



**M**ontana is justifiably famous for its trout fishing. But unknown to most of the world—except walleye anglers themselves—is our state's wonderful walleye fishing.

Just ask Dale Gilbert, an Ulm-based fishing tournament professional who has competed on many of the nation's top walleye waters. "We don't realize how good it is here in Montana," he says. "We've got some of the best walleye fishing in the country practically right out the back door."

It's tricky to compare one state's walleye fishing to another's. But consider that anglers regard a walleye over 10 pounds as a trophy—for most, a trophy of a lifetime. According to Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources, lakes in that walleye-obsessed state are fished so hard that 10-plus-pound walleyes are almost unheard of anymore. Compare that to Montana, where anglers so regularly catch 10-, 11-, and even 12-pounders that the news hardly gets mentioned (though 15- or 16-pounders definitely draw attention). And angling pressure is so intense in Minnesota that on the state's premier walleye lake, Mille Lacs, it takes an average of eight hours to catch a single walleye. Compare that to Montana's Canyon Ferry Reservoir (the only lake on which Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologists track catch rates), where anglers catch one fish every three to four hours.

Certainly Montana can't compare to the number of walleye waters in other states (both

Wisconsin and Minnesota contain more than 1,000 each), but our Fort Peck Lake and Canyon Ferry, Holter, Tiber, Cooney, Fresno, and Nelson Reservoirs, along with the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers, provide enough walleye fishing opportunities to last a lifetime.

What's the appeal of these members of the perch family and close cousins to Montana's native sauger? Above all, walleyes are one of the best-tasting fish on the planet, with white, bone-free filets. These coolwater fish are also beautiful and live in scenic reservoirs and rivers. But maybe their greatest appeal is that they are such a challenging puzzle. For dedicated anglers like me, solving the mystery of where walleyes are and what they will bite—factors that change from day to day and even hour to hour—can become all consuming.

Learning to catch walleyes can be ridiculously simple. For instance, take Missoula's Bob Hart. Though an experienced trout angler, Hart had never fished for walleyes before one day in November 2007 when he drove to Tiber Reservoir, about 65 miles north of Great Falls. He set up a lawn chair on the bank, put a sucker minnow on his hook, cast it out, then sat down to wait.

The first day he caught a 14-incher, his

# Welcome To Walleye Fishing By Mark Henckel

Expert advice for anglers who are finally ready to branch out from trout



**EYE ON THE PRIZE** The walleye's eyes appear clouded or glassy in sunlight because of a reflective layer of pigment behind the retina called the *tapetum lucidum*. Similar to that in a cat's eye, this ocular feature allows the retina to absorb extra light, providing the walleye with excellent vision in dark or muddy water. The "wall" in the species' name likely derives from the Icelandic word *vagl*, meaning "film over eye."

MONTANAFWP



first walleye. The second day things got a little crazy. Hart hooked and landed a nearly 3-foot-long walleye weighing 17.75 pounds that became (and remains) the Montana state record. It doesn't get any simpler.

On the other hand, walleye fishing can call for complex angling strategies and extensive equipment. A typical setup used by hard-core walleye anglers like Gilbert is a 17- to 21-foot boat with two outboard motors (a big one for running the lake and a small one for trolling), an electric trolling motor, two fish locators equipped with GPS, a half-dozen or more fishing rods and reels, and several tackle boxes overflowing with lures, plastic baits, swivels, and sinkers.

I pointed out to Gilbert that his walleye rig set him back tens of thousands of dollars, while Hart hooked the state record sitting in a lawn chair that cost \$10. He laughed at the irony. "You definitely don't have to have a boat like mine to fish for walleyes," he says. "I started out with a 14-footer that had a little 9.8-horsepower outboard, and I caught a lot of nice fish and had a good time. Sure, with a smaller rig you have to be a little more careful about fishing big reservoirs or getting caught in a storm, but otherwise they can be real effective."

