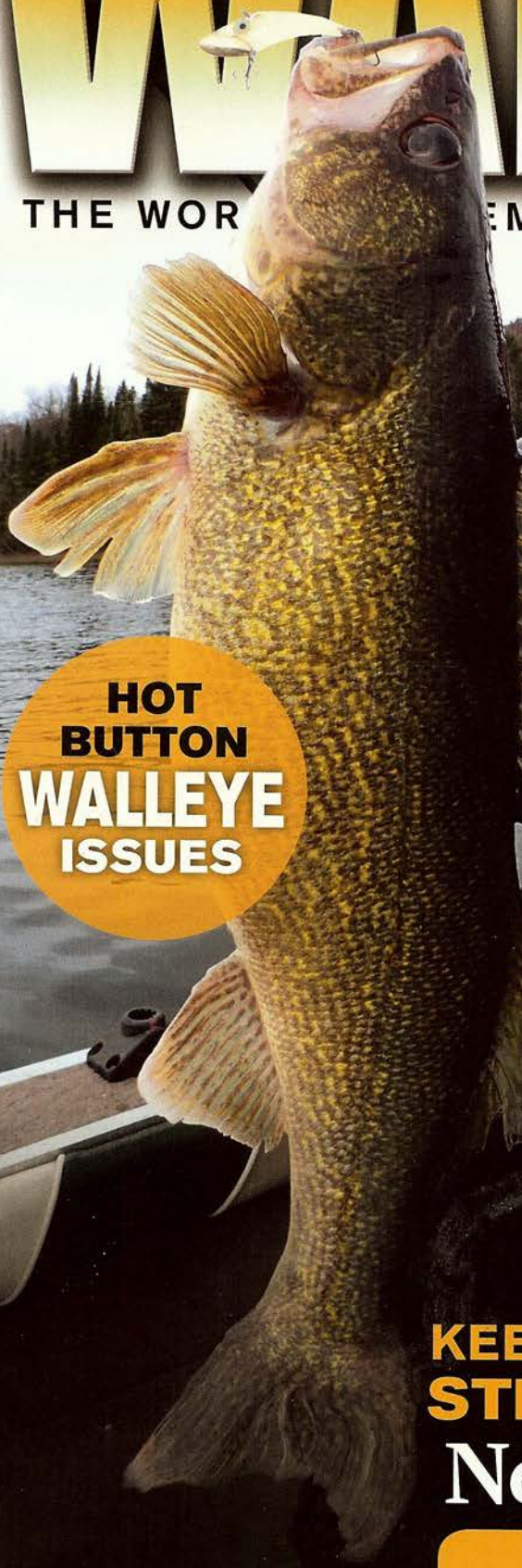


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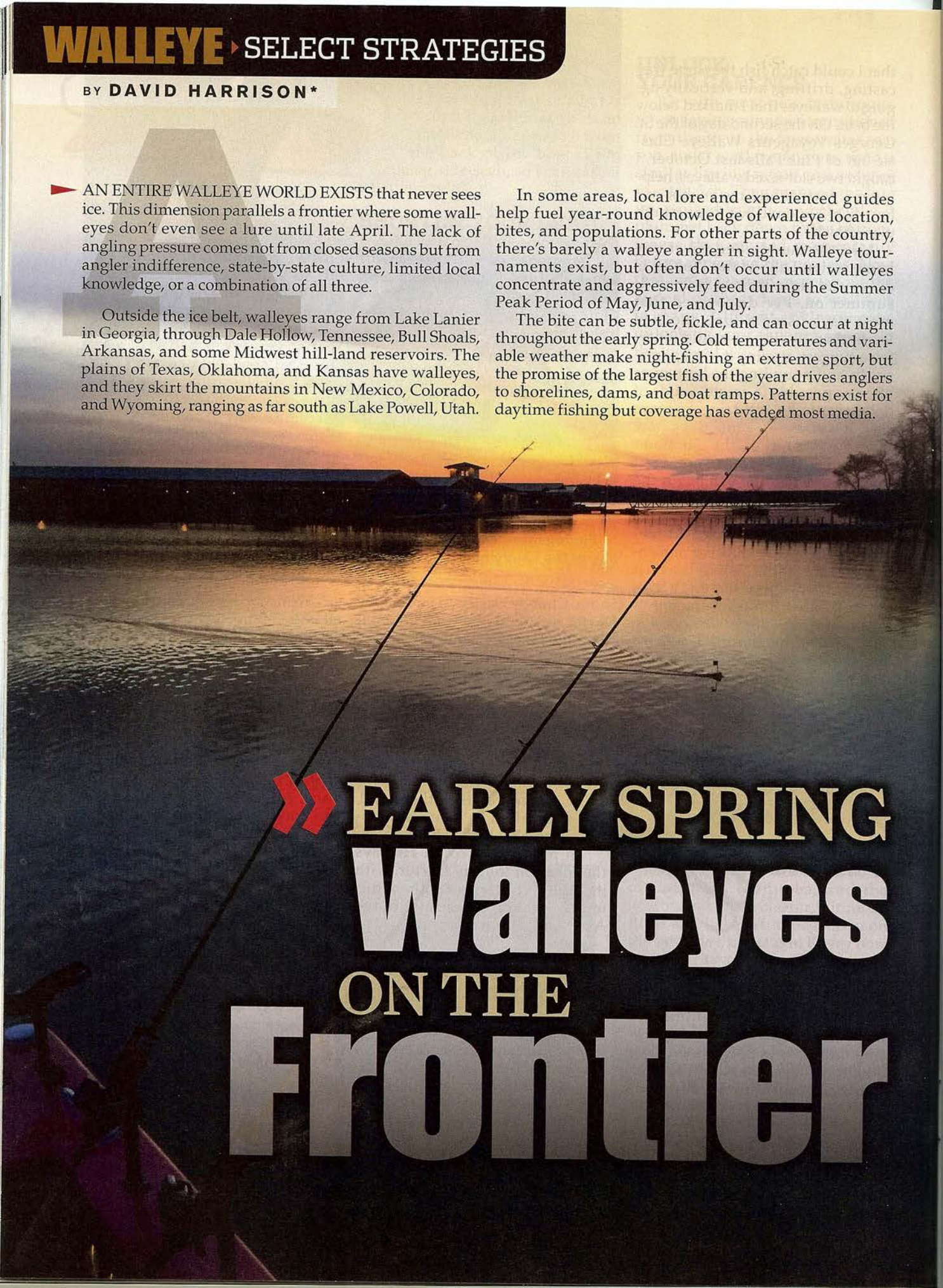
BY DAVID HARRISON*

▶ AN ENTIRE WALLEYE WORLD EXISTS that never sees ice. This dimension parallels a frontier where some walleyes don't even see a lure until late April. The lack of angling pressure comes not from closed seasons but from angler indifference, state-by-state culture, limited local knowledge, or a combination of all three.

Outside the ice belt, walleyes range from Lake Lanier in Georgia, through Dale Hollow, Tennessee, Bull Shoals, Arkansas, and some Midwest hill-land reservoirs. The plains of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas have walleyes, and they skirt the mountains in New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming, ranging as far south as Lake Powell, Utah.

In some areas, local lore and experienced guides help fuel year-round knowledge of walleye location, bites, and populations. For other parts of the country, there's barely a walleye angler in sight. Walleye tournaments exist, but often don't occur until walleyes concentrate and aggressively feed during the Summer Peak Period of May, June, and July.

The bite can be subtle, fickle, and can occur at night throughout the early spring. Cold temperatures and variable weather make night-fishing an extreme sport, but the promise of the largest fish of the year drives anglers to shorelines, dams, and boat ramps. Patterns exist for daytime fishing but coverage has evaded most media.

A photograph of a lake at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. In the foreground, several fishing rods are visible, extending from the bottom left towards the center of the frame. The water is calm, reflecting the colors of the sky. In the background, there are some structures and a bridge or pier.

» EARLY SPRING Walleyes ON THE Frontier

STOCKTON MWC

The progressive Masters Walleye Circuit works to promote the sport. Its lengthy nine-stop season allows for new and challenging locations that push the limits of walleye tradition. In 2015, the tour eschewed its normal opener on the Illinois River at Spring Valley to run an even earlier tournament during the first week of March at Stockton Lake in Missouri. A snowstorm delayed some anglers' prefishing efforts and a brisk wind affected first-day weights, but this event demonstrated that pre-spawn walleyes bite during the day.

