

Once upon a winter in the West . . .



WOW!

WESTERN OPEN-WATER WALLEYES IN WINTER

by Tom "Doc" Johnson*

Fall slips into winter. Jet skiers disappear, sailboarders have mutated into snowboarders, and all but the hardest anglers have winterized their boats and are settling in at home for a new season of In-Fisherman television. In the In-Fisherman lexicon of calendar periods, Turnover has passed, Coldwater has arrived with Frozen Water soon to follow. Not necessarily so. This is the West, Colorado to be exact.

The Weather Channel leaves the rest of the country with the impression that Colorado during winter is cold and constantly snowing, that only the heartiest of anglers dare venture forth. This is true in the mountains, but not on the eastern slope of the Rockies. On many occasions, "front-range" temperatures in January and February reach into the 60°F to 70°F range. Last year, for example, Pueblo Reservoir in the south-central part of the state was ice-free all winter. Other front-range reservoirs froze off and on, and then for only a short time. During many winters, the Frozen Water Period never arrives or is so short that open-water reservoir fishing is enjoyed year-long.

To be successful, anglers must understand (1) differences between natural lakes and reservoirs, (2) types of reservoirs in the West, and (3) how to respond to the unique problems each type of reservoir presents.

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RESERVOIRS AND NATURAL LAKES

Essentially, a reservoir is the widening and deepening of a river or stream formed when an obstruction, such as a dam, is built between two high points, slowing or stopping the free flow of water. Since a reservoir is a combination of a river and lake, it functions a little like both.

The greatest difference between natural lakes and reservoirs is rate of water exchange. The rate that water flows into and out of a reservoir affects fish location and movement more than any other single feature. The greater the rate of water exchange, the more the reservoir resembles a river. The less the exchange, the more it resembles a natural lake. Fish move extensively in rivers and less in natural lakes, especially smaller lakes. Consider the special problems an angler faces when confronted with the following scenario.

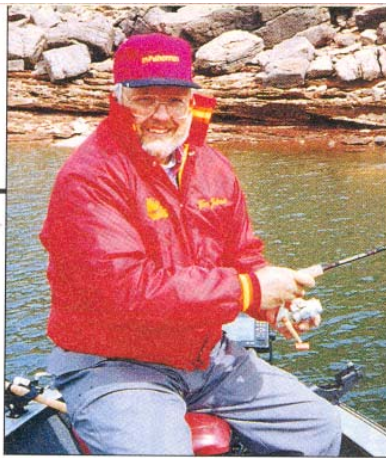
Three years ago, the Wyoming Walleye Circuit (WWC) held a tournament at Seminole Reservoir near Rawlins, Wyoming, the upper reservoir on the North Platte River. Water levels, due to downstream irrigation demands, reached only to the end of the low-water boat ramp and continued to drop throughout the tournament. One year later, on the same date, when the WWC returned, the low-water boat ramp had disappeared. The reservoir had risen 45 feet.

TYPES OF WESTERN RESERVOIRS

All reservoirs in the West don't experience such a drastic fluctuation in water level and exchange rate. In-Fisherman classifies the following six types of reservoirs, each with its own distinct personality: canyon, plateau, highland, hill-land, flatland, and lowland. Canyon reservoirs in the West generally are large and function primarily as water storage for downstream agricultural irrigation. These reservoirs are subject to high rates of water exchange. In the Colorado-Wyoming region, they're usually located at higher altitudes, where they experience significant periods of frozen water, so are not the subject of this article.

Our focus is on flatland and plateau reservoirs, which are common to the West. Most of the walleye waters in Colorado are the flatland type. These reservoirs were constructed in flood plains and are shallow, rarely exceeding 25 feet in depth. They cover huge flats with gentle rises or depressions and gradually sloping points, and they're relatively fertile. These include such Colorado reservoirs as Cherry Creek, Sterling, John Martin, and Bonny.

But even these reservoirs vary in their yearly rate of water exchange. Cherry Creek Reservoir located in the Denver Metro area, an outstanding producer of large 'eyes, primarily



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controls periodic flooding of shallow Cherry Creek. As such, little water exchange occurs, so it functions much like a natural lake. Other Colorado flatland reservoirs are primarily water storage facilities for agricultural irrigation and as such are drawn down dramatically in fall and rise dramatically in spring. Their rate of water exchange is high but not continuous.