#### BASIC TACTICS

Walleye anglers use four basic techniques. One is to fish a jig—a hook with a molded



**GEARED UP FOR BATTLE** Bigger boats definitely make fishing on large reservoirs like Fort Peck and Canyon Ferry safer. And trolling motors, fish finders, and GPS can add to your success. But walleye fishing doesn't necessarily require spending a small fortune. Anglers in 14-foot boats with small outboards catch fish on many Montana reservoirs, as do anglers who fish from shore.

lead head—tipped with a minnow, leech, night crawler, or plastic bait. You cast the jig into the water, let it drop to the bottom, then slowly retrieve it while raising and lowering the rod tip so the jig bounces along. Or drop it down off the side of the boat and "jig" it up and down just off the bottom. Walleyes usually hit a jig as the lure is falling and the

line is slack, so beginners often miss several takes before acquiring a feel for a bite.

Another method is to fish a spinner-and-'crawler harness—a colored spinner blade followed by two hooks tipped with a night crawler. The harness is attached 18 to 36 inches from a bottom-bouncer sinker. As an angler slowly trolls along in the boat, the sinker skips across the bottom while the 'crawler harness rides up a few feet to where walleyes lurk. Popular spinner blade colors are orange, chartreuse, green, perch-finish, and blue-and-silver. Pink works well too, though we manly types prefer to call it light red, bubblegum, or watermelon.

The third method is to use a crankbait—a minnow-shaped plastic or wood lure such as a Rapala—either by casting and retrieving or by trolling it behind a slow-moving boat.

The fourth method, best for shore fishing, is to use a floating jighead tipped with half a night crawler with a slip sinker (also known as a Lindy Rig) attached about 18 inches below. Cast out and wait. (For more on shore-

*Mark Henckel, longtime outdoors editor for the Billings Gazette and a fixture in Montana's walleye fishing community, died unexpectedly in 2010.*



**FRIED HEAVEN** The main reason for the walleye's popularity: sweet, white fillets.

fishing for walleyes, see sidebar on page 15.)

Jigs typically works best in cold water. Walleyes are sluggish then and won't chase fast-moving baits. Jigs work because you can make them rise and fall slowly. Because jigs are made of lead, they also work well on rivers any time of year when you want to get your lure down through the current to the bottom.

As waters warm and walleyes become more active, boat anglers switch to 'crawler harnesses and trolled crankbaits. Trolling allows your lure to cover more water, and as their metabolism heats up, walleyes are more likely to go after a moving object. Jigs can be handy in summer when you've been trolling a crankbait or 'crawler harness and luck into a concentration of fish. That's when you anchor, tie on a jig, and intensively fish the hotspot.

#### TACKLE

It doesn't take a fancy rod and reel to catch walleyes. An inexpensive combo that costs \$30 or less will do fine. The only problem with cheap rigs is that the reel bearings often wear out quickly, ruining the reel, and the fiberglass rod can't detect the subtle walleye bite as well as a more expensive

graphite or boron rod can.

Experienced walleye anglers usually carry several rods. One is a spinning rod and reel for jigs, loaded with 6- or 8-pound-test monofilament. Another, used for 'crawler harnesses and crankbaits, is a stiff rod and an open-spool bait-casting reel loaded with 10- to 17-pound-test monofilament. You don't actually need anything stronger than 8-pound-test line to land a walleye, even a big one, because the rod and the reel's drag absorb much of the pull. But a spinner rig or crankbait trolled near bottom can snag debris, and you'll need heavy line to pull it free.

The many other gadgets you see in sporting goods stores have their uses. On big reservoirs, it helps to have a fish finder to locate walleyes and structure and a GPS to find hotspots and avoid getting lost. Electric trolling motors are good for saving gas and staying quiet when you want to move slowly along a shoreline.