The event was won by former In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail West Division co-angler-of-the-year (and Stockton guide) Gary Stanton with his partner Lee Brown. They say conditions limited their success but they were impressed that the standard patterns for early season walleyes held true.

Daytime walleyes in lower Midwest states generally hold between 23 and 35 feet most of the winter to avoid temperature swings and feed on gizzard shad, but they also follow bait as deep as 50 to 80 feet during winter. Many feed at night, limiting their aggressiveness during the day, but persistent anglers generate their own success. The team relied on Lowrance electronics to mark shad and walleyes at these depths and eliminate other parts of the 24,900-acre reservoir.

Two presentation systems that cover water and generate bites for early season walleyes include spinners with livebait and crankbaits on leadcore. During prefishing, the team relied on a gold-colored #4 Colorado blade spinner rig to hone in on fish location in a cove close to the dam. By noon on the first competition day, they hadn't landed a fish. "We launched in 17°F air temperatures and then a 25-mph wind picked up, further limiting the bite," Stanton says. "We had a tough time controlling boat speed and we figured our spinner rigs weren't staying in the strike zone." A quick change to leadcore-trolling with crankbaits worked wonders and the



team weighed three fish on day one for fourth place.

"The second day we had five fish by noon, all on leadcore," Stanton says. "The #5 Berkley Flicker Shad has a classic action and similar-sized Salmo Hornets have a subtle yet erratic kick. We started with firetiger and purple-themed colors. With such a tough tournament, there was no assurance we had won."

Second place was the veteran MWC team and 2016 World Walleye Champions Randall Gaines and Mike Rhodes. As the pair drove down from Ohio, they developed a plan. "Our first goal was to find the deepest water near the dam (spawning site) that had bait," Gaines says. "This area was near the mouth of a cove in 60 feet of water." To fish those depths, they used W5 Jigging Rapalas and 1/8-ounce jigs tipped with a bulked-up combination of 3-inch Berkley Gulp! Minnows topped with live shiners. Jigs with only Gulp! or minnows didn't produce. The other part of the lake the team checked included slowly warming inlet areas. "These areas showed lots of fish on the graph but we only caught warm-water species like white bass and crappies," he says.

> On misty, dark days at Stockton Lake, Pete Fisher heads to rocky points armed with shallow jerkbaits.

"We followed the bait as shallow as 23 feet throughout the day, but our only bites came when the fish were in the deepest areas," Rhodes says. "By watching our electronics, we were able to view sluggish walleyes come up from the bottom only far enough to 'herd' the bait. If another boat came off plane in the area, the bite died. The experience was fascinating as we had never seen that type of activity." All of the first-day leaders were in the same area of the lake. By the second day, most of the field followed.

Another experienced tournament angler, Jaran Cox from Manhattan, Kansas, says, "We hit a feeding window earlier in the week where

we caught multiple fish casting soft plastic lures in 6 to 12 feet of water on a rocky point. The wind was blowing and the fish moved up during the afternoon. This area was a significant distance from the dam and the rest of the time we caught fish on stair-stepped structure that extended from this shallow point. The large shelves at 20 and 40 feet each marked and produced fish throughout the week aligning with weather stability and wind conditions." Cox and his partner Shane McReynolds used curly-tailed softbaits shallow but turned to black bucktail jigs for deeper fish.

STOCKTON NIGHT-FISHING

Stockton Reservoir also hosts a lot of early-season night fishermen. While the well-known "march madness" spawn bite in late March sees the most activity, lakeside resident Pete Fisher enjoys a full winter of walleyes. "Winter walleye activity revolves around weather," he says. "If a hazy day turns misty and dark it's time to throw jerkbaits to rocky points. Launch your boat a few hours before dark and work a run of spots. Another wave of anglers fishes a second bite window around midnight on

some evenings." A good night sees up to 50 boats working the hot spots.

