

Explore the Mississippi River, the Heart of the Driftless Area

BIG RIVER

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Winter Walleyes

**Driftless Area
Cheesemakers**

Hope for Bats?

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Jason Hughes and walleye. (Capt. Ted Peck)

Cold Water Walleyes

By Capt. Ted Peck

The Mississippi is getting sleepy, easing downstream in shades of gray that mirror the skies. By month's end, backwaters will freeze hard enough to invite tentative steps by a vanguard of bucketeers whose number will soon become legion.

Last year November 24 marked my first trip out on the ice. It was good to see the bobber dance again, a welcome change from morning forays into the arms of mighty oaks waiting for a trophy buck and afternoons on the water probing wintering holes for walleyes and saugers with clients, or sometimes just for fun.

Walleyes and saugers are often mentioned in the same breath because they are cousins in the perch family, look a lot alike and are often found in the same places. Walleyes get much larger, which is important to most anglers and makes them subject to stricter limits. Walleyes are green and gold with a white spot on their tail, while saugers are grey to brown and have black spots on their dorsal fins. Consider the term "walleye" to be inclusive in this article unless I make a distinction.

Walleye location doesn't change much from Thanksgiving until early March on the big river. If it's possible to launch the boat and navigate, those few other intrepid souls still on the river will likely see my Lund easing over 18- to 24-foot-deep holes along the channel edge, where these myopic manitous will hunker down until runoff goads them into moving upstream, in early March.

The water just below dams from the Twin Cities to the Quad Cities holds wintering holes with lots of fish. Many of these are accessible from boat ramps that stay open all winter.

Similar overwintering spots near the Main Channel and in deeper run-



Lee Fluekiger, Alma, Wis., displays a full stringer of walleye. (courtesy of Capt. Ted Peck)

ning sloughs attract much less attention between now and sometime in March when the river opens up enough to allow tenuous boat travel. In 2015, hardcore walleye nuts were able to follow their passion from boats until a week before Christmas. The creator alone knows when fishing on the broader river will grind to an icy halt this year.

Getting Their Attention

Lure selection and presentation haven't changed much in decades. Back in the 1960s, we fished mostly hair jigs and blade baits: slender fish-shaped slabs of metal with several holes in the top to tie the line to and a pair of sharp treble hooks hanging down to tickle any fish coming close to investigate. The favorite blade back then was the Heddon Sonar, created in 1959. The sonar and the lures it inspired are still catching fish today.

Now my favorite blade is called the Echotail, with five points to attach the main line instead of three, multiple options for attaching hooks and a serrated back end that can accommodate virtually unlimited plastic tails or even live bait.

Soft plastics that can be attached to Echotails or threaded on bare jigheads continue to evolve. Back in 2015, I collaborated with the Vibrations Tackle Co. creating an Echotail in willowcat pattern called the "Teddy Cat." Of course this quickly became my favorite blade.

Kalin, Northland and B-Fish-N tackle plastics have been the vanguard of the fishing industry for years, with B-Fish-N tackle having its genesis right on the Mississippi. The purple/white tail ringworm was an extremely popular bait, until a few years ago, when B-Fish-N came out with the Moxie tail — essentially a ringworm on steroids.

In just the past couple of years, a paddletail plastic called the Pulse-R and similar lures from Kalin and Northland have become the bomb on this water. Modern plastics have become so lifelike that a growing number of anglers have sworn off putting live minnows on their jigs.

Hair jigs are another traditional favorite on the Mississippi, catching fish since Lansing, Iowa's, Ray Taylor perfected his "killer" jig back in 1960. Karen Clements, of Genoa, Wis., fishing-float fame, took over the company in 1995 and is still turning out quality work in a rainbow of color patterns and several sizes.

Several years ago, Karen gave me a few Taylor Tackle Killer Jigs to field test in a pattern she dubbed "296." It quickly became, and remains, my favorite hair jig. Unless a cold front has slowed fish metabolism to near hibernation status, below 35 degrees, I seldom use a minnow on a hair jig.



Capt Ted recommends these favorite jigs (left) and swivels (right) to catch winter walleyes.

Showtime

Presentation with hair is all about cadence. If walleyes are under the boat, a quick wrist snap every 15 to 30 seconds will often trigger a strike. If the less scrupulous sauger is present in greater numbers, find the bottom, come up about four inches and simply allow the bait to hover directly below the boat. When it feels like the jig is sliding through cold honey, set the hook!

When fishing blades or hair, a vertical presentation is usually the most effective. Vertical jigging will also work with the new soft plastics, but the presentation of casting out and slowly swimming the bait near the bottom often results in more strikes.

“Pulling” is another popular technique that has been around for decades. Originally, this method consisted of a heavy bass sinker and stick bait or a minnow on the two free droppers of a three-way swivel trolled slowly upstream. Since then the three-way rig has seen countless configurations, including the popular “Dubuque rig,” which has won several major cold-water walleye tournaments here.

Finding the right length for the two dropper lines coming off of the three-way swivel can be critical for success. The long dropper, which has the primary hook at the end, is typically 20 to 50 inches long. The short dropper has most of the weight, to enhance bot-

tom contact. Years ago I gave up on using sinkers to achieve this goal, as not many fish get caught on sinkers. A heavy jig with a plastic tail or a ¾- to one-ounce blade bait on the shorter

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six- to 12-inch dropper will sometimes outfish the primary hook. (The third eye of a three-way swivel is tied to the fishing line.)

Other Tools

We have seen big improvements in the gear that makes cold-water fishing more efficient and comfortable. Trolling motors with spot-lock and route-saving features are a solid improvement. Extremely sensitive rods, like my St. Croix 6.5-foot, medium-action Legend Extreme, are truly beautiful, functional tools.

Another major advancement is the arrival of no-stretch, superbraided line, which appeared in 1997. I prefer 10-pound Sufix superbraid, which is available in a bright yellow that remains

highly visible to an old angler’s eyes under low light conditions.

Modern clothing, handwarmers and portable heaters have greatly increased the time that fishing can be enjoyed rather than endured.

There are still a few old river rats who remember when Heddon sonars and Taylor Tackle Killer Jigs were new technology, and a Berkley Cherrywood or Eagle Claw gold rod were on the cutting edge. When trolling motors were called oars and a bucket of charcoal was a welcome adjunct to an outer layer of canvas with base layers of mostly wool.

Most Young Turks in their shiny fiberglass boats loaded with technology will be gone from the river once the fishing gets really good. There may be a few sons of the river out there in slick rigs, but those few gathered below the roaring dam tailwaters are mostly old men with a passion of chasing cold-water walleyes on the Upper Mississippi, hunched over and intense in battered flatbottom boats, bundled against an insistently approaching winter, smiling from their soul as the rod in their multi-gloved hand telegraphs that the jig below is sliding through cold honey.

And, it gets them out of the house. 🍷

Ted Peck has been guiding on Pool 9 for 15 years. His last story for Big River was “Dogfish Have A Jurassic Bark,” March-April 2018.