

RESERVOIR Walleye

by T.J. Schwanky



Fred Plummer Photo

Reservoirs are a mystery to many anglers. For those of us

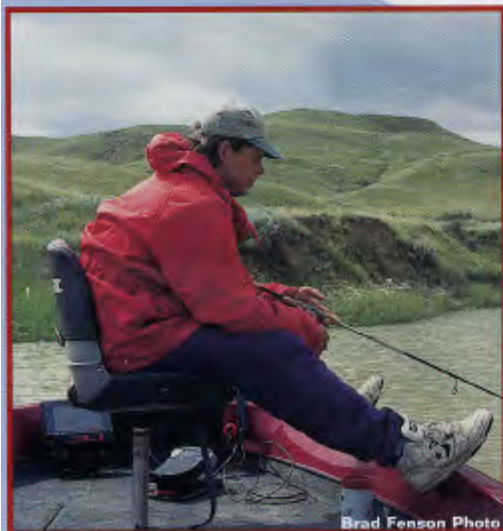
“It amazes me how much trouble people have catching walleye in Alberta’s southern reservoirs. Most of these problems can be attributed to fishing unproductive waters. If I don’t catch fish on a reservoir in the

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who grew up fishing the natural lakes of central and northern Alberta, they can be a real challenge, especially their walleye. For the most part, walleye are fairly predictable in natural lakes. There are places where you know they’ll always be. Large slow-tapering points, sharp drop-offs and mid-lake humps usually give up enough for dinner. And on reservoirs these areas can be productive too. But reservoir ‘eyes are often here today and gone tomorrow. Just because a location produces one day, don’t be fooled into thinking you can consistently catch walleye there. Fishing your memories is a sure way to come home empty-handed.

Not that southern Alberta walleye are impossible to catch; quite the opposite—you just need to adopt some new tactics. Once you figure out these nomadic beauties, you’re in for some of the best fishing of your life. Reservoirs such as Newell, Crawling Valley, Chin, Forty Mile and Ridge are some of Canada’s hottest walleye waters.

Reservoirs are usually formed by the damming of rivers and creeks. The old river channel, however, remains intact, albeit usually covered by many feet of water. Walleye use this channel as if it were still flowing water. If the river had walleye in it before being flooded, they’ll be even more in tune with this undulating channel. For my money, this old river channel is the most consistent spot on a reservoir to catch



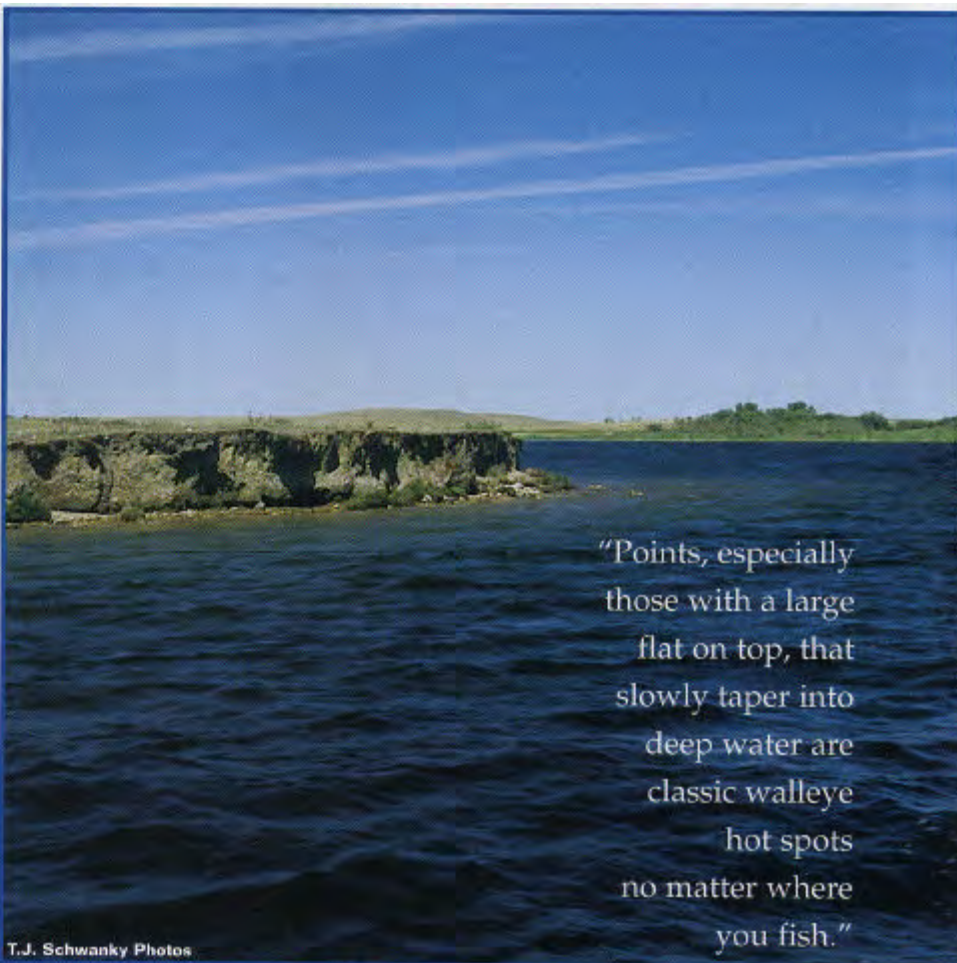
Brad Fenson Photo

walleye. Not all of it will hold 'eyes, but if you have a basic understanding of productive locations in rivers, these flooded river channels are very similar.