Still, Gilbert says all a first-time walleye angler really needs is a spinning rod and reel with an assortment of jigs and a few crankbaits. As for a boat, he says an expensive rig can get you around faster and allow you to stay on the water longer and with

**Pink works well too, though we manly types prefer to call it light red, bubblegum, or watermelon.**

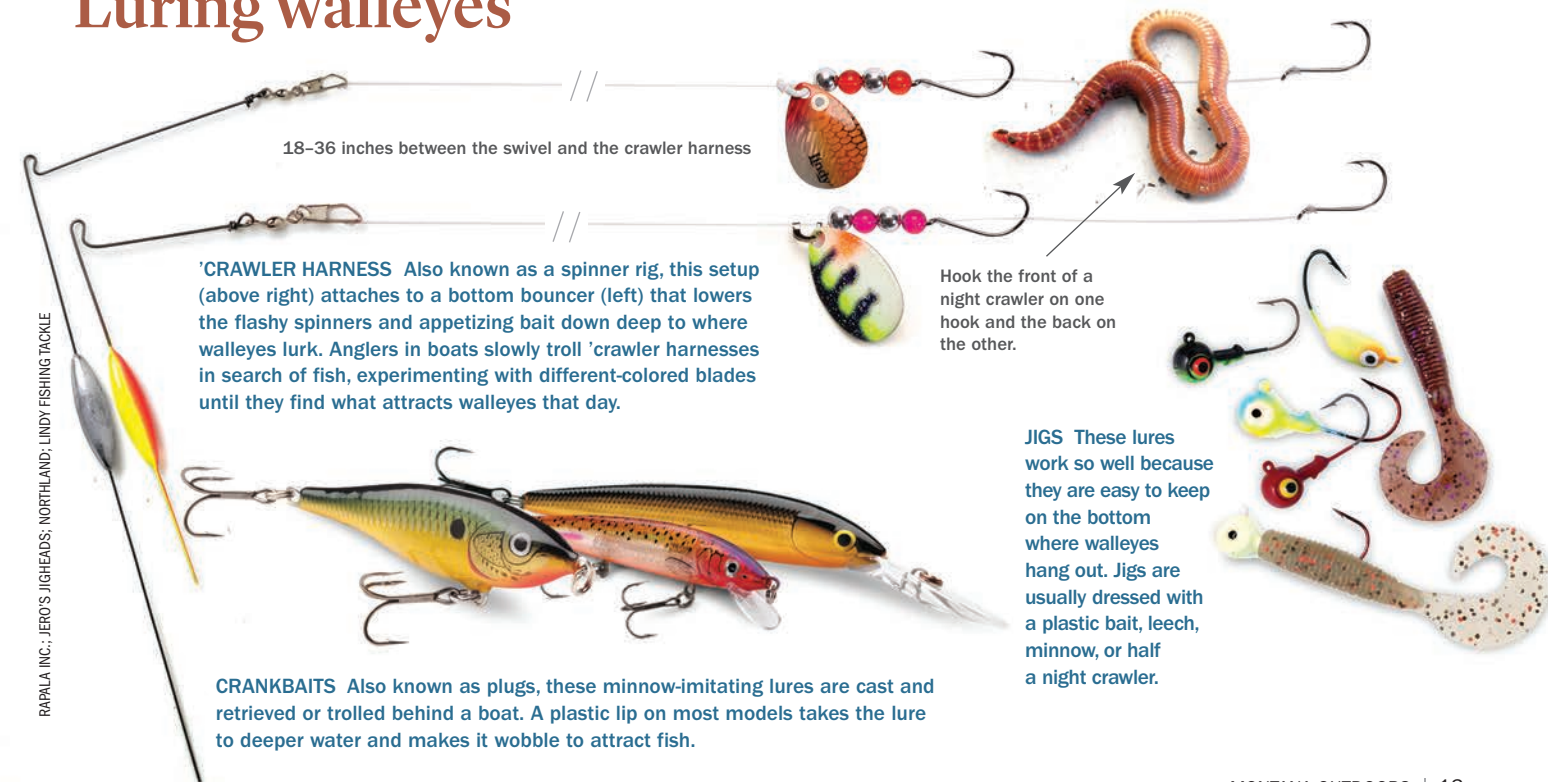
more comfort. "But anything that floats and can get to spots that hold fish will work fine when you're getting started," he adds.

