

Walleyes



THE ABILITY TO GET DOWN
TO DETAILS SEPARATES
GREAT ANGLERS FROM
THE LARGER PACK OF
GOOD ANGLERS
FISHING OUT
THERE TODAY

Most of my fishing these days is both exploratory and assignment-specific, given a television shoot schedule that requires gathering enough great footage to fuel another year of In-Fisherman on screen as well as in print. In recent years, I've had a chance to travel more than ever before. I've been able to fish great fisheries during peak periods, as well as visit lesser-known fisheries at other times. We work with several great tackle companies on television, so I always have plenty of appropriate products to fish with. Berkley and Rapala have extensive product lineups to fit almost any situation, and I continue to fish with products from a range of other companies when I get the chance.



TAKE ONE,

TAKE TWO,

TAKE THREE

All of us here like to push the window with respect to the presentation part of the fishing puzzle. Since joining *In-Fisherman* many years ago, that's always been an integral part of my nature as a researcher and writer. So, on the television trail, the emphasis isn't just on capturing the status quo, so much as illustrating the cutting edge of what's happening on a variety of fronts. We keep saying that attention to detail separates great anglers from good anglers. That's particularly true when it comes to bait and lure presentation.

So I thought I might discuss with you a few things I've seen over the last few years, things not commonly known or widely enough appreciated to be popular, yet I've mentioned some of these things before, but they still haven't caught on.

Some observations are simply a matter of seeing how other great anglers do what they do, and then comparing notes. Some anglers, especially some top-notch guides, are these days hugely knowledgeable

about their areas. On the other hand, they don't get to see what I've seen traveling the country, fishing with dozens of top guides and captains. Such was the situation early last April. Bad weather killed a crappie shoot in southern Arkansas. We had stored a boat in Texas to film there during winter and we were driving the boat home, planning the shoot-stop in Arkansas as we drove north.

I made a spur-of-the-moment call to Daryl Binkley of Bink's Guide Service on Lake Norfolk, near Mountain Home in northern Arkansas. We'd filmed stripers at night with him two years ago in early November. One of my favorite trout fisheries, the White River out of Gaston's Resort, is nearby. And, of course, *In-Fisherman* has conducted several Professional Walleye Trail tournaments in the area at Bull Shoals, sister reservoir to Norfolk. What a great region to explore—exceptional multispecies fishing, plus strong walleye fisheries getting even better, according to fishery folks.



#1 Berkley Cross-Lok Snaps

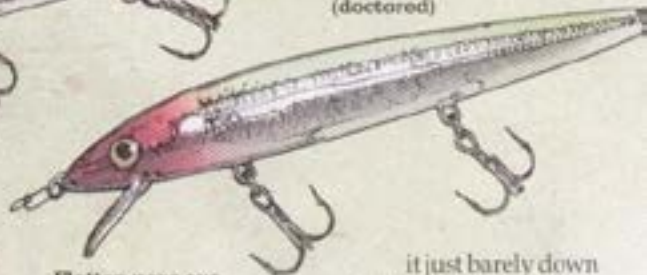
Remove split ring in favor of #1 Berkley Cross-Lok Snap.



#14 Rapala Husky Jerk



#14 Rapala Husky Jerk (doctored)



Flatten nose eye and bond slightly down.

"Anything biting? And do you have time?" I asked Bink on the phone.

"Stripers and walleyes and hybrids," he said, "with a mix of white bass thrown in. The fishing's at twilight well into dark. Water's ultraclear right now. I can spare a night. Let's find a way to fish, if you can get here."

"We'll be there by late afternoon," I said.

When we'd fished for stripers at night previously, I found myself immediately at home with the scene and the situation, having spent half my life fishing for walleyes after dark and throwing some of the same large plugs that we threw those nights. The best lures were #14 Rapala Husky Jerks, and I brought a new lure into the mix, the #12 Long Cast Minnow.

Although our primary target was stripers that fall, we didn't complain when walleyes happened along. Bink insisted he'd tried smaller plugs and hadn't caught any more—maybe fewer—walleyes when he'd tried them. When he dropped smaller, he didn't catch many big stripers. So the right combo for the situation was definitely bigger.