Fisher owns over 70 jerkbait styles and colors but generally sticks with two versions. "I like the traditional Smithwick Suspending Rattlin' Rogues when the wind is calm," he says. "To cast farther in rougher weather, I switch to the Megabass Vision OneTen, which has a superior weight-transfer system." If the point has a deeper drop, he picks up a second rod rigged with a Smithwick Perfect 10 or the Megabass Vision OneTen+1. All of these lures suspend.

Other considerations with jerkbaits are vibration and action. Rapala has a progressive-action line of lures starting with the Husky Jerk,

moving toward the higher-action Shadow Rap, and the extreme-action X-Rap. Similarly, the Megabass ITO shiner darts up to 30 percent farther than the less-aggressive Vision 110.

To dial in action and depth, he rigs up 10 or so rods a night. "Line choice can affect success," he says. "Half of my rods are rigged with 10-pound mono and the other half with 10-pound fluorocarbon." Mono keeps lures at a consistent depth while the sinking fluorocarbon line can slowly pull a lure downward during pauses. Other anglers use 6-pound line to adjust lure sink rates.

He uses 6½-foot or shorter fast-action rods like Berkley Amp or Bass Pro Shops Walleye Angler series.

Larger-sized Pflueger Supreme spinning reels reduce casting loops for mono and he switches to bait-casting reels to manage fluorocarbon line. The shorter rods allow more control over jerkbait action.

GEORGIA RECORD

The 14-pound 2-ounce pre-spawn walleye caught at Georgia's Lake Rabun in February of 2016, was almost 3 pounds heavier than the previous state record. Heavy stocking in multiple reservoirs helps control blueback herring and has revived populations. The protein-rich herring helped fatten walleyes while key guides work to develop angling skills and knowledge throughout the area.

▷ STAPLES for Winter Walleye

Smithwick Suspending Rattlin' Rogue



Rapala Shadow Rap (SDR-11)



Smithwick Perfect 10 Rogue



Rapala X-Rap (XR-10)

Megabass Vision OneTen



Rapala Husky Jerk (HJ-10)

Megabass Vision OneTen+1



Bagley Rumble B



#5 Berkley Flicker Shad



Rapala Jigging Rap (W5)



VMC Bucktail Jig



VMC Hot Skirt Jig



Gulp! Minnow (3-inch)



Hildebrandt Hammer Time #4 Walleye Spinner

Wes Carlton runs Georgia Lake Fishing guide service out of Lake Lanier and the surrounding mountain reservoirs. "Submerged mountain and abundant brushpiles make wall-eye fishing tough," he says. "Trolling isn't an option. We drop jigs right on top of marked fish or use live blueback herring on Carolina rigs to pull the fish out of cover." He spends a few weeks each year in Minnesota chasing walleyes and then adapts classic techniques to southern waters.

All of the work is paying off as many of his clients book trips to learn walleye tactics. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources also published a guide to walleye fishing to help anglers understand yearly patterns and learn about the species.

Carlton caught the state record after a slow morning of bass fishing. Rigging blueback herring over a deep point was the ticket. "It bit the rig four times before we had a solid hook-set," he says. "I fed line and let the fish take the bait." The spawn comes at the end of February, a month earlier than in Missouri and Kansas, and well before ice-out in northern states.

COLORADO NIGHTS

Promoted by fishing guides and early season tournaments, spring patterns along the Front Range bring even the average angler out for a shot at big fish. With an early ice-out (typically in the first week in March) and generally hospitable weather, the small, 800- to 1,800-acre reservoirs fill up with boats most spring evenings.

Tightline Outdoors owner Nathan Zelinsky brought classic early season trolling patterns from his years in Minnesota and applied them to Colorado waters almost two decades ago. He pioneered the use of red-colored LED spotlights to track planer boards at night, pulling stickbaits like the Rapala Husky Jerk and Smithwick Suspending Rattlin' Rogue.

"Most Colorado dams are closed to fishing during the spawn so we focus on prespawn and postspawn fish," he says. "These fish move to the warmest water food source nearby then feed at night, gaining an advantage over night-blind shad. In some reservoirs it's a cove, but sometimes, open-water structure like a roadbed or shoreline might hold enough bait for big fish to feed." The rivers coming out of the Rockies provide enough streamflow for a portion of



> Night trolling with planer boards regularly produces the largest fish of the year in Colorado.

the population to spawn, so Zelinsky also tracks those areas by running his boat up to the first pool and looking for fish with spotlights.