One of the very first places to begin your search is on a bend in the old river channel. Baitfish use these channels like highways and walleye wait in ambush on the bends. The sharper the turn, the more productive the location. Obviously, you need a good sonar unit to find these hot spots, and I usually carry a few marker buoys to keep track of this structure. Often it can be found right in the middle of the reservoir, so a GPS is also handy if you want to return to the spot another day.

Last summer, Richard Mellon and I had a day to kill after a couple of productive days on Crawling Valley, and we decided to give Newell a try. It was one of those days walleye anglers dread: no wind, 30 degrees and not a cloud in the sky. But by quickly finding an old river channel, we were into fish in less than 30 minutes. Most of that time was spent cruising the channel and watching our sonar. I hadn't had my Walleye Flasher in the water five minutes when I hooked the first walleye of the day, a fat seven-pounder.

It amazes me how much trouble people have catching walleye in Alberta's southern reservoirs. Most of these problems can be attributed to fishing unproductive waters. If I don't catch fish on a reservoir in the first 10 or 15 minutes, I'm off to a new location. Unlike Alberta's natural lakes, which are often little more than sand shorelines slowly tapering



T.J. Schwanky Photos

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into a basin, reservoirs are loaded with structure. Walleye in natural lakes are forced to use the few bits of structure available there, but reservoir walleye just cruise from place to place as they please, often only pausing briefly to feed.

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My next-favorite location is a classic example of this. Points, especially those with a large flat on top, that slowly taper into deep water are classic walleye hot spots no matter where you fish. The problem with reservoirs is that there are so darned many points that walleye just keep cruising between them. By all means

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fish points, but if you don't catch fish right away, move on to the next one.

The same can be said for mid-lake humps. Many reservoirs are loaded with them and while they're like magnets to summertime walleye, they can be too much of a good thing. Fish them, but don't waste a lot of time on each one. Classic humps are those located off the end of a point. When reservoirs were originally flooded, the sandy soil surrounding the river was subject to rapid erosion. Often, portions of long fingers extending down to the river were washed out, leaving what was once part of the finger detached, and creating a hump.

For a short time in spring, walleye behave more like their natural-lake-dwelling cousins and abandon structure for the rapidly warming water of the shallows. Long flat bays and flooded coulees produce as consistently as anywhere on a reservoir. Often, the water may be four or five degrees warmer in these backwaters, attracting creatures all the way up the food chain. I've enjoyed some of my best days on reservoirs in May and early June in water less than three feet deep.

While where walleye live and how they relate to structure differs from natural lakes, the greatest difference lies in how you fish them. For most of

the year you need to be aggressive in reservoirs. Other than in very early spring, I'd rate the bottom bouncer and spinner rig the number one presentation for reservoir walleye. Just think about it, these fish are highly nomadic and since there's more structure than fish, you must cover water fast, targeting aggressive fish only. There's no better way to do this than with a spinner rig.

I won't go into detail about this presentation, since most walleye anglers are familiar with it. I will encourage you to fish it from June until freeze-up. Certainly, there may be better presentations on certain days or particular pieces of structure, but to find walleye quickly and catch fish that are spread out, bottom bouncers and spinners are perfect. Most anglers spend way too much time worrying about whether they have the right bead and blade colors, when all they really need to worry about is getting their presentation in front of the fish. By all means experiment with these variables, but first get the darned thing in the water.

If you do happen to find a concentration of walleye on a point or hump, it may be worth your while to try vertical fishing. My advice is to locate fish with the bottom bouncer and spinner rig, fish the structure vertically until the fish quit biting, then move on and locate other active fish. Also, if you go more than 30 minutes without a bite, it's definitely time to move along.

Many reservoir walleye can trace their roots back to river-dwelling 'eyes. For the most part, they're more aggressive than those from natural lakes, so even when fishing vertically I like to add a little flash and vibration. The biggest boon to reservoir walleye fishing has been jigs that have a spinner blade attached to them. Jigs like the Reel Bait Walleye Flasher have become a staple on reservoirs. The added flash and thumping of the blade as the jig falls really triggers these naturally more aggressive fish.

Two other vertical lures I fish often on reservoirs are jiggging spoons and blade baits. Again, these baits have some extra action that drives walleye wild. Heavy jiggging spoons in the one-ounce range are ideal when walleye get in deep water. Anglers who think walleye only eat tiny meals or take delicate presentations haven't spent much time on reservoirs.

The exception to this occurs first thing in spring, when water temperatures are just above freezing and the cold-blooded walleye are lethargic. This doesn't mean you can't catch them, just slow down. My favorite way to catch walleye in the warming back bays is with a very light jig and a leech. Cast this tiny offering out and allow it to sink to the bottom. If nothing picks it up, begin slowly dragging it back toward you. If you feel the slightest resistance, set the hook. This may not sound very exciting, but when

the walleye move into these backwaters, they provide some of the best action of the year. It's not often you'll find walleye this concentrated in a reservoir and it's not often you'll find this many big fish together.

If your idea of fun fishing is anchoring your boat and spending the day in the same spot, forget about southern Alberta reservoirs. But if you like covering lots of

water and are willing to forget everything you learned fishing natural lakes, then you could be in for one of the greatest experiences of your life. Alberta's reservoirs are just starting to come into their own and each year reports of 10-, 11- and even 12-pound fish become more numerous. I see nothing but good ahead for these waters and for those who get out and enjoy them. ■



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The advertisement features a map of lakes in the background. In the foreground, a black pickup truck is shown with a boat mounted on its roof rack. The boat is held in place by several white, fan-like automatic loaders. The text is overlaid on the image in various colors and sizes.