

Early Ice Walleye

BY JOHN ANDREW

This time of year reminds me of a weeklong bonanza that we encountered three years ago during early season ice fishing when we couldn't miss catching walleye with shallow water tip-ups. My client wanted to walk out on the ice and fish a deep hump that we were catching several walleye on just two weeks earlier. I just looked at him and he said, well, maybe next week. Thin ice is just that—**thin**. Please, think safety, first.

We were inside a shallow weedy bay that was in the northwest corner of the lake. This bay has a creek channel that runs down the middle of the bay from the shallow cattails from shore. The channel is about two feet deeper than the rest of the bay and the channel is only about 12 feet wide. We set our tip-ups in 2-1/2 feet deep to 5-1/2 feet deep of water. We were located in front of a swampy inlet and we sat on a bucket waiting for the action to start. What happened for the next four hours was untold, until now in this article.

The first flag went up right at sunset and we had our six flags spread about 50 feet apart. As we tiptoed out towards the flag (wearing our ice cleats), a second flag went up and then a third. This was before we even got to the first flag. On our way back to sitting on the bucket, two more lights lit up. When we got to the flags we were amazed to see right through the ice with our bright light and we could see fish moving all around under our footsteps. That night we had 33 flags and iced 24 walleye. When we filleted the four we kept we were amazed to see they all had salamanders in their stomachs and these salamanders were around eight or nine inches long. We were using golden shiners.

This was a soft-bottomed bay and even the old creek channel was lined with a few inches of silt. Walking close to the cattails that were present along the shoreline was a bad idea, as this ice was even thinner and you could put a boot through the soft ice. This area has slush most of the winter and is purposely avoided by everyone, with good reason. What did we learn from this is there is warmer water moving into the lake through the swamp that is connected to the bay. This shallow, soft bottom content also provides insulation, keeping the water slightly warmer and provides a comfort zone for different aquatic species to utilize this area, and the game fish follow in right behind the food. We have caught muskie and pike in the same location in between catching walleye, although the walleye are the most consistent. As the season wares on, this area will not produce as well.

This area was good ice fishing for



The evening started with this average walleye during first ice.



This client enjoyed catching walleye during the early ice bite of December.

about two weeks and has been good for early ice fishing since then. Setting your bait down 12 to 30 inches under the ice takes a little getting used to but the results pay off big time.

Another good area we found at early



These walleye were caught with guide John Andrew during the early December ice fishing bite.



This early season walleye was caught at an early season location.



This lucky client has a replica mounted of this early season giant walleye caught in early December.

ice is on the deep, clear lakes that have cisco and white fish in them. These fish spawn in the late fall, and some shallow walleye are still moving around those spawning locations at early ice and they usually are bigger walleye.

We like the round Frabill tip-ups all year long, although the Beaver Dams are hard to beat. Staying quiet is very important. Running out to the tip up is not recommended when fishing 2-1/2 to 5-1/2 feet deep. We like using colored #6 treble hooks. Other people think a bigger treble hook is better or even a single hook. An old trick I learned 35 years ago still works for us today. Try not to laugh, but we put several small 1/16-ounce split shots about 10 inches above the hook and spray paint them all pink. We feel this attracts the fish right into the bait and the extra weight does not spook the walleye this time of year, as they are already aggressively feeding. Yes, this works for us. This also works for pike fishing later in the season.

We also like to fish the channels between lakes for early ice. This has been a long time hot spot. Staying shallow is very important. Yes, there may be those who catch some 'eyes in the deeper sections of the channel, but traditionally



These early season giant walleye were caught in four feet of water and took two people to bring up onto the ice, guided by John Andrew.

speaking, stay between two and six feet deep and try to be quiet.

Early ice, a fantastic time of the year for several species and above all, be careful! Wear a flotation device and carry ice picks that are not in your pockets. Tape or Velcro them to the outside of your arms for easy access if the ice is thin.

Now let's get 'em. God bless!

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