



Welcome to the Jungle!

Guide-Tested Secrets To Catching Walleyes In The Weeds

By Dan Johnson with Hall of Famer Greg Bohn

Walleye fans often focus their efforts on classic structural reefs. But weeds hold walleyes as well. Flush with baitfish and other forage, these sunken gardens attract hungry 'eyes and routinely produce fishing action as good or better than the structure bite.

Veteran walleye guide Greg Bohn knows the drill. He blends timing, location and tactics to consistently pull hungry 'eyes from the jungle throughout the open-water season.

“Walleyes gravitate to vegetation spring through fall,” says Bohn, proprietor of Strictly Walleye Guide Service. “From the perch spawn to the autumn feeding binge, you’ll find walleyes in and around the weeds. Active fish, too. Fish that often hit more aggressive presentations and bigger baits than walleyes sulking on or adjacent to offshore structure.”

Perch procreate shortly after ice-out in April or early May, in water temperatures around 45-52 degrees. Males attend as promiscuous female perch drape strands of gelatinous eggs over submerged vegetation. Walleyes crash the party, feeding on the lovesick baitfish. From here on out, it’s not unusual to find walleyes patrolling the weeds in search of easy meals.

Not all weeds are created equal, of course. Bohn says broad-leaved pondweeds—commonly called cabbage—are walleye magnets all season long. “Cabbage is one of the first weeds to sprout in 3 to 6 feet of water and really pull walleyes in,” he says, explaining that early greens in fast-warming back bays are hard to beat.

Cabbage patches remain hotbeds of walleye activity throughout the open water period. “I start the season looking for emerging cabbage in the shallows and expand my efforts as the deep edge gets progressively deeper,” Bohn says. Cabbage is found to depths of 20 feet and remains productive through fall and even into the winter months. As a bonus, cabbage’s stiff stalks and crisp leaves are far less likely to foul your lure than those of clingier species.

Coontail is a common native weed walleye anglers should be aware of. Also called hornwort, it thrives in moderate to extremely fertile fisheries and provides excellent habitat for juvenile fish and other aquatic critters—which makes coontail beds prime feeding areas for a variety of predators. “Where cabbage is lacking, weed-loving walleyes often hunt along dense coontail edges,” says Bohn. “Be forewarned, coontail is a clingy customer that easily fouls jigs, crankbaits and other presentations. Besides ruining individual casts, dragging uprooted plants around is a great way to spook wary walleyes out of the neighborhood.”

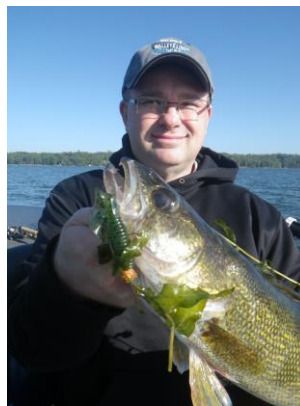
Curly-leaf pondweed is an exotic species often mistaken for native cabbage. It can be distinguished from real cabbage by small teeth on the edges of its stiff, crinkled, 2- to 3-inch leaves. Cold-tolerant and an

early sprouter, pondweed can provide some of the season's first weed cover. This is especially true in areas where snow cover was light or missing during winter, such as beneath an ice road.

Pondweed can grow in thick stands that impede boat traffic and are difficult to fish. It typically reaches the surface in early summer and dies off shortly after. In hot, calm weather, massive pondweed die-offs can cause fish kills. However, where oxygen levels remain hospitable when pondweeds fall, savvy anglers can swoop in and target walleyes that were hard to reach when the weeds were living.

Eurasian watermilfoil is another aquatic exotic that forms dense stands that are tough to fish with all but the most weedless presentations. Punching heavy weights through the canopy to reach fish cruising open water below is popular with bass anglers. But walleye anglers tend to favor the edges of—and pockets within—smaller, more manageable stands of milfoil.

Bulrushes, often called reeds, can also hold walleyes—particularly during periods of peak baitfish use such as the shiner spawn. Typically found in shallow water, these leafless perennials are easily identified by their slender stems. “In dark, stained lakes with little other vegetation, walleyes often gravitate to reed beds in 3 to 5 feet of water,” Bohn adds.



Ways of the Weeds

At any given moment, certain areas of a weedbed will hold more walleyes than others. Along with forage abundance, environmental conditions help determine walleye location in weeds. “Walleyes are more likely to lurk just outside weedlines or cruise the tops of submerged weedbeds when the surface is choppy,” Bohn says. “They typically tuck into shadowy edges and deeper in the bed when it’s calm and sunny. Early in the season, however, walleyes often hold in open pockets and along inside weed edges to soak up spring sunshine.”

Don't overlook the inside or shallow weed edge, especially in windy weather or low-visibility conditions such as low light, stained water or suspended sediments. Even in summer, hungry walleyes aren't shy about raiding the shallow edge when conditions favor a feeding foray. Likewise, pay attention to isolated weed growing beyond the deep edge. “Walleyes love these isolated stands but most anglers miss them,” Bohn says.

A variety of presentations will catch weed walleyes. Slow-trolling spinner rigs a cast-length behind the boat is simple and deadly. Crankbaits and small spinnerbaits are weed wonders as well. But to connect clients with the most weed fish possible, Bohn typically relies on jigs—either casting and retrieving or suspending them beneath slip bobbers.

On the casting front, he favors 1/8- to 1/4-ounce Northland jigheads in perchy glow patterns like Glo Watermelon. “Realistic eyes, painted or holographic, get more reaction strikes,” he notes. Minnows are a top tipping early, but fork-tailed plastics like Bohn’s 4-inch Walleye Limit Minnow get the nod once the water temp pushes past 45 degrees. Above 65 degrees, curlytails like Kalin’s 5-inch Lunker Grub are additional options.

Short casts are the rule. “The more vertical the presentation, the better,” he explains. “Slide the jig through the weeds on a steady swimming retrieve. Don’t snap it much—you hang up more when you do that. And always work the bait vertically for a minute at the end of every retrieve.”

When bobbering, he favors Thill Pro Series Slip Floats with Thill bladed snells. Minnows are a mainstay until the water temp hits about 62 degrees, after which he switches to leeches. Work float rigs along edges, around isolated weeds and in pockets of open water within weedbeds.