#### WHERE TO FISH

All Montana walleye waters are east of the Continental Divide. The biggest—and one that requires a good-sized boat and motor to fish safely—is 135-mile-long Fort Peck Lake, which at times can seem more like an ocean than an inland reservoir. "We see quite a few

*continued on page 17*

## Luring walleyes



18–36 inches between the swivel and the crawler harness

**'CRAWLER HARNESS** Also known as a spinner rig, this setup (above right) attaches to a bottom bouncer (left) that lowers the flashy spinners and appetizing bait down deep to where walleyes lurk. Anglers in boats slowly troll 'crawler harnesses in search of fish, experimenting with different-colored blades until they find what attracts walleyes that day.

Hook the front of a night crawler on one hook and the back on the other.

**JIGS** These lures work so well because they are easy to keep on the bottom where walleyes hang out. Jigs are usually dressed with a plastic bait, leech, minnow, or half a night crawler.

**CRANKBAITS** Also known as plugs, these minnow-imitating lures are cast and retrieved or trolled behind a boat. A plastic lip on most models takes the lure to deeper water and makes it wobble to attract fish.



## Montana's top walleye waters

**1 Fort Peck Lake** Starting in May, the fishing here is best in the upper reaches and Big Dry Arm. As summer progresses and waters warm, good fishing extends to the reservoir's middle reaches and dam area.

**2 Canyon Ferry Reservoir** This is a popular walleye and rainbow trout fishery for Bozeman and Helena anglers and those from west of the Divide. Action begins in June and lasts well into summer. In early summer, look for crowds of boats on the lake's south end. Walleyes move northward into deeper waters through summer and fall.

**3 Tiber Reservoir** Home of the current Montana state record, it's also known as a solid, self-sustaining walleye fishery that produces plenty of eaters.

**4 Bighorn Lake** Straddling the Montana-Wyoming state line, it has a good walleye and sauger fishery. It's fished primarily with jigs near steep banks or with trolled crankbaits for suspended walleyes.

**5 Cooney Reservoir** This Carbon County reservoir offers anglers both walleyes and rainbow trout. Many walleye anglers fish from dusk well into the night.

**6 Yellowstone River** From the Hysham area downstream there is good fishing for both walleyes and sauger. Fishing is often best in late summer, fall, and into winter.

**7 Holter Reservoir** This Missouri River reservoir north of Helena offers good fishing for both walleyes and rainbows. It's also one of

the prettiest places in Montana where anglers can fish for walleyes.

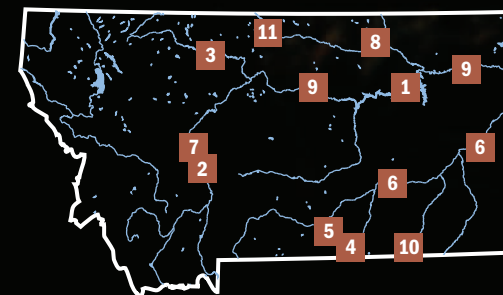
**8 Nelson Reservoir** June is the best month to fish this lake, east of Malta. Nelson is also a good spot to catch walleyes through the ice.

**9 Lower Missouri River** Anglers fish the river both above and below Fort Peck Lake. Above the reservoir, it's a great spring and fall fishery. Below, there's good fall fishing.

**10 Tongue River Reservoir** Many walleyes are caught out of this Big Horn County water, which is better known for its crappies and small-mouth bass.

**11 Fresno Reservoir** This reservoir near Havre on the Milk River produces decent-sized walleyes.

**DARK WATER PREDATOR** Like brown trout, walleyes avoid bright light. That's key to knowing when and where to catch them. On bright days walleyes will be deeper, where the sun's rays can't penetrate as far. At night, on cloudy days, and during low-light periods of dawn and dusk, walleyes move shallower and become more active. A "walleye chop" is when enough wind creates waves that diffuse light entering the water, allowing walleyes to move shallower.



BILL LINDNEY/WINDGOIMAGES.COM

Learn more about these and other walleye waters in the [Montana Fishing Guide](http://fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide): [fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide](http://fwp.mt.gov/fishing/guide)

## Walleyes without a boat

**A boat makes catching walleyes easier**, but it's not essential. Plenty of walleyes—including the state record—have been caught from shore.

