

Getting ready for the 2018 walleye opener

By Ron Hustvedt

The walleye opener is a time-honored tradition in Minnesota, full of memories and rituals not to mention a ton of fun. Even though we like to laugh and joke about all the mishaps we experience throughout the years, eliminating complications is the ultimate goal of a successful opener.

Don't let the simple things that are easy to overlook ruin this year's opener.

Almost every problem you

deal with on opener can be avoided: whether it's the guy pulled over on the side of the road with a busted trailer; the boat at the launch that just won't start; or your fishing partner in the back whose old fishing line keeps breaking.

Avoiding problems is especially critical when bringing kids along for the trip. Little mishaps here and there are bound to happen and give you something to laugh about, but a major breakdown is a surefire way to ruin a good time.

Check your equipment

Preparation is the key to having a fun, joyous opener, and now is the time to get everything ready.

Make sure your boat battery is charged and in good shape. While you are at it, check the operation of all of your boats electronics. If you have interior lights, make sure they work for any night fishing you plan on doing. If you don't have interior lights but still want to night fish, put together what you'll need to avoid fumbling around the boat at night.

Get down to your boat trailer and check for any cracks in the frame, while at the same time, packing your bearings. Even trailers with bearing buddies need to be checked, no exceptions. Check those trailer tires and be sure they are properly inflated.

Consider investing in some simple water mufflers so you can get your boat started in the driveway. If you don't have these, you can still check your boat's ability to crank by dry firing it for a few seconds.

Do not forget to freshen up your fishing line where appropriate and take care of any maintenance to your rods and reels. Sharpen the hooks of those lures you plan on using and pre-rig your rods before getting on the water.

Walleye fishing basics

There are a lot of boats on the lakes during opener, and so many of them are not catching walleye. It's too bad because walleye this time of the year can be pretty willing to bite.

In most years they are done spawning, have rested enough and are hungry. This year, due to the late ice and cold water temperatures, things could be a little different. I fish Mille Laacs on opener, but whether you are on a big body of water or a small one, fish shoreline structural areas.

Typically you want to find

sandy bottom locations with emerging vegetation or shallow rock reefs. Depths will be shallower than 20 feet with 10 feet being the focal point to begin with. Should there be a walleye chop and overcast skies, then move shallower. If the lake is a mirror and the sun is high, however, start fishing deeper, but don't be afraid to move shallow especially if the water temperatures are low.

A livebait rig with a minnow, leech or crawler is a great way to start walleye fishing on opener, with jigs being another good option along with slip bobber rigs. Trolling or casting crankbaits around rock reefs or sand is another good option that is easy to fish.

I like minnows and leeches when the water is calmer, but if there's a good chop, going then nightcrawlers are the way to go from the start.

Small boat, big lake?

One of the best things about opening weekend is that anglers with smaller boats can, under most conditions, fish big bodies of water like Cass or Winnibigoshish without difficulty. These big lakes are wonderful locations for walleye fishing but because of their size, smaller boats are unable to access them throughout most of the summer when the wind is blowing.

Opening weekend weather can be a crapshoot, but because walleye are relating to shoreline structure, anglers with smaller boats can get to the right locations without too many troubles.

If the wind is blowing hard, try launching on the opposite end of the lake. Always pay close attention to the conditions, however.

On Cass Lake, all parts of the lake have excellent shoreline locations. Later in the season, the walleye move out to the big basin, but right now there's an opportunity close to shore that most everybody can enjoy without trouble.

Weather and Mother

Some openers have snow while others have blistering sun. Some even have both. Either way, Minnesota's May weather is unpredictable, and it's easier to pack for it all rather than go without.

Because it's her special weekend, don't forget to take care of Mom or the wife before you head out of town. It's good to bring something back, but it's always worthwhile to do something nice beforehand as well.

Include kids in the preparation

Getting ready for the big opener is one of the most important parts of the tradition, and it's a good idea to let your kids be a part of that preparation. They'll feel like a valuable part of the team, and it

also helps them take more ownership with the experience.

Allowing them to put in the effort beforehand can make sure they get more out of it.

