





# Foolin Fall 'Eyes

STORY BY MICK KLEMESRUD PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

**T**he best fall walleye fishing happens when the early November deer rut occurs and many anglers are sitting in a tree stand holding a bow instead of a fishing rod. But “Don’t hang up your rod,” says Jim Wahl, fisheries supervisor for the DNR’s northwest district. “Fall is a great time to catch big fish.”

In addition to big fish, other temptations pull in anglers—boat traffic is down, cooler temperatures prevail and fewer pesky bugs exist. Here’s how to get your fish.

## THE RIVERS

Around the first week of November, walleyes crowd into over-wintering holes looking for an easy meal.

In 2000, the DNR increased stocking walleye fingerlings in northeast Iowa rivers and the populations took off. While most Iowa rivers have good walleye numbers, two rate “best of the best:” the Shell Rock River from Greene to the confluence of the Cedar River (Butler and Black Hawk counties), and the Cedar River from Nashua to Vinton (Chickasaw to Benton counties).

“We’ve had really good reports all through those stretches,”

says Greg Gelwicks, DNR rivers research biologist.

By late summer and early fall, rivers typically have low, clear flows. Walleyes are found in 4 to 6 feet of water in current breaks, like logs or downed trees and near areas with flow, like riffles. A sandbar that drops off to a pool is a good place to find active fish.

Cast a jig and night crawler into the pool, and on the retrieve, lift and drop the bait. Another method is vertically jigging the area or cast into the current and let it swing the jig into the break. Jig size depends on flow. Use only enough weight to feel the bottom. Gelwicks says he uses 1/16-ounce jigs in light flow and will move up to 1/8-ounce in moderate flow. Crankbaits and plastics will work, too.

“They like to sit on the current break and watch for food to come by,” says Gelwicks, who implanted walleye with radio transmitters in the Wapsipinicon River and tracked their movements for five years. He says walleyes start moving to overwintering holes in October and finish by November. Deeper holes are 10 to 20 feet deep and out of the current. He says walleyes hang by the drop-offs and aren’t necessarily in the deepest part.





While fall walleyes are putting on the feedbag in preparation for winter, they are not as aggressive as spring fish. The key is lighter, smaller and slower on presentation.



When in their winter holes, switch to minnows. Gelwicks likes to anchor and work the area with a jig. If there are no bites, he moves downstream one boat length to try again. If the hole is large, he trolls it with a three-way rig. Find holes at sharp river bends, around bridges or dredged areas that may be near quarries.

### THE LAKES

Lake fishing tactics change for fall walleyes. Use large live bait, fish slow and deep during daylight. At sunset, use twister tails or shallow running crankbaits from shore. Walleyes are common near bridges, points or “neck down” areas with flow. “Neck downs” are constrictions or funnels, like the footbridge and Buffalo Run at Spirit Lake, and the sandbar at McIntosh Woods on Clear Lake.

“It’s slow fishing. It’s not 50 fish in the boat, but a slower bite—but you will be rewarded with larger fish,” Wahl says.

Fishing sunset to after dark is best. With clearer fall water, walleye become spooky and run deep during the day. At night, they come closer to shore, making shoreline angling with waders a good option.

Preferred baits are jigs with a twister tail or shad body, or a shallow running crankbait either pencil- or minnow-shaped. The lure should only dive 2 to 4 feet. Use slow, steady retrieves without excess movement as the fish aren’t as aggressive as during the springtime.

Walleyes are looking for food to increase their body weight before winter and to develop eggs for the spring spawn.

“They are opportunistic feeders this time of year, and they target frogs in the fall,” Wahl says.

Leopard frogs migrate from sloughs to lakes in September and October to overwinter, providing a food source. A few locations where the migration will take place are on Garlock Slough on West Okoboji and Trickles Slough on Spirit Lake, among others. Walleyes also begin gathering around points, like Big Stoney Point on Spirit Lake and Dodges Point on Clear Lake.

If fishing mid-day, use large baits like a 5- to 6-inch minnow up to a small sucker placed on a 3/8-ounce jig or Lindy rig. Look for sharp breaks where lake contours drop to deeper water, like Omaha Point, Pillsbury Point or Pocahontas Point on West Okoboji Lake. Slowly move the bait by drifting or with a trolling motor. 🐟





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