

## OPEN WATER ANGLING ON ERIE

By Marc Colwell

The first time you put a boat in the water Lake Erie is quite intimidating. Instead of acres you're looking at miles of fish holding water. But with big water you'll find big fish. The same rules apply you just need to think outside of the box. Fish still relate to two things. Structure and baitfish. On Erie structure could be a breakline depth change of one foot, sandbars, sunken boats or both manmade and natural reefs. Baitfish on the other hand can be anywhere. Charter captains and bait shops keep track of these movements and can be of a great help eliminating dead water. Sometimes these schools of bait and walleyes are so big they can be seen from the air.

Tactics can basically be broke down to trolling and vertical jigging/ drifting. For the most part I only stop to vertical jig when a large school is seen dead to the bottom. Often these are sheepshead but walleyes go belly down and this is a productive way to catch them. No need for small baits here, 3/4oz. VIBES, jigging spoons or 1oz. Jigs tipped with the largest emerald shiners you can find. The idea is to keep the bait vertical and making contact with the bottom. You will only do this on fairly calm days. Erie has an undercurrent and it's not normally going the same direction the wind pushes you. Using a trolling motor helps correct this. My best day came in the fall using bladebaits, with my biggest 5 fish weighing over 52 pounds. With one of the new high-powered depth finders on the market you can also catch suspended fish since bladebaits will show up on the screen if you jig them under the transducer just above the fish.

Since the nineties Lake Erie has been know as a trolling lake due to the clearness of the water. We've seen reefs in 15' of water and watched fish scatter as the boat went over. Trolling in these conditions call for planer boards. My preference is Off-Shore boards with tattle flags. I use 9 foot catfish rods by Beaver Rods with light tips and plenty of backbone. On these I have line-counter reels so I can repeat the amount of line out when fish are caught. I put these in the rod holder as vertical as possible so to get my boards as far from the boat as possible. 100' away on the outside board isn't too far. When it's calm on Erie you can make "S" turns slowly making sure you're inside board doesn't lay down. Most of the time though, you'll have waves and you just have to go with them.

When you have a fish hooked on an outside board, have your partner reel in the inside board and lay it in the splashwell on the opposite side of the boat, or freespool it back while reeling in the fish. Then reset the drag and place it as your outside board. Do not be surprised when the flag goes down and the board goes under like a big bobber. This is a big fish. Here's a tip when using boards or just trolling in general. Set your drag light enough so you can pull line from it. If your drag is too tight and you snag, say goodbye to rod, reel and rod holder. I've forgotten a couple of times and paid for it.

When you hook a fish be sure to mark an icon on your GPS every time. This will help you relocate the school. When you're out of the school crank in your gear and head back up going around the school and start again. Once again mark icons on your fish using a different icon. After the second or third time through look at the GPS. Often you can tell what direction the school is moving. While talking GPS make sure you mark an icon or waypoint from where you launch and save yourself time when coming back. Always keep a compass on board as a backup and take readings with it when you leave port.

Now for lures. On Lake Erie Reef Runner is the King of Crankbaits. Reef Runner lures were developed and are produced on the banks of the Western basin. You'll want a selection of Reef Runners, Ripsticks, Little Rippers and Deep Little Rippers in several colors. Gold Banana, Cheap Sunglasses, Dr. Dread, Barbie Doll, Purple Demon, and Emerald Shiner are just a few of my favorites. Here's a tip that occasionally comes in handy. Tip the very bottom hook on the belly treble with an inch or more of live night crawler. When the fish are in a neutral feeding mood this sometimes helps trigger the bite. Start by running one of these lures just under the surface on an outside board. Then run the other outside board with one at 10' one at 15 and one at 20'. Then every 15 minutes or so add or take away a couple of feet or change colors till you see what the eyes want. The Precision Trollers bible by Mark Romanack is a big help of getting an exact line out for depth on crankbaits and spinners.

The unique wobble of Reef Runner lures come from the shape and Lake Erie walleyes can't resist them. Scott Stetcher of Marblehead developed them for Lake Erie and to my knowledge is the only crankbait developed and produced completely in the U.S. of A. These fish are very color oriented and you'll want to switch your colors of Reef Runners often until one starts producing. When it quits producing switch colors until another one is found. You'll be surprised when a two boards go back, one with a Reef Runner running 25' down and the other with a Little Ripper only 3 feet under the surface. These fish will come a long way up to feed.

Trolling Spinner Rigs or spoons is another option you may want to explore, especially early in the year. On Erie use big blades and big beads. Since your trolling open water you can use treble hooks since snags aren't a problem. Berkley Gulp worms work as well as live night crawlers and run straight eliminating any twist and you don't have to rebait every time a sheephead takes your lure. Snap weights can be put 50' ahead of the lure then let out 10-50' hook to the planer board and let it go. Mack Lures has a product called Hot Wings, which consists of two blades that counter rotate against each other creating plenty of flash. This is an excellent product to run 3-10 feet in front of your spinners or crankbaits as a lightweight attractor much like the flashers that salmon anglers use. Being lightweight it doesn't alter the depth or running capabilities of your lures.

You can also combine running cranks along with a spoon, spinner or a second crank. Connect a three way swivel directly to your line. Run a five to six foot leader. To this tie a snap and a deep running Reef Runner. Tie a 3 foot leader and hook your spoon, spinner or a shallow running crankbait. This is great search bait. Just remember that only three hooks per line are allowed so if you run two cranks with two hooks you must remove one treble from one of the baits.

One Erie as with any other lake speed can be critical. Early in the year ½ mph isn't too slow. During the summer fish can be caught going up to 5mph. Always run your lure next to the boat making sure it is running straight and doesn't need tuned before setting it loose. Occasionally toss the motor into neutral and drift a few seconds when you're going through fish. This will often trigger a bite. Something I would like to see added to the Precision Trolling bible in the future is how many feet you move every second at different trolling speeds. If you go over fish and your lure is 100' back and you want to go into neutral when the lure is over the school, just how many seconds should

you wait after seeing them on your depth finder before you do this. I'm not a mathematician so maybe someone can figure that out and have Mark add this to his book.

A couple of last things I'd like to bring up. Listen often to the weather channel on your marine radio and watch the sky for any changes. Storms can come quickly but you can see them for a long distance. You don't want to be caught out here in a storm, so don't take chances. The other is carry flares with you. Either hand held or the gun type are fine but they are required by law. If you've never fished Lake Erie before you're in for one of the best treats fishing has to offer. Ten pounders are common and a shot at a 13-15lb. Eye is highly possible. The biggest problem to fishing Lake Erie is going home. After a few days here you'll be spoiled for life and it may be hard to go back to catching those smaller fish on your home lake.