

The Portable Age

Locators –Locators-Locators

By Chris Clemmons

I've been corresponding with some very nice gentlemen from North Carolina the last couple of weeks about ways to catch more and larger walleyes in Canada. We've covered water depths, water temps, structure, favorite lures, favorite presentations, live bait, line, moon phases and just about everything in between.

All of their excellent questions got me thinking about my trip coming up in June and what equipment and lures I would be taking to Canada. As I went down my list, I realized that the guys in NC and I had truly covered just about everything to help us catch more and bigger walleye in Canada this year. However, we forgot to cover one of the most important fish-catching tools you can bring on your fly in adventure.

Just for fun, let's say Alan, the owner of Wilderness North, flew into Strikers Point Lodge, came running up, and said, "Chris, we found this 5,000 acre lake that no one has ever fished and we want to fly a boat in for a half day and see if the lake is worth opening up to guests. However, our time and weight is limited so you've got five minutes to gather up ten items that you think will help us catch fish and then meet me on the dock to board the Beaver."

First of all, it wouldn't take me long to jump at a dream opportunity like that, or to figure out my ten items. I'd grab a rod and reel filled with 8lb test line, 4 pink ball-head jigs, 4 three-inch white twister tails and my portable sonar locator.

Other than the obvious fishing equipment like rods, reels and lures, a good quality locator is one of the most important tools for catching fish, even in Canada. The days of sight structure fishing or dropping an anchor to the bottom to check depth have long gone. With today's advancements in technology and companies' abilities to store that technology in compact sonar units, why wouldn't we take advantage of the opportunity to put all the fish-catching odds in our favor? I look at it this way. My main objective in Canada is to catch lots of fish. I've only got a short five-day window to accomplish that. I'll probably spend about a couple hundred bucks on new-fangled equipment and lures that probably won't even get wet. Why not invest those funds in something that will truly help me catch more fish this year and for years to come?

Portable sonars, "locators" "graphs", or "fish-finders" as I sometimes call them, are amazing at helping anglers find more productive structure and catching more fish. I've mentioned the old 80/20 rule in many of my past articles because I believe it's true! 80% of the fish in a lake will inhabit only 20% of the structure. If you're not fishing the right areas that are holding those fish, you're in for a long day. Sonar will help you quickly eliminate unproductive areas and find the areas holding fish.

Some anglers, including me, are intimidated by sonar units. For example, if you read the specifications on the box or listen to some pros talk about the hundreds of features

available on sonar units, you'd think you need a master's degree in electrical engineering to operate one. That's not the case. All modern sonar units have a factory setting that automatically allows anglers to simply push the power button and start fishing. Using your sonar in "auto" mode is 90% as effective as using all the fancy "manual" features. The most important thing about using sonar is to, first, understand where fish prefer to live such as humps, break lines, weeds, reefs, wood, points and flats. (Basically this is any structure that is different than the surrounding area.) Then, use your sonar to help you find these different areas. Once you find an area that looks interesting, start to examine what the sonar is showing you. For example, you might see small marks just off the bottom, which are most likely game-fish, or you might see a black cloud come across the sonar screen, probably indicating bait-fish. In some instances you might only see strange bumps on the bottom. These might be boulders or even fish lying tight to the bottom but, either way, the sonar is telling you that something is different down there and worth checking out.

When buying portable sonar for a fly-in trip, there are a few important things to keep in mind. First, make sure it's compact and the product description says it's made for remote fly-in fishing. That means it's lightweight, durable and was designed with the fly-in fisherman in mind. Next, make sure you buy a sonar unit that has a reasonably high pixel count. The pixel count will determine how sharp the picture is on your sonar screen. The higher the pixel count, the more detail the sonar unit will show you. When describing a sonar unit's features, packaging will list a cryptic number, for example 240V x 240H. What this means is that this particular sonar unit has 240 vertical pixels and 240 horizontal pixels. To give you a better feel for what that means, some of the most expensive, top sonar units have 600V x 800H pixel counts. This is on par with HD-TV and possibly more than you need for a Canadian fly-in. On the other hand, you might come across a unit that has a pixel count of 128V x 64V. This would be like looking at the original Pong video game. Though it will help you find the main structures, you'll lose a lot of important detail. Portable sonar units with combined pixel counts between 400 and 640 should give you plenty of visual detail and remain reasonably priced. Other important things to consider are the type of battery the sonar uses, whether they recharge and have the ability to recharge the batteries at the destination? I recommend sonar units that take two 6V batteries or one rechargeable 12V battery. If you are staying at a camp that has electricity, the single rechargeable 12V units would be my top choice. If you're staying at a remote outpost and you can't recharge, I would recommend bringing an additional 12V or two additional 6V batteries. Two sets of batteries will last the entire week.

