

# MONROE LAKE'S WORLD OF WALLEYES

**GREAT FISHING BELOW THE DAM AND IN THE MAIN LAKE ADDS UP TO ONE GREAT PLACE FOR CATCHING MARBLE-EYES THIS YEAR. HERE'S THE LATEST.**

**BY DON WILSON**

**I**t was a beautiful morning to cruise Lake Monroe, just south of Bloomington. Like so many times before, I was in search of my favorite toothy predatory species: the walleye. Unlike most of my trips, though, my fishing rod had been traded for telemetry equipment. I was riding along with Sandy Clark-Kolaks, an assistant biologist for the southern region of Indiana's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). Also riding with us was fisheries aide Brian Terry.

We were in search of walleyes that had been previously tagged with radio transmitters. Fish 523 had just registered the first signal of the morning near the Salt Creek boat ramp. The depth was around 28 feet, but the tagged fish was holding at 17 feet, according to Terry. Clark-Kolaks offered that the walleyes were holding several feet off the bottom because of the lack of dissolved oxygen at the deeper levels.

The tagging program started in April 2008 when 33 walleyes were collected, tagged and then released at three different sites: the lake side of the dam at the south end of the lake, the causeway near the middle of the reservoir, and in the backwaters of Saddle Creek. The fish

were collected using electroshocking and gill nets. Only four of the 33 fish in the study were females, one of which passed through the dam unscathed only a week after being tagged. According to Clark-Kolaks, females were extremely hard to come by during the four-week collection period.

Other fish have passed through the dam and will be tracked at some point.

For now, though, the program's focus is on the main lake. The program is scheduled to run for two years or until the batteries in the transmitters expire. So far, biologists have found the largest numbers of fish near the lower one-third of the lake. Deeper water and plentiful forage keep most of the marble-eyes between the dam and Fairfax Point. *(Continued)*



Night-fishing in the tailwaters of Monroe can be very productive. This fine specimen was fooled by a floating Smithwick Rattlin' Rogue. Photo by Don Wilson.

The information is being used to study the movement patterns of walleyes during different times of year. The study will also help in tracking fish during the spawning cycle. Researchers travel the lake the first two days of the week collecting readings. The information is then processed and posted weekly on the DNR's Web site. Anglers can use this information to aid in their search for this elusive fish.

With 10,750 acres of surface area, Lake Monroe is the largest impoundment in the state. Three counties surround the lake. Monroe and Brown counties surround most of the lake, but a small bay creeps into Jackson County as well.

According to Dave Kittaka, fisheries biologist for District 6, the walleye-stocking program started in 1982. The goal for the last 10 years has been 40 walleye fingerlings per acre to be stocked each year. The stocking plan has changed and now 50 fingerlings per acre will be stocked. That's close to 537,500 mini-walleyes that will take the plunge every year.

Kittaka also claims that the walleyes have enjoyed good growth rates in the lake, so it only takes about two years for a walleye to reach keeper size. Citing a 2007 study, Kittaka stated that there were fish from 10 year-classes collected, with the largest reaching 28 inches and 9 pounds.

From late winter to early spring, walleyes are in the pre-spawn mode. The males will feed heavily on flats adjacent to points, while the females prepare to spawn in deeper water. Fish also stack up near shallow, rocky points on the main lake. Anglers will find the largest length of the fish in the program is 20.54 inches with the average weight being 3.27 pounds. The largest fish in the program is a 6.7-pound female, with the second largest fish being a 6.5-pound male.

During the collection process, an intern with the DNR tipped off the crew to another hotspot. Saddle Creek was the biggest surprise so far in the study. According to Clark-Kolaks, they traveled up the creek as far as their boat could go. There they found a hole 15 feet deep. The hard bottom that lined the hole was littered with large rocks. She then described a scene that most walleye fishermen dream of. She stated that while implanting tags, they

had scads of walleyes swimming past the boat. Targeting feeder creeks, like Saddle Creek, could yield hot action on cool spring days.

When fishing the main lake and its tributaries, current is not an issue, so walleye fisherman can probe the depths using 6-pound-test line on 6 1/2- or 7-foot medium-action spinning rigs. This combination works well for pitching 1/8-ounce jigs to fussy deep-water fish, as well as launching a jerkbait to back-water fish.

Biologist Clark-Kolaks believes the main forage base for walleyes in Lake Monroe to be shad. She also admits that some yellow bass and bluegills are consumed when walleyes are in the brush close to shore.

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Casting minnow baits that imitate this forage, like the Smithwick Rattlin' Rouge in the 3 1/2-inch, 1/4-ounce and the 4 1/2-inch, 1/3-ounce sizes, or the Rapala Husky Jerk in the 4 3/4-inch size, around creek mouths, will garner favorable results. Fishing the 3 1/2-inch Storm Thunderstick Jr. can produce as well. Trolling the same lures across points adjacent to the feeder creeks can be very productive night or day.

During the day, an angler would do well trolling deep-diving crankbaits near channels in water with a depth of 15 feet or more. One observation Clark-Kolaks has made is that most walleye fishermen are not fishing tight enough to wood cover. Biologist Clark-Kolaks said of trolling fisherman, "If they would just troll 20 to 30 feet closer to the trees, they would be in the fish."

Finding areas where deep channels brush up against flooded timber or brush is an ideal situation.

Finding pre-spawn fish is a little easier below the dam. Most fish will stage within a couple of hundred yards from the spillway. As the season progresses, anglers would be better suited to concentrate their efforts even closer to the outflow.

The current is usually swift when fishing the rocky areas adjacent to the spillway. While choosing a location, survey the shoreline and look for large rocks that deflect current. Walleyes will

lie in the slack water behind the points. On one late March outing, I found that by focusing on the slack water, I could trigger more strikes. The lethargic walleyes would come out to nab any passing food items.

Even better, by standing farther upcurrent from the large rock, I could work the entire length of the eddy past the point. Fish hanging tight to the point would hit just as the lure passed the rock. Utilizing these techniques, I managed to land a healthy 5-pound female that night. Unfortunately, though, I lost several nice fish before that big one as well.

Shore-bound anglers who are willing to focus their walleye hunting efforts at night will find good success in the tailwaters from late winter all the way to midsummer. A good headlamp will make all the difference in the world when fishing rough shores in the dark. An LED-style light is a good choice.

When chasing walleyes below the dam, most walleye veterans prefer a spinning outfit with a medium-action rod. Fishermen would be wise to spool up with a quality, abrasion-resistant line in 8-pound-test or heavier. Some anglers will use lighter line, but when a 6-pound walleye turns into the swift current after hitting your lure, the extra line strength offers a little more reassurance.

The same minnow baits mentioned for lake fishing are my go-to baits for tailwater fishing. Make sure to use a floating lure when casting in the tailwaters. Suspending jerkbaits will hang up in the rocks, but floating models will float back and out of hangups.

Some fishermen like to pitch jigs in the slack-water eddies. While this can be productive, be prepared to lose a box of jigs for every walleye you catch. If you feel compelled to use a leadhead, casting a 1/8-ounce chartreuse jig with a yellow or green curlytail will get the marble-eyes' attention.

After some trial-and-error, I also found that soft-plastic jerkbaits would draw strikes, too. Baits like the Zoom Super Fluke and the Strike King Zulu worked rather well if twitched along slowly in slack water eddies.

Lake Monroe offers plenty of walleye action for both boaters and land-bound anglers. If you wish to share information about your walleye fishing, the employees of the DNR would love to hear from you. □