Cody Nagel is an FWP fisheries biologist who grew up shore-fishing on walleye lakes throughout North Dakota. Now based in Havre, he catches walleyes without a boat at nearby Fresno Reservoir. His techniques, which he says should also work on most of Montana's other smaller walleye reservoirs:

**WHEN:** Walleyes become more active at low light and move into shallower water to feed. "The best time of day is dawn and dusk," Nagel says. "The best times of year are April through June and then September through November, when the fish are shallower and feeding more aggressively."

**WHERE:** Nagel has caught walleyes almost everywhere along the Fresno shoreline. His best fishing has been off points or other places where shallow water is close to deep water. "In midsummer I concentrate on the shoreline closer to the dam, where the water is deeper," he says.

**HOW:** Nagel wades out waist deep so he can cast farther and cover more water. He fishes a 1/8- to 1/4-ounce leadhead jig tipped with a plastic bait or half a night crawler. He will also use a floating Rapala or other crankbait, making several casts before moving a few more yards along the shoreline. "If you see a guy at Fresno at night in waders and a headlamp, that's probably me," he says.

Nagel notes that stationary anglers also catch fish at Fresno. "Some people do real well just sitting on shore, casting out an egg sinker with a floating jig-head tipped with a leech or night crawler," he says. "At dusk, the fish are moving and they will find your bait, so you can just sit there and read a book or watch your kids play along the shore and still catch fish."

**OTHER SHORE-FISHING WATERS:** On other walleye lakes, Nagel recommends fishing off rocky points or other shoreline structures that extend into the water. On walleye rivers such as the Milk, Marias, and Yellowstone, he recommends anglers fish below diversion dams and weirs, where walleyes and other coolwater species stack up. "I target current breaks, seams, and eddies or slack water behind boulders and submerged logs adjacent to current," he says. "River fishing really picks up in July and August, right when it's slowing down in the lakes," he says.

One of the state's top early season shore-fishing sites is the Causeway between Hauser Lake and Lake Helena, a few miles northeast of the state capital. Walleyes moving upstream in spring are constricted to a small channel at the popular site.

**NO KIDDING** Though not as easy to catch as panfish and hatchery trout, walleyes are taken from shore at many of Montana's smaller reservoirs.



HOWARD TRIPP/WINDGOIMAGES.COM





**KEEP OR RELEASE?** Where legal restrictions don't dictate otherwise, the size of fish you keep or release is a personal matter. Most anglers let go the "dinks" under 14 inches and keep the 14- to 20-inch "eaters." Some anglers who regularly catch a lot of walleyes also release their large fish.

## Walleye fishing terms

**'Eye:** Short for walleye.

**'Crawler harness:** A two- or three-hook rigging, usually with a colorful spinner blade, used to fish night crawlers. Usually tied behind a bottom-bouncer sinker.

**Bottom bouncer:** A lead weight midway down a stiff, 6-inch-long wire, which bounces along the bottom as you troll it.

**Crankbait:** A minnow-shaped lure made of plastic or wood with a plastic lip.

**Bait rig:** A sinker-and-hook combination without a spinner, used to fish minnows,

leeches, or night crawlers.

**Jig:** A hook with a lead weight molded to it. Usually fished with a plastic bait, minnow, leech, or night crawler on the hook and either cast, slowly trolled, or fished straight down over the side of a boat.

**Walleye chop:** Waves, kicked up by wind, that break up light entering the water, allowing walleyes to move shallower.

**Kicker:** A second, much smaller outboard on a boat that allows you to troll more slowly than the big motor.

**Electric:** An electric trolling motor, which may be operated by hand or a foot pedal.

**Planer board:** A device used to extend the width of your trolling. As the boat moves along, the board takes the lure far out to the side of the boat.

**Mud line:** A place where waves begin washing mud from the bank. Decayed plant matter in the dirty water attracts bait fish and, as a result, walleyes.

**Backtrolling:** Trolling with the stern of the boat going first rather than the bow. Used to troll more slowly and precisely.