My son loves to hunt for nightcrawlers (almost as much as he loves fishing), and he's planning on collecting a bundle for our weekend outing.

A good quality closed-face fishing reel is best for kids because they are the easiest of all to use. Let your child practice casting correctly before getting on the water.

The time spent beforehand is what makes opener great for everybody – especially those who are going to be part of the tradition for many years to come.

How do you introduce a kid to fishing?

Being part of the excitement when kids catch fish can form memories that last a lifetime. But taking kids fishing can present some unique challenges.

Jeff Ledermann knows all about the joys and challenges of taking kids fishing. He was able to start his own daughters fishing when they were just over the age of two. When they were older he helped form a girls' fishing club after hearing one daughter say after school that "Girls don't fish."

Now, Ledermann works with educational programs that help teach kids and others about fishing. As the angler recruitment, retention and education supervisor for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, he's glad to share some wisdom on how to connect kids with the outdoors through fishing.

What can adults do to make fishing fun for kids?

For the first times out with kids, focus on short and successful outings. Do some research to find a place where fish populations are high and other opportunities exist when kids get bored, such as playground equipment, rock hunting and climbing, or chasing bugs. It's even better if there are bathrooms close by. Don't forget to bring snacks and a camera to capture the excitement of that first fish.

How important are those first few times a kid goes fishing?

The first few times are critical. If a child has a really bad experience, it may take a lot of effort to overcome those memories and anxieties. Make it fun and keep outings short. Don't be afraid to call it a day if they start to get bored, the bugs are bad or the weather is not good.

What are some of the biggest mistakes parents and others make when taking kids fishing?

The biggest mistake I see is that parents lose focus on the kids. As much as we all relish the opportunity to wet a line, fishing with young kids means you may have to give up some of your own fishing time.

What fishing skills do kids need the most help with?

New anglers of all ages need lots of help figuring out how to use fishing equipment. Be sure to demonstrate to them how rods and reels work and give them lots of opportunity to practice. Casting in the yard at hula hoops or other targets is a great way to get kids excited about fishing. The biggest mistake that young anglers make is not keeping a tight line while playing a fish. Teach them to keep their rod tip up. You can make it easier for kids by giving them a rod that is the right

size for them. A rod that has a lighter action or more flex also provides more room for error and kids will be less likely to break off. Also be sure to check the drag on the reel so they can manage a larger fish if they catch one.

What safety pointers should people remember?

Safety should be your highest priority. Be mindful of the dangers of being on or near the water. Wearing a lifejacket is the law for kids under age 10 and a really good practice for everyone when in a boat. The other big safety concern while fishing is hooks. That risk multiplies when lots of people are casting. If I have lots of kids in a boat, I minimize casting by having them fish right off the side of the boat or slowly troll the weed edges with small spinners and jigs. For older kids, spinnerbaits are great for casting as the hook is less exposed. I would avoid any casting with treble hooks until kids have more experience.

Any tips for what kids of fish to try for and what gear to use?

Catching bluegills or bullheads is a great way to start fishing with kids. In many lakes these fish are very abundant, but also very small. If you use light line and small hooks with live bait, you will have a good chance at success.

How do you choose where to fish with a kid?

Ask at bait stores, surf the many fishing blogs on the web or ask other anglers where they would recommend taking kids fishing. In the Twin Cities, the DNR's Fishing in the Neighborhood program manages and stocks several lakes and ponds to increase fishing opportunities. Check out www.mndnr.gov/fin for details.

What should you pack to bring a kid fishing?

Bring enough items so that you're prepared for all kinds of weather, and distractions if fishing gets tough or kids get bored. We want kids to eat healthy, but I'm not against making the outing special by bringing a favorite treat or stopping by the ice cream shop on the way home. Bring what you think will help make the outing fun. A positive attitude is probably the most important. Your enthusiasm for fishing will rub off on them!

Where can people learn more?

Adults who want to learn more before taking a kid fishing can find answers to common fishing questions, download a beginner's guide to fishing, and find a place to fish at www.mndnr.gov/fishmn. Resources for educators can be found at www.mndnr.gov/minnaqua.

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