

I was thinking this article by the Late Dusty Routh might be fun for the web site, he was a friend of mine with Hunting and Fishing News and said I could reprint it anytime I wanted, it was a fun trip.

On the Scene

Early winter Columbia walleye

We started at the boat ramp at Camas, looking out on endless whitecaps on the Columbia River. Too rough to go out there, said our walleye consultant, Cal Burkhardtsmeier of Vancouver, Washington. The wind was howling. We could fish in it, but it wouldn't be any fun. It's hard to jig when it's blowing like this.

We did a quick huddle. The John Day Dam is two hours east of Camas. Cal said that often when an east wind is blowing down the Gorge, the area around John Day will be calm. I'd driven down the night before from Seattle with my walleye fanatic friend Brian Henton, in hopes of fishing with Cal to learn about trophy walleye fishing the Columbia. Heck, what was a quick 2-hour drive east?

So we piled into the rigs and headed out.

Sure enough, at the Giles French park ramp just below John Day Dam on the Oregon side, the Columbia was flat and calm. Even better, the place was nearly deserted. Other fishermen in the area were above the dam, fishing the lower John Day River for steelhead. We climbed into our winter fishing clothes and headed out to partake of November walleye.

Just about everything having to do with winter walleye fishing is s-l-o-w. You don't need to be out on the water until well after daylight, so you can slowpoke in the morning. You jig blade baits slow, or you troll crank baits upriver slow, or you troll bottom walkers with spinner worm harnesses downstream slow. You work the water slow. And the fishing will be slow. If you hook one or two on a winter afternoon, you've had a great day. These are warm-water fish, so the cold winter water impedes their metabolism. They have to be angered or agonizingly enticed to strike.

However, if you do hook a walleye between November and March, chances are it will be big, and possibly big enough to be called *huge*.

That's because the Columbia is an absolutely world-class fishery for some of the biggest walleye you'll find anywhere, and that includes Canada and the Great Lakes. The Columbia is so good for big fish that it has attracted a close brotherhood of practitioners who have turned the river into a classroom, guys like Cal Burkhardtsmeier, Mike Davis, and Jeff Warila, to name only a few. They've learned, and are still learning, how to fish this massive, fast-moving water for walleye that can range from 8 pounds to 18 pounds.

Day One: After spending all afternoon shivering and jigging, they hit on a blade bait (a thin metal jig with a heavy lead head that "swims" when you pull it up, such as that made

by Silver Buddy in cold weather can confuse you. Is that the bottom I've got again? Hit a stick? A snag? A rock? Dang, I must really have the bottom, things not moving at all. Damn it, I'm hung up again.

Then, yanking and trying to free the 2-treble, 6-barb blade jig, something pulled back, something strong, something heavy and something definitely angry.

We never saw the fish. It pulled straight down, shook its massive head two or three times, bent the rod like a twig, and then was gone. How a toothy critter like a walleye can inhale and then spit out 6 barbs is beyond me. But I can say this much the exhilaration of the Bottom pulling back was enough to convince me that these walleye guys are really on to something.

I hooked and lost one other fish, and that was that for the day. That evening we feasted on BBQ at the Texas T-Bone restaurant, and slept soundly crammed into a motel room at Dinty's Motel in Rufus.

Day Two: One of the interesting things about walleye fishing is how many steelhead you'll hook while you're doing it. We saw lots of steelhead rising below the John Day Dam the first day, so we decided to dedicate the opening of the second day to chasing them. We only boated two, but we hooked several others trolling crank baits upriver against the current. We also hooked squawfish, a smallmouth bass, countless clams off the bottom (yes, clams), and a walleye.

This is a pretty typical kind of winter trip for mid-river on the Columbia a couple walleye, a couple big fish misses, a number of steelhead, and a smattering of other fish.

Wisdom of the pros: When you spend time with walleye fanatics who pound the Columbia hard even through winter, you pick up a few pointers. Here are some tidbits of walleye wisdom that these guys have learned after countless hours spent learning:

- Walleye love crank-baits, like Hot Lips Express and Wiggle Warts.
- Troll crank-baits straight-lined behind the boat upriver, against the current.
- Small and medium crank-baits work better than big crank-baits for walleye.
- Big crank-baits work better for steelhead than for walleye.
- Walleye love spinner worm harnesses behind bottom walkers.
- Troll spinner worm harnesses downriver, with the current.
- Adjust the weight of your bottom walker so that it lightly ticks the bottom when you lower your rod tip. It shouldn't drag, and it shouldn't float free it should be somewhere in between as you lift and lower your rod tip.
- While blade baits come in different colors, you only need two for the Columbia, silver, and chartreuse.
- A chartreuse double-tail plastic on a Whistler jig head is one of the walleyes favorite meals.
- The best time to catch a trophy walleye on the upper river is March.
- The best time to catch a trophy walleye on the lower river is October.

- The best time to catch a lot of walleye, regardless of size, is August.
- If you get married, it will interfere with your walleye fishing.
- Walleye like shallow water, especially in summer and fall. During these times they can be up in as little as four feet of water or less.
- When they're not shallow, river walleye can be anywhere from 8 feet of water to 30 feet, except in mid-winter when they can be as deep as 40 or 50 feet. There is a theory that they may also suspend in deeper water.
- Don't believe those stories about how walleye don't put up a decent fight. River walleye are extremely strong, agile fish. Until you get the knack, you'll lose more than you boat.
- The best way to catch steelhead is to go walleye fishing. The incidental catch of steelhead by walleye anglers is incredible.

--Dusty Routh