I'm seriously thinking about updating my portable sonar unit this season and am considering the portable Eagle Fish Easy 320c. With a pixel count of 320V x 240H, it offers a nice midrange pixel count at a reasonable midrange price. The 320c is also a color unit, which makes it an even better value. Not only do color units give you more contrast for better target identification, the 320c has what Eagle calls "COLORLINE" to help separate fish marks from structure even more. For example, remember those strange bumps on the bottom that we talked about earlier in this article? If the bumps are boulders, a color unit will identify them as being hard like the bottom and assign them a

similar color to the bottom color so you'll know that they're most likely not fish holding tight to the bottom. On the other hand, if the strange bumps are fish, the color unit will recognize that they are less dense and assign a different color to them. On a traditional grayscale sonar unit everything will be in some shade of gray but with a color unit, the bottom will show as yellow and the fish as blue or red, even when they're "belly to the bottom". The color sonar unit is slightly more expensive than the grayscale models but once you see one in action you'll probably want one for yourself. In my opinion, it's like viewing color TV versus black and white TV. How many black and white TV's do you see around anymore?

The Eagle Fish Easy 320c viewing screen is a 3-1/2" 256-coloractive-matrix TFT display, which is a fancy way of saying that it has a nice-sized viewing screen that remains readable in direct sunlight. That's important because if you've ever tried to read a sonar unit with the sun shining directly on it, you'll know that a sunlight-readable screen is a very nice feature to have. This sonar unit also includes a high-performance, low-profile 200 kHz skimmer transducer with suction cup, built in water temperature sensor, and a 60 degree cone angle. The water temperature sensor is handy for finding the right water temperatures, especially in early spring when the fish are more apt to be in warmer water. The wide cone angle allows you to see a larger area of the lake bottom. It's also built to be rugged and is completely sealed to withstand the harshest weather in Canada. It's nice not to worry about coming down to the boat after a rain the night before and finding the inside of your viewing screen fogged up. This unit also features a Fish ID option, which turns the traditional fish arches into fish symbols, so there is no guessing at what you're looking at. When Eagle designed the 320c they and Cabela's added the components to make the unit portable. They also had the ice fisherman in mind and designed the portable housing so it would fit nicely into a 5-gallon bucket. They also included a full-time vertical bar real-time flasher display which allows you to watch your ice jig in real time and the fish as they react to your presentation.

These are some of the things that are important, if you're like me, and just want to turn on the sonar unit and go fishing. If, however, you are more into the meat and potatoes of making your sonar work to its fullest potential, here are additional features that make the 320c even better. It has an adjustable ping speed with "HyperScroll" that allows you to adjust and see fish marks at high boat speeds. It has an adjustable color setting which will allow you to see more fish in dense cover such as weeds. It also has "FishTrack" that displays the depth above the fish symbol at where the fish is marked. Finally, the 320c offers zoom with zoom bottom tracking that allows you to take a closer look at your target; zone alarms that can be very handy in some of the reef-infested lakes of Canada; and internal memory backup so that it's always easy to return to using the basic features of your sonar unit.

When I last checked, Cabela's offers the portable Eagle Fish Easy 320c color sonar unit with a 12V rechargeable battery, charger, 60 degree suction-cup mount transducer, durable protective plastic frame and handy padded water-resistant six-hundred denier nylon carrying case for \$269.99.

As you start thinking about the hot new lures and other new fangled gizmos that can help you catch more fish on your trip to Canada this season, don't forget to include one of the most important fish-catching tools you can have - the portable sonar locator! I'd be lost without one!

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