.

The size CD5 and CD6 are ideal for walleye applications. Some anglers tip the back treble hook with a small minnow, but others believe the lure's natural darting action is what makes it so deadly.

Peak Periods

The mobile approach to walleye fishing is a solid strategy because it increases the odds of encountering active fish. But it is not the way to go during peak feeding periods.

Winter walleyes feed most often and most aggressively at dawn and dusk. During these times, it's wise to be camped out on the best spot you can find. Reserve the hour around sunrise and the hour before sunset for fishing. Avoid travel and keep your line in the water as much as possible during these brief but critical times. There will be plenty of time to run when the action slows.

When peak times have passed, apply the run-and-gun approach. Often, relocating fish is as simple as moving toward deeper water adjacent to spots that have historically produced fish. The next most logical move is to analyze the

spot or spots that have been producing fish and try to find similar areas.

Keeping Perspective

The run-and-gun approach works because moving is the most logical way to make contact with active fish. It's important to understand that outside of peak feeding times, rarely will the action be as fast. Instead, anglers should expect to find and catch the occasional active fish.

For example, if you move to a new location and quickly catch a fish or two, don't camp out on the spot all afternoon waiting for more action. Chances are the fish that are going to bite will do so immediately. The safe money is to keep moving until another group of active fish is found. In short, moving often tends to target only the most active fish.

Every place that produces a fish should be saved as a waypoint on your GPS unit for future reference. It's a good idea to take the time to name specific waypoints for later. These spots, when fished at prime times, often turn into honey holes.

Developing a list of productive waypoints on a particular lake creates another invaluable advantage. Use the waypoints to set up a milk run. Targeting known fish-producing spots increases confidence and also the likelihood of success.

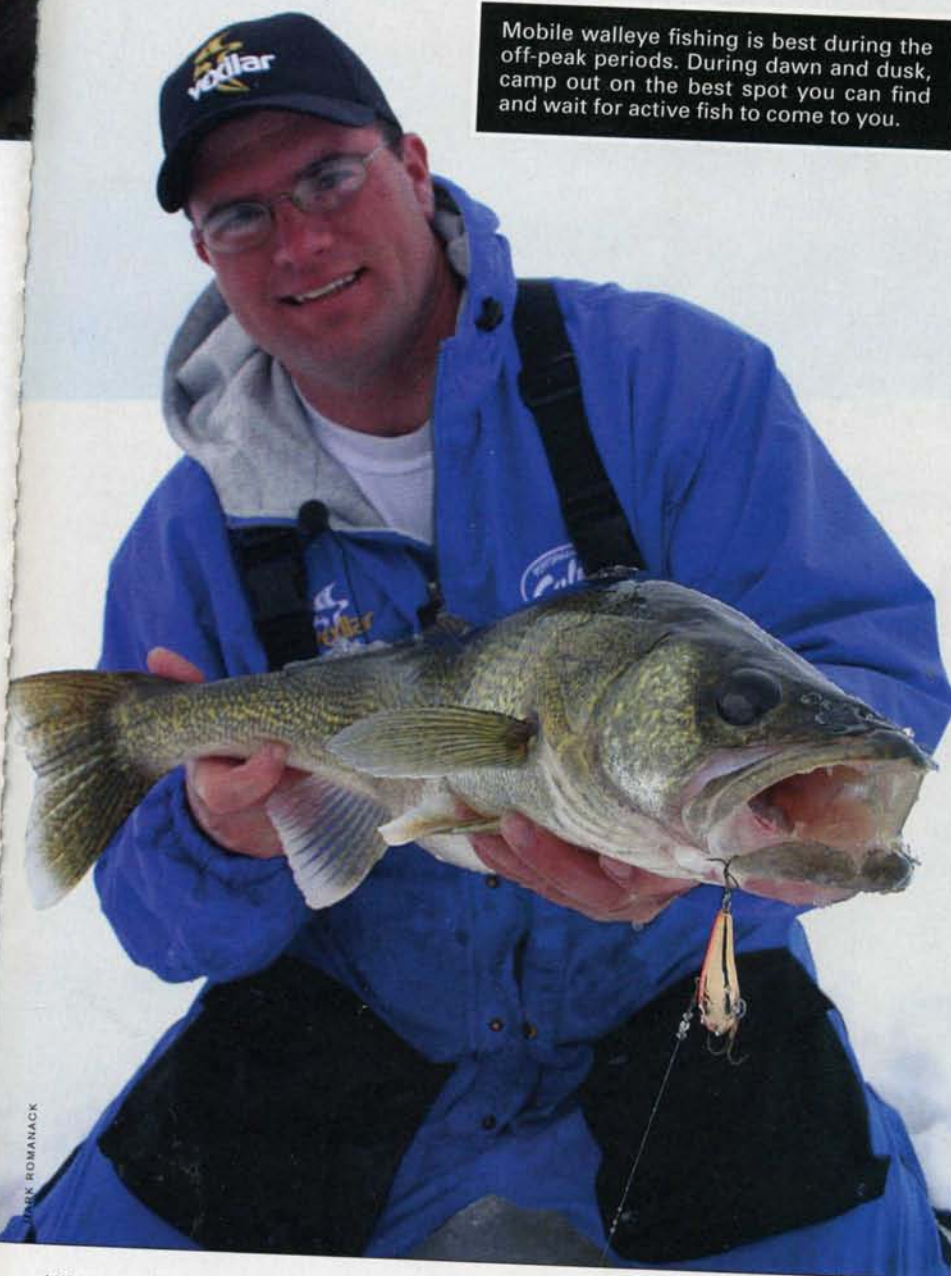
Summing It Up

Running-and-gunning is an aggressive means of covering water and contacting active fish. Using motorized transportation is a key element of this strategy, but so is keeping the gear list as functional and trim as possible. In short, the way to make moving frequently a practical strategy is to figure out how to make each move as little work as possible.

Set up mild runs to target spots that have produced before, and always be willing to check out new spots. It never hurts to spend some time in uncharted waters. After all, that's what this approach is all about. You never know when you'll discover a new favorite fishing hole.

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Mobile walleye fishing is best during the off-peak periods. During dawn and dusk, camp out on the best spot you can find and wait for active fish to come to you.



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