

Walleye on the Fly

By Gord Ellis

Walleye fishing and live bait pretty much go together. It is the rare angler who doesn't have some crawlers, leeches or minnows stowed away on the boat when the weekend rolls around. However, there are many other ways to catch walleye bait free. Some of the better techniques include jigging with scented twister bodies, trolling diving crank baits and jerking minnow baits. Yet there is one fishing style that you rarely hear about for walleye, and that's fly fishing. The print space devoted to fly fishing for walleye on the *CJ*(Chronicle Journal) outdoor page over the years could fit into a baby's fist.

My first introduction to fly fishing for walleye came via Russ Swerdlyk. The introduction took place about 21 years ago at Miminiska Lodge, on the Albany River. Russ and I had flown there to fish brookies, but found ourselves with time on our hands between trout trips. So Russ, a keen fly angler even then, broke out his 8 weight rod and trolled streamers while I used cranks and other lures. Russ did pretty well with his flies, and landed some nice ones. I was not ready to give up my trusty spin casting equipment back then - despite having fished flies since I was a child - and never tried the whole trip. Recently, on a return trip to Miminiska, I thought about Russ and his flies while fishing these fabled waters. My family and I had already caught and released enough walleye in Miminiska Lake to fill a small grain silo, so it wasn't going to hurt anything to experiment.

One afternoon, in the wide rapids flowing into Petawanga Lake from Miminiska, my son Devin and I put the boat up onshore and decided to work the rivers edge.

The plan was to try and get a brookie, but the odds were much higher of hooking into walleye. On past canoe trips to the upper Albany, I'd found walleye liked to sit in pockets along the edge of the main flow. So at the very first pool we came upon, I cast a bead head Woolly Buggar out with my 5 weight Sage rod and let the fly sink into the dark water. The floating line sat like a thin strand of spaghetti on the surface as the fly and leader drifted down. After a time, the fly was met with a sharp tug. The rod throbbed and a yellow flanked walleye of about 18 inches rolled on the surface before charging back to the bottom. Anyone who says walleye don't fight has never caught an Albany River fish in the rapids. They fight. This walleye put up a very good account for itself, before being beached. I grabbed the plump fish, twisted the fly out and let it go. This exact scenario played out a couple more times so I waved my eldest son up from down river. Devin, who had never thrown a fly to that point, was given some quick instruction on how to cast. I told him about keeping his elbow still and tight to his side, and recommended he start slow at first just getting out enough fly line to put the Woolly Buggar in the sweet spot. After a few false starts he got the line out, and let it sink. After a couple casts, he was finally awarded a strike. Devin immediately did what almost all first time fly anglers do and set hard with all 9 feet of the rod. The fly snapped out of the water minus fish.

"Just give the fly line a little tug," I said to him. "You don't need to jerk the rod." Back went the fly, and this time the jerk on one end met the jerk on the other (sorry). Devin silently played in his first walleye and turned it towards me to land. "They hit hard," he said, showing a slight smile. He landed a few more before we packed that in.

The next day, we took two boats to a Miminiska hotspot called the "walleye mine". Anyone who has ever visited Miminiska Lodge knows about this hotspot. My wife Cheryl and Devin were in one boat, Austin and I in the other. The walleye mine was an hour or so from camp, but worth every minute of the boat ride. Located where the Albany River dumps into Miminiska Lake, the walleye mine gathers fish like Arkansas gathers rednecks. The fishing is nuts. So it seemed a good place to try some flies.

The basic technique at the walleye mine is to motor up the river a ways and then drift back down with the current. Usually a jig and twister is all that's required to bang endless fish. Since I was sharing boat space with my youngest boy - a hardcore jigger - it was going to be me fitting into his drift. So off came the floating line and on went a full sink line. This would allow the fly line to get down 8 to 10 feet where the walleye were hugging bottom. For flies, I chose a weighed silver and white Clouser Minnow for the top and a brown and orange no name streamer as the back hook. I attached the orange/brown streamer to the hook of the Clouser with about 18 inches of 14 pound fluorocarbon. This would help get flies back when toothy pike came calling. The first two drifts did not produce, despite my best efforts to jig the flies with subtle lift and drops. It was easy to feel the line touch the sandy bottom, and when this happened I'd reel a bit of line in. Thankfully, the walleye mine has few snags. Although Austin was nailing fish with his green Gulp, the first two drifts with the fly proved unproductive. However, on the third drift I slowed the jig action down and immediately felt something poke at - then hammer - the fly. The 5 weight rod made a tight circle and the fight was on. This walleye really scrapped, aided by the current and the sinking line.

"Is that a big one Dad?" said Austin as he watched the rod bob and weave.

"It's a decent one, and it sure is making me work," I said. Austin got out the net and when the fish appeared he scooped it up for me. Turned out the walleye measured 19 inches and it had hit the orange streamer at the back. For the next two hours, I caught at least one walleye on every pass using the fly rod. It got so good I was catching nearly as many fish as my jig crazed son. By the way, of the 13 walleye landed on flies, 3 hit the no name or streamer, and the other ten hit the sliver and white Clouser.

It was a hoot, and a great way to catch walleye. Austin did out fish me however. Little mini man.

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