The coves fill up fast with anglers, especially on weekend nights with decent weather. At times, Zelinsky has to stay ahead of the crowd. "One night I saw a boat out in the middle of the lake," he says. "Turns out a friend had loaned his rig out and the angler thought the roadbed waypoints must be a good place to troll. He lucked into multiple shad schools in the area due to a south wind that brought in big fish. We nicknamed the area after the angler, and I had a week or so alone there before other boats followed."

Emerging weedbeds take patience to mark with waypoints and to visualize, while complicated structure in shallow-water can also work well for the imaginative angler. "Putting out a bunch of lures doesn't lead to fishing success," Zelinsky says. "The anglers that dial in their gear, know their depths, and can work to put lures horizontally through specific spots, flats, and points make the most of each trolling pass. It takes imagination and experience to consistently produce bites."

That imagination is on display during the Walleye Insanity night tournament held at Chatfield

Reservoir each spring. This early-April event occurs when each angler has been out a few times and thinks they know where the fish are headed. It also coincides with warmer water, allowing the fish to feed throughout more of the lake. Zelinsky says, "At the beginning of the season, only the inlets and the backs of the bays hold water warm enough for big walleyes to feed efficiently. Every week expands the areas where walleyes feed until pure summer patterns emerge."

Similar to the Colorado Walleye Association Cherry Creek daytime tournament where the entire field pulls crankbaits on leadcore through the basin, the Walleye Insanity event has almost every boat towing four planer boards across the shallows all night.

KANSAS FRONTIER

Having spent most of my fishing life in Colorado, I expected Kansas to have a similar culture of tournaments, anglers, and traditions for spring walleyes. One difference is that the guides focus on abundant crappies during the spring, white bass in the fall, and the April walleye tournaments see 60°F water temps driving summer-like patterns. Without an active off-season community, most lakes see very little year-around pressure on walleyes.

Salina-area guide and tournament angler Todd Kaniper runs a few early-season trips to Kanopolis Reservoir. A devoted walleye angler, he's one of the few that focuses on them even when catch rates slow. "Although an hour drive from Salina, the points at Kanopolis Reservoir are easy to access by foot, so we get a mix of shore fishermen and boat fishermen throughout the winter and early spring evenings," he says. "Walleyes move up in the evening. You see shore anglers catching fish closer and closer to their waders as the sun goes down. For guided trips, I pull crankbaits on leadcore for a couple of hours mid-afternoon and then jig the points from 3 to 6 p.m."

Videographer Craig Barulich has put in enough time on the water to solve a few spring bites. His videos of a walleye feeding spree during a dark rain shower and saugers responding to trolled Dubuque rigs are proof that classic patterns exist in the heartland. But there are few anglers willing to develop them.

"...A NEW FRONTIER OF ADVENTURE AWAITS"

On my night-trolling trips, I've found concentrations of shad and walleyes pushing up to the 20-foot depth contour in coves. Hillsdale Reservoir has a marina that concentrates walleyes and bait. Trolling and casting through submerged trees at night takes confidence but produces fish. Smaller reservoirs show a similar pattern. The 20-foot depth at the mouths of coves seems to give walleyes room to feed without pushing bait farther back into shallow areas.

Another frontier is Utah. Strawberry Reservoir has a long history of a strong walleye population but it doesn't see enough anglers to nail down the winter and prespawn bites. Zelinsky drives over from Colorado to lead seminars that attract over 200 people starving for information. While talking with television personality Jarret Edwards about Lake Powell walleyes, he

said, "Yes we have walleyes. They run to the same area every spring. We rarely see them the rest of the year." He says

that there are some walleye experts there but not many.

Except during the Summer Peak Period, when walleyes feed all day on shallow flats and structure, states with limited populations of fish (and anglers) can lose track of these highly mobile predators the rest of the year. Anglers need to spend time on the water if they want year-around success with walleyes. As the popularity of the species grows, a new frontier of adventure awaits. ■

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