**Tiller:** A boat operated with a handle directly on the outboard motor. A "big

tiller" has a large-horsepower motor.

**Console:** A boat with a steering wheel and windshield.

**Sauger:** A close walleye cousin that is native to the big rivers of eastern Montana.

**Suspended walleyes:** Walleyes far up off the bottom, hanging at a particular depth over deeper water.

**Dink:** A walleye too small to keep (usually less than 14 inches long).

**Eaters:** Generally speaking, walleyes from 14 to 20 inches, though it varies by angler.

**Release fish:** Generally speaking, walleyes bigger than eaters that are released.

*continued from page 13*

walleyes taken over 10 pounds," says Heath Headley, FWP biologist for the reservoir. One reason for the large walleye size is the reservoir's cisco population. These cousins of trout are high in calories—like double bacon cheeseburgers with fins. Another reason is that Fort Peck is so big that anglers there haven't overharvested the medium-sized walleyes—a pervasive problem in midwestern lakes—thus allowing plenty of fish to live a few more years and reach trophy size.

Headley says the best time to catch Fort Peck's large walleyes is late spring and early summer, when they are relatively shallow and feeding aggressively. "As summer progresses, they go deeper to pursue the cisco, which are trying to get away from the warmer water."

Rising lake levels in the past few years have flooded Fort Peck's shoreline vegetation, creating new spawning and rearing habitat for fish—especially perch, another important walleye food. Flooding also released huge amounts of nutrients from the submerged shoreline, fueling the lake's ecological food web. "It's called the 'new reservoir effect,'" says Headley. "All that flooded plant material breaks down and increases plankton production, an essential building block for all fish species.

"We've had very good fishing these last few summers," he adds, "and I predict very good fishing again in 2011."

Another top walleye lake is Canyon Ferry, which can be fantastic starting in late spring and lasting into fall. Canyon Ferry became famous in the early 2000s when the 1997 "year class" (generation of fish) began reaching catchable sizes. "Phenomenal is a good word to describe the fishing then," says Eric Roberts, FWP's Canyon Ferry biologist. Because walleyes were new to the reservoir, the predator species took advantage of abundant forage fish and grew at phenomenal rates. These days, says Roberts, Canyon Ferry's walleyes are growing at more normal rates. "What we're seeing now is the abundant 2007 year class moving through the system," he says. "Last year those walleyes were about 12 to 14 inches, with some getting up to 16 inches by fall. This year anglers will be seeing a lot of those fish at 13 to 16

**Or you can just sit back in a lawn chair and let the minnow do all the work.**

inches and even up to 18 inches by the end of the season." He adds that spring test netting continues to capture monster females over 14 pounds, "so that tells us there are still plenty of trophies out there."

Because action on Canyon Ferry can go from cold to hot in minutes, anglers pay close attention to other boats to see who is catching fish. "It's the only place in Montana with what I call 'pack' fishing," Roberts says. "On the south end of the lake, when fish are biting, boats are practically bumper to bumper."

Such crowding is unheard of at other Montana walleye waters. On massive Fort Peck, you can sometimes fish for hours and not see another soul. And on walleye waters near the Rocky Mountain Front, such as Tiber Reservoir and Lake Frances, fishing pressure can be so light during the week or in spring and fall that an angler can get downright lonely.

That's one of the great things about walleye fishing in Montana: There's a type of fishing for every taste. You can fish on your lonesome or seek out company. You can jig or you can troll. You can fish reservoirs or rivers.

You can also spend a fortune on the sport. Or you can do like state walleye champion Bob Hart did and just sit back in a lawn chair and let the minnow do all the work. 🐟

*For more information, visit the Walleyes Forever or Montana Walleyes Unlimited websites at [walleyesforever.com](http://walleyesforever.com) and [montanawalleyesunlimited.net](http://montanawalleyesunlimited.net). Sporting goods stores in Glasgow, Havre, Great Falls, Helena, Bozeman, and Billings have knowledgeable staff who can provide walleye fishing advice and help you find appropriate fishing gear.*