

Walleye!

How to Target 'em When the Bugs are Hatching...

By Captain Jeff Boutin

For most of us, time on the water fishing for walleyes is limited, so we go fishing whenever we can. If you find yourself on a body of water in late May to mid-June that appears to have simply shut down, the bugs may be ready to hatch. Walleye start feeding on bugs before and during the hatch. The walleyes use their noses to dig into the mud releasing millions of larvae. This is known as “rutting.” As the larvae start to rise in the water, the fish gorge themselves on this very simple meal. A lot of fish we catch this time of year actually have the skin worn right off their upper lips, and you can see the bugs inside of their mouths.

Every year around the same time, bugs hatch in the waters of Wisconsin lakes. Targeting walleye the week or so before one of these bug hatches can be very difficult, to say the least. In the waters of Lake Winnebago and the Bay of Green Bay, the major hatch is the lake fly, also known as the bay fly. During its peak, the lake fly hatch on Lake Winnebago is so large it can be seen by weather satellites. With the rise in water quality on the Bay of Green Bay, the hatches have been increasing every year. These hatches are a big part of the ecosystem in these waters, and have become a prime food source for many types of fish, including walleye. Trying to catch fish during this time of year is like letting a child eat candy while trick or treating and expecting them to eat a large dinner, it is just not realistic. Here are a few techniques I have found over my many years of guiding that can produce walleye during this challenging period.

Before a hatch, most of the walleye will still be out in the mud rutting up the bottom and feeding on bugs. If the hatch is starting and you have any type of wind, you'll want to fish the windblown shallow drop-offs near deep mud basins. As the bugs hatch and rise to the surface, the upper water currents created by the blowing wind and waves push the bugs in toward the shore. This doesn't need to be a big blow, just a constant wind that can create upper water movements for several hours. This is one of the keys behind being successful. The bugs that come to the surface will get blown to a shoreline. I wish it were as easy as “fishing the windblown shoreline” but it isn't. There are several things to keep in mind.

The first aspect to keep in mind is that there has to be a shallow water drop-off, and there needs to be weeds along the edge of the shallow water. The other key part is the water will need to be “dirty.” Dirty water has about 12 to 18 inches of clarity. The weeds in these areas generally hold bait fish, and when the bugs come in, these bait fish start to feed, as do walleye. I usually work my way along the breakline, casting small crankbaits using my Minn Kota Terrova trolling motor to get close enough without spooking the fish. Another great method of finding these fish is trolling. I'll set the

Photo by Eric Engbretson, Engbretson Underwater Photography



The author, Captain Jeff Boutin, catches a Bay of Green Bay walleye during a bug hatch.

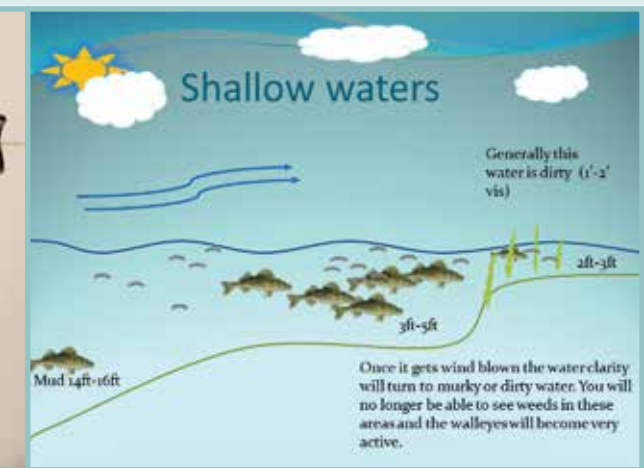
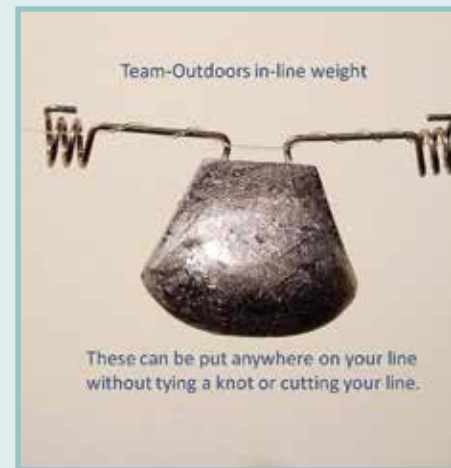
outside board 40 to 50 feet from my boat and only have the other 2 or 3 boards separated from the outside board by 2 feet to 3 feet each. I will use my trolling motor and run crankbaits behind TX-22 Churches Tackle planer boards. I prefer to use the TX-22 in this situation because I can stop my planer board and the TX-22 will not tip over. My two preferred baits are a #4 Flickershadow, or a Salmo Hornet. Trolling these slowly, at 1 mph to 1.4 mph, using a "start stop" method with my baits works best. I like to place the baits right near the edge of the first drop-off or 3 to 4 ft. of water (see diagram at right). When using my trolling motor, I just hit the stop button, and wait for the boards to stop, count to 5 then hit the start button. This "start stop" can get the walleye's attention and force a strike. I prefer to troll these edges only because I can keep my bait in the zone all the time, and this is great for finding fish.

Another type of bait I use during this period is a crawler harness. A typical harness is 2 hooks tied in line with a series of beads and a spinning metal blade of some type such as a Colorado, Willow or Indiana. These blades need to be moving around 1 mph for them to spin. If you slow down, they will stop spinning, and when you stop, they will sink, even with a body float. So I prefer to substitute a Max Smiley blade; they are a plastic type propeller blade. No matter how slow your bait moves in the water, the propeller on a Smiley blade spins. I like to rig these with a body float. That way, when I start and stop these harnesses, they float upward, simulating a bug rising from the floor of the lake. I'll put a 1/8 oz. split shot about 5 feet up the line and let out between 20 to 30 feet of line before hooking up my planer board. This will put my presentation at about 2 to 3 feet down. I prefer this presentation over the

crankbaits only because if these walleye are in an area with a little heavier weed growth, the harnesses go through the weeds a little easier without getting weed build up on the baits.

If you don't have the wind, head out to the mud. When you do, use your locator to mark fish. Look for fish that are on the bottom and suspended a foot or two above it. These are the areas that the walleyes are rutting up the bugs from the bottom. Here's where I use, a Max Smiley Blade with a float and a Team-Outdoors inline weight (above). The advantage to using these inline weights is you can run a 10 foot lead with a 4-foot crawler harness. I setup with a 10-foot lead in front of the Max Smiley blade with a float body (shown at right). I use the same technique in the mud as I do in the shallows. I'll run my baits about 3 feet higher than the bottom. Stop the planer boards by either stopping or turning. When they stop count to 10. The weight will sink to the bottom, but the harness will start floating upward simulating the bugs rising from the bottom of the lake.

The next time you are fishing a body of water this time of the year and you notice bugs floating around on the surface, give this a try. Hopefully you are as successful as I have been.



Captain Jeff Boutin is a member of the National Professional Anglers Association and the Sheboygan Walleye Club. Jeff's Sponsors include Mercury Marine, Starcraft, Humminbird, Minn Kota and Churches Tackle Co. Jeff also owns his own tackle company, Team-Outdoors.com, and is a USCG licensed Charter Captain on the Bay of Green Bay.

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