"Bigger than the majority of walleye anglers might think is better" has long been one of my primary points over all four seasons—and certainly once it gets dark. Three-inch curly-tail grubs don't cut it after dark. For that matter, they usually don't cut it during the day, either.

Most walleye anglers are fishing way too small most of the time. Not only do walleyes not shy from large baits at night during prime yearly periods

like summer and fall, they usually prefer them—even fish in the 14- to 22-inch range. They also aren't so likely to miss larger plugs, when they attempt to eat them. Furthermore, the bigger and more distinctive wobble given off by larger baits allows walleyes (and other fish) of all sizes to find and hit the baits better. The rule is to always push the window larger when it comes to lure choice—always to fish as large as you can get away with.

I've written often before about a trick I use to doctor these baits to get them to wobble even wider for fishing after dark. This works with Husky Jerks, Long Cast Minnows, and Count Down Rapalas. It also works with a few other plugs from other manufacturers. And it works with most floater minnowbaits, like the Floating Rapala.

Simply take pliers and, first, pinch the nose-attachment eye about half flatter than it was before. Now bend

it just barely down from horizontal, looking at it from the side. The Long

Cast Minnow is a little tougher to deal with but the results are the same—and with the Long Cast Minnow, particularly transforming. The biggest knock for anglers about the Long Cast Minnow isn't that it doesn't cast far enough; it truly is the longest-casting plug of its type on the market. It's that it doesn't have enough action out of the box. But my little doctoring trick gets this plug wobbling right. Wobbling a little bigger and bolder is right at night except during spring and early summer, when the subtle wobble of the plug right out of the box is best.

The Long Cast Minnow is a great shorecasting plug wherever you might be in North America, especially off Great Lakes piers after dark during late fall. Only a few other baits cast even remotely as far as the Long Cast Minnow. Keep fishing those Husky Jerks and Smithwick Rogues in shorecasting situations or from a boat in many situations at night; but if you need longer casts, use the LCM.

The #12 and #14 Husky Jerks (and Floating Rapalas) often are seen as



The idea is to catch a fish's attention with the jerks, then get it to eat on the pause. The modestly fast cadence allows for covering lots of water. In spring, for largemouths and smallmouths on flats too shallow for easy fishing with hard jerks, I fish a bit more slowly, something like: jerk-pause, jerk-pause, jerk-pause-pause-pause; then repeat.

Soon enough, Bink's catching an occasional striper, white bass, or walleye, and I'm not. So I start watching. Bink's retrieve is different: bigger-jerk, pause; bigger-jerk, pause; bigger-jerk, pause; with the jerks moving the Shad about 15 inches and the pause lasting a good second or two. The jerks take place with the spinning rod tip down. During the pause he's smoothly reeling up slack line from the big-jerks. We're fishing 14-pound Berkley Fire-Line, with a 4-foot section of 20-pound fluorocarbon leader.

I start experimenting with the Binktrieve and immediately catch a fat 18-inch walleye. "What if I throw a 5-inch Swim Shad instead of the Jerk Shad," I ask. "Will I catch more walleyes, maybe an occasional striper and wiper?"

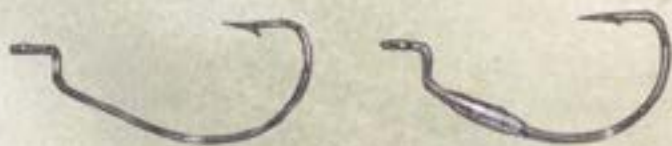
"I know how much you like the Swim Shad," he says. "I know how well they worked for us last time we fished for stripers after dark in fall. You got me fishing them big-time, but they're not working in this situation, certainly not as well as the Jerk Shad, and absolutely not until dead dark. The Swim Shad, like the hard jerks, is just too straight-on-in, wiggle-wiggle, and not erratic enough."



5-inch Berkley PowerBait Swim Shad (Matzuo Flat Jig)



5-inch Berkley PowerBait Swim Shad (Owner Jighead)

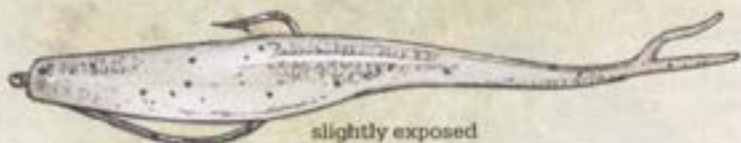


Lazer Sharp L7092 (#4/0) by Eagle Claw

Falcon Bait Jerker (weighted hook #4/0)



Texiposed



slightly exposed



Falcon Texiposed

"Well, what if I go with a smaller plastic shad-style thumper—something about 4 inches?" I ask.

