

# ***The Resiliency of Lake Erie & Lifelong Friendship***

## **Lake Erie - June 2006**

By Jim Zegar

Electric fillet knives buzzed like chain saws as fish heads and carcasses were tossed into a garbage can while a large pile of succulent fillets grew even larger. A days' catch for the seven of us was 42, a limit of six each, a bountiful harvest by any measure. What was the harvest? Catfish, Bass, Crappies?

No. Walleyed pike, commonly referred to as walleyes, one of the tastiest freshwater fish there is. Not a pike at all, but rather a member of the perch family, the fish ranged from one to four pounds with the average fish about 2 ½ pounds, the perfect size for eating.

This was Sunday, June 11, and we had fished the Western Basin of Lake Erie. The day before had yielded similar results, so as we filleted the last of the 'eyes at the fishing cleaning station, the cooler was packed with fish. Lots of fish. We took home a huge cooler full of fillets. In case you're concerned about catch and release, a practice which I espouse for most waters, it's not necessary on Lake Erie. The walleye population is that good.



Capt. Dave Gwin

We fished with Capt. Dave Gwin of Hawg'n Charters out of Port Clinton, Ohio. Each year at this time, five other guys and I make this trip: Brother John Zegar of Waukegan; Bob Teser of Gurnee, Mike Toto of Northbrook, Lee McCollum of St. Cloud, Wisconsin and Chuck Barstow Algonquin.

John, Bob, Mike and Lee all went to high school together and have been friends for almost forty years, so this annual trip is a reunion of sorts for them. Chuck and I go because the charter boat holds six guys, and we like to catch fish, too.

"I've been a charter captain for 18 years and this is the best fishing I can remember seeing," said Gwin. "Two and three years ago we had terrific spawning and survival rates, and this past spring looks like it might be every bit as good."

Our weekend catch would confirm that because we had fish of all different sizes, including some too small to keep. Four different year classes were caught, a good sign of a healthy fishery.

The most effective ways to catch walleyes right now are trolling nightcrawler harnesses or casting either weapon rigs or weightforward spinners. A boat is a must, and generally speaking the boat needs to be of a size capable of handling the waters of Lake Erie.

Watch your electronics for open-basin fish. These walleyes do not relate to bottom structure; rather, they roam the open waters looking for baitfish. If your depthfinder shows them at 15 feet down, keep your bait slightly above that. These fish are suspended, and at times the active fish will be higher up, and sometimes down deeper. Trust your electronics. Discard your old rule about fishing off the bottom.



John Zegar preparing another rig

When rigging 'crawler harnesses', make sure the worm hangs straight after you've inserted the two hooks of the harness so it runs true as you troll. To get to the desired depths, use leadcore line or snap weights, and spread your lines apart with planer boards. If you are getting lots of irritating bites from little fish or from Sheepshead, try using Gulp! Nightcrawlers. Gulp! is made by Berkley and is a really effective substitute for the real thing in this application,

For weapon rigs or weightforward spinners, just gob the 'crawler on the hook any way you want. Once you've located a pod of fish, note their depth on your depthfinder. If it's say, 15 feet, cast out, count to 15, and start retrieving. That will keep your bait in the fish zone.

Teser put on a clinic on how to fish the weapon rig. He was the hot stick for both days and really had the touch. Needless to say, he had to answer "whadareya doin'?" and "what color you got on" and "how long are ya counting?" He fished off the bow of the boat, a 30 foot Sportcraft, and had mastered the "swing", the phenomenon that describes the arc and path of your lure that results as you cast your bait quartering into the wind while the boat drifts away from you.



Bob Teser & Capt. Gwin

Said the hot stick, "I varied my retrieve, constantly changed speed and experimented with different depths. Sometimes, I'd lift and drop the bait and at other times I would just crank it in slowly and steadily. There was no consistent pattern."

Although mastering the swing might sound somewhat technical, it's one of the keys to catching Lake Erie fish at this time of the year. If you do that and match it with the right retrieve technique, you'll have a limit of fish in no time.

There is always something more in every outdoor experience, something far more interesting than the mere harvest of fish or game. I thought awhile about this trip, looking to discover what it was. Sure, we caught fish. We had fun. We ate like kings, or maybe it was pigs. We relished the rare, calm waters of Lake Erie. But it was something else.

I think it was a metaphor, the similarity of Lake Erie to the friendship of the four men. Erie used to be a tremendously hot fishery, and then it died down, but now has come back because of its resilience. Not unlike their friendship.

Best friends in high school together, they all graduated from Waukegan Township High School in 1968, and then went their own ways, to separate colleges, and lived in different cities. But the resilience of their friendship has prevailed, keeping them together ever since, once a year bonding at Lake Erie while pounding its walleyes.

And you can bet your favorite Erie Dearie lure they're already thinking about next June.



The charter fleet begins their early morning run in search of Lake Erie Walleyes

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*For the best chartering service on Lake Erie, contact Dave Gwin or Steve Ashley of **Hawg 'n Charters** at: 419-732-7200 or visit their web site at: [www.hawgncharters.com](http://www.hawgncharters.com)*