

# Large Baits and Late Ice

In my neck of the woods (Northeastern South Dakota) I consider late ice, to be the period from mid February until you can no longer safely venture out. By this stage in the game most of the enthusiasm for drilling holes has greatly diminished. This is due to the fact that the bite has probably been tough for sometime and most folks are getting a little burned out. As the days get longer, thoughts start turning to open water, reorganizing tackle and attending Sport Shows.

Resist the urge to put the auger away and dream of warmer days. If you are interested in icing some big Walleye's, now is the time to get after it. Your odds for catching heavy egg laden females, is better now, than at any other time of the year. Their location is highly predicable and they can prove to be relatively easy to catch, if you use the right methods. Specifically, large livebait suspended below a tip up.

Location of these prespawn fish will be consistent from year to year. They are genetically programmed to begin moving in the general area of their spawning grounds. The only variable is when they begin to arrive. What I have found is that they will move into the nearby basin areas a lot earlier than most anglers think. I believe this is the reason angling becomes so inconsistent at late ice in the more traditional classic structure type spots. Mother Nature has tripped the biological triggers and the fish leave these areas and are basically lounging out in the basin, near spawning sites, awaiting ice out. This explains why you can make decent catches, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, during the day.

For the most part, these fish are at best in a neutral state as far as eating goes. We must understand the highly efficient nature of mature female Walleye's. They have spent their entire lives becoming masters at expending the least amount of energy for the highest return in protein. These fish will prefer to slurp down one large meal as opposed to chasing numerous small ones. That's why it is uncommon to find them amongst a group of smaller males that are slashing at almost anything that moves. They simply avoid the competition and feed only when conditions are optimal for success.

Large baits are the key to enticing these fish. In particular, chubs. If you can find them, a six to eight inch creek or redbtail is best, and even up to ten inches isn't too big. Sucker chubs are most readily available and will work just fine. *I've also had good results using big shiners in areas with decaying weeds that hold juvenile sunfish, crappies and bluegills. The fish have a virtual buffet line set up on the weed edge and you can nearly set your watch by their nightly arrival.*

A typical scenario involves first finding an area that the fish traditionally spawn. Best are south facing gravel or sand shorelines with a feeder creek. These areas warm the quickest and any influx of fresh water from the feeder will serve to stir the pot. You will want all of your holes predrilled long before either dawn or dusk. I concentrate my efforts on the sunset bite as the movement is more pronounced and seems to last longer than at sunrise. Start drilling in the nearest deep water and work your way in to the shallowest break or weedline. This is where you will want the major concentration of holes. Have open holes at each of the various depths that you run your tip ups. This allows you to progressively jig shallower as the evening wears on and the fish move in.

Now that the holes are cut, we will need to focus on presentation. This is where large baits and tip ups come into play. Fish with a couple of buddies, or even better, bring some kids along, so as to place as many lines as possible. Simply run the tip ups from deep to shallow, with the highest number on the shallow end and wait for the inevitable bites. *I like HT's Pop Up style* and rig them with 50lb Gorilla braid for main line and tie to a small snap swivel. To this I attach a four to six foot leader of 10lb mono, or fluorocarbon if the water is gin clear. Reverse hook along the dorsal fin with Gamakatsu's Walleye Wide Gap in #2 to 1/0 depending on chub size. This allows for enough gap while using large baits to ensure positive hookups and I rarely ever loose a fish. Attach sufficient weight 12 to 18 inches above the hook to permit good movement with out letting the bait to become overly active. Run them 6 inches to 3 foot off bottom and let the fish tell you what they prefer.

Please, when a flag goes up, do not immediately run to it and start pulling. I can guarantee you that you will nearly never get your fish. Keep in mind, we are using sizeable offerings and the Walleye will need some time to get it down. I feel that most of the time the fish grabs the chub from the side, kills it, and runs a short distance. It will then reposition it so as to take it in head first. The whole process can take several minutes. If you can't stand it and must go to the flag right away, just watch and learn. What you will witness is that perhaps the bait has only been taken a few inches to a foot. Subsequently, the fish will slowly move off with the bait and then stop. Easy now; what the fish is doing is turning the chub so as to inhale it. After a short time, the line will begin moving again, probably at a quicker pace. She now has it all of the way in and it's time to set the hook. This is best accomplished by simply grabbing the line and stopping the fish's progress. Hold firm and you'll feel the headshake and you know you've got her. If she wants to run, let her go under constant tension and begin picking up line with a give and take until she tires. Once you get to your leader you'll know that she is directly under you. Line her up and pull until you can either get a gill or grab her head and slide her on the ice. No gaff is ever needed by doing this, and these big females can be confidently released, as they should.

Now that we've covered the tip ups, it's time to start jigging. I start deep before sundown and by pitch black will end up in the shallowest holes. I rely on my Fish Trap to shift quickly from hole to hole as needed. You let the bites on your tip ups serve as an indicator of the fish's progression to the shallows and move accordingly. As these are typically neutral to negative fish you will need to adjust your jigging technique and lures accordingly. I have found large profile swimming lures such as a Salmo Chubby Darter, Nils Master Jigging Minnow *and my personal favorite, JB Lures Spanker* to be highly effective. I tip the belly hook with a minnow head for confidence, but it is often not necessary. Another tip is to remove the belly hook and replace with a 4 inch dropper attached to a large gap 1/16 or 1/32 oz. jig with a big fathead. Occasionally perform a lift drop routine for attraction and leave it rest for long periods. This setup will perform equally well below a slip bobber and used as you would a dead rod. The profile of the swimming jig brings em in and the struggling livebait seals the deal. Bait Rigs Oddball jig with a chub or Power Minnow is also effective. Employ a subtle lift drop hold motion and concentrate on feel and the merging of the lines on your Vexilar, as the fish will lightly suck in this package.

Don't be surprised *or concerned* if you get very little to no action on your jigging presentations. It is not uncommon to take several nice fish in an evening, with the tip ups accounting for all of them. As discussed, these fish are not overly aggressive and generally will not expend a lot of effort to take a lure. I firmly believe that aggressive lures and techniques, will at times turn them off. This is where your properly rigged and set tip ups really shine.

Use common sense, be safe and put this system to use. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. Besides, it will save you some money by not going to the Sport Show.

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