"Tried that, too," he says. "This is what works best before dead dark. It continues to work into dead dark. But the hard jerks work just about as well, then, when the fish can't see quite so well."

"Would it make any difference if I went with a weighted hook, instead of the straight hook?" I ask.

Bink looks at me. "What weighted hook?" he says.

I switch to a Falcon Bait Jerker, a wide-gap hook that has a piece of lead molded onto the shank. I go with a 3/16-ounce hook. "See, I can cast

farther than you," I say as I lob it all the way to the shoreline edge.

"That you can," he says.

Now that I have the Binktrieve down, and using my heavier hook, it becomes apparent that I'm catching better than Bink. We compare the baits at boatside and decide the weighted hook makes the retrieve slightly more erratic because the bait settles faster, but not so erratic that fish miss the bait. Bink switches to the Falcon hook.

The thing about the walleyes eating the soft jerk was that they were just as keyed into the erratic retrieve as other fish were. As walleyes so often do, they were attracted to the bait, followed it for a bit, then swam up from behind to engulf it. I thought it remarkable that we rarely missed fish; but once they were committed, they ate big-time and it wasn't hard to hook them—even with the plastic rigged Texiposed.

Just after dark and into dark dark, as we kept on catching fish, Bink suggests we switch to #14 Husky Jerks. "If the fish were really tentative, one of us might stick with the soft jerk, just to see," he says. "But they're eating pretty good, so the Husky Jerk is just going to fish so much more efficiently. Cast and slow retrieve—let the bait do its thing."

"Yaa, yaa," I say.

Here then was a situation where a lure rarely fished for walleyes, rigged as it usually is for bass, proved, during a portion of the day on an ultra

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Here then was a situation where a lure rarely fished for walleyes, rigged as it usually is for bass, proved, during a portion of the day on an ultra

clear reservoir, to be best thing going, so long as it was worked just so—not too fast and erratic, but just slowly erratic enough for it to be enough of an illusion to keep fish just off balance and guessing so as to get them to make a mistake. This would never have been discovered had the real target not been something other than walleyes.

The point, too, is that even inch-smaller baits were too small to trigger big stripers and wipers. An inch-smaller soft jerk might have triggered walleyes, but apparently didn't trigger more walleyes than the larger lure. Other lures, both hard and soft, weren't quite enough of an illusion—weren't quite tricky enough to get fish to commit. The best individual lure was a 5-inch soft jerkbait in a soft white color, rigged on a wide gap hook with a little weight on the shank, fished with a steady but slightly erratic retrieve. Worked just so, the lure not only triggered bigger stripers and wipers, but worked for white bass to about 2.5 pounds and walleyes up to about 5. This, I offer as an example of fine-tuning a situation. This I offer as an example of what it



often takes to separate anglers from the pack today.

If I had been fishing the reservoir on my own, I would have been fishing something that my quite extensive experience has shown worked in hundreds of other situations—but granted, situations not just like this one. I wouldn't have been catching much and might have concluded the fish weren't there or weren't biting.

But walleyes are always biting. There's never been a walleye tournament I know of in which everyone caught nothing, even in disastrous conditions. Someone always catches something; someone always finds some of the fish biting.

Fine-tuning and then finer-tuning—get it right and it's so much fun.

Sometimes, granted, it's location that makes the difference. Usually, though, it's a presentation factor or factors that in combination separate those who catch walleyes from those who don't—and those who catch bigger walleyes from those who catch smaller fish.

Running spinners or spoons, choosing one softbait over another, working through the puzzle to get just the right color, just the right lure size and profile, just the right vibration pattern, just the right—especially speed and depth control: It goes on and on, until you get it right. That's what makes this so challenging—and, when you get it wrong, so discouraging. And when you get it right, so much fun. I still don't know many folks who like to be out there when they're getting it wrong, so our business is telling you how to get it right.

Next time, among other things, we'll talk about remarkably effective softbaits and the best hardbait I've found for walleyes near weeds. ■



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