Like some flatland reservoirs, plateau reservoirs serve as water storage for rural irrigation. Many also supply water to nearby metropolitan areas. These reservoirs are much deeper than their flatland cousins, reaching depths of 100 feet or more.

The draw on these reservoirs is much heavier than the draw on flatland reservoirs, therefore they experience a more dramatic water exchange rate. Drawdown on these reservoirs often exceeds 40 or more feet a year. Due to the high degree of water exchange, these reservoirs tend to lack vegetation and are low in fertility. Walleyes must move more to find food. This type of reservoir type functions more like a river than a lake.

WINTER TECHNIQUES

Once the differences between natural lakes and reservoirs and the characteristics of western reservoirs are understood, the question becomes, "How do I successfully fish these reservoirs during the open-water period in winter?"

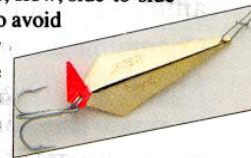
During the Coldwater Period, flatland reservoirs with low water exchange rates are fished like natural lakes. Livebait rigs and bottom bouncers with livebait are the usual choices, but crankbaits offering a tight wobble such as Jr. ThunderSticks and Rapalas also are productive. The key is finding the warmest water and fishing slowly. The northeast corner of these reservoirs usually contains the warmest water. Walleyes there move shallow during the day in search of prey.

Flatland reservoirs with dramatic fall-winter drawdowns and winter-spring infusions of water must be fished differently, not in tactic, but in location. The basic rule of reservoirs of this type is: During falling water, fish main-lake points and humps, especially those closest to the old river-stream channel; during rising water, fish the backs of bays and secondary points within bays.

Plateau reservoirs, as mentioned, are less fertile than flatland reservoirs. Since this type of reservoir experiences the greatest degree of water exchange, walleyes can and do move great distances. Searching is necessary to locate them. In this situation, look in the deeper parts of the reservoir.

During the Coldwater Period, water temperatures and oxygen levels equalize throughout the water column. Baitfish move deeper to hide from predators. They locate near or above deep rockpiles and deep rock reefs. Walleyes move deep in search of this vital food source. But how deep is deep? During winter in Pueblo Reservoir in Colorado, walleyes in open water are frequently 60 to 110 feet deep.

Once you locate these deep fish, the most successful tactic is to fish vertically with jiggling spoons. Electronics are a must, units that let you see your spoon at work on the fish. The most popular spoons are Hopkins and Crippled Herrings. A best kept secret is the Arrow Spoon that displays a wide, slow, side-to-side action as it falls. To avoid hang-ups on rocky structure, change the hooks on these spoons from trebles to size 1/0 or 2/0 straight-shank hooks.



Spoon sizes vary from as light as 1/2 ounce to 2 ounces, depending on the depth you're fishing and line size. Berkley Cold Weather line, in as light a diameter as is comfortable, is a good choice. And Berkley's new Fire-Line may be an even better choice.

As you vertically jig for these deep fish, remember that most strikes occur on the drop. Follow your lure down with the tip of your rod, watching for the most subtle irregular line movement. Don't allow too much slack line on the drop, just enough so the spoon drops freely, imparting its natural deadly action. Set the hook sharply when you detect any irregular movement.

Winter in the West is not a time to sit at home and dream of the next open-water season. Open water is still here in many reservoirs. Open-water walleye fishing is a year-round event in the West.

(For more information, contact Larry, Dick, or Lois at Colorado Sports and Tackle, 303/287-2111; or Louise or Dave at Valley Country Tackle, 303/693-9014.) ■

COMPANY CONTACTS

Berkley, 800/BERKLEY; Hopkins, 804/622-0977; Luhr Jensen (Crippled Herring), 800/366-3811; Normark (Rapalas), 612/933-7060; PRADCO-Rebel (Arrow Spoon), 800/422-3474; Storm (Jr. ThunderStick), 405/329-5565.