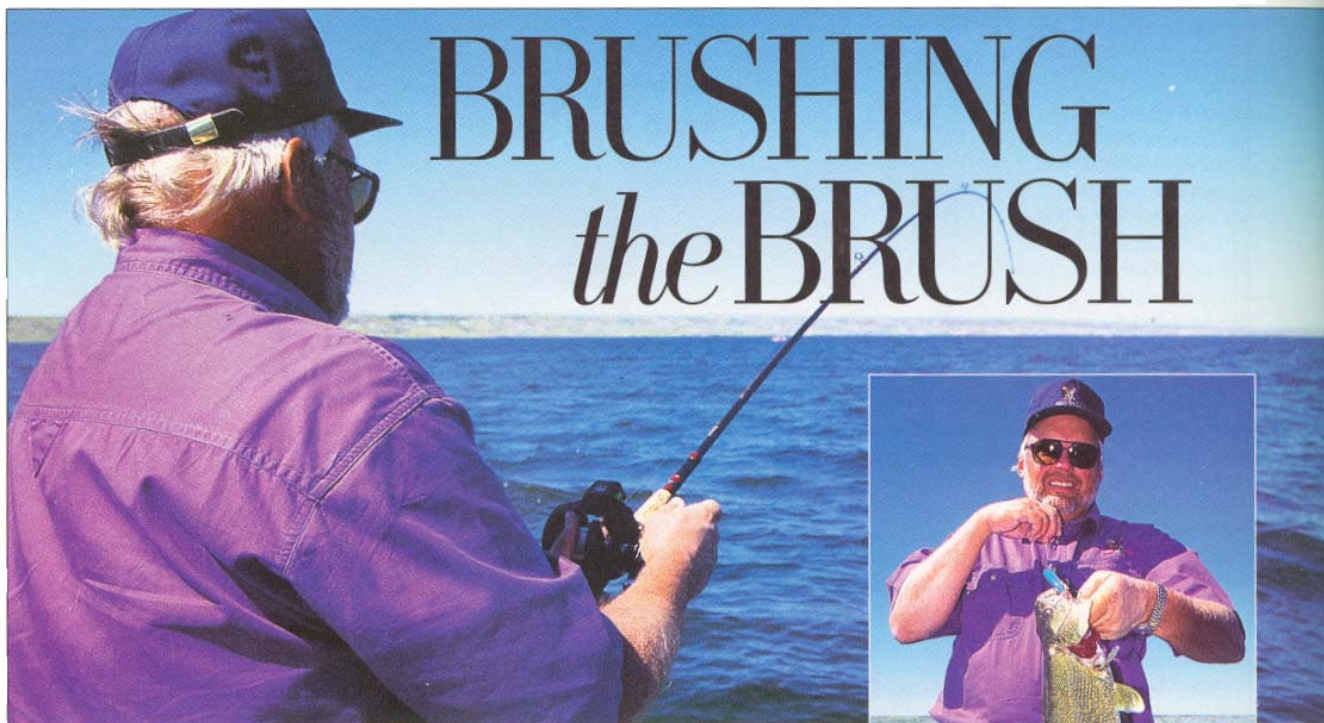
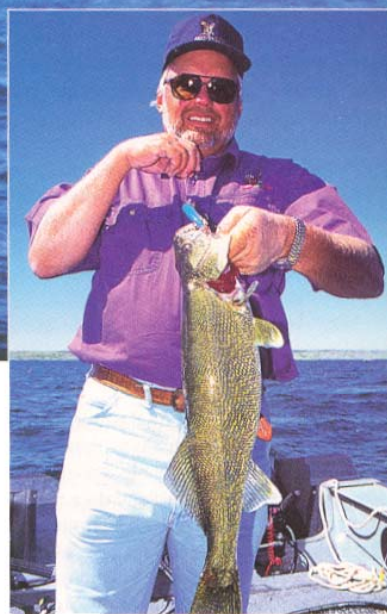


'Eye to 'Eye, Treetop High



by Tom "Doc" Johnson*

For several years, western reservoirs fell victim to drought, rarely rising to normal pool, even during traditional spring run-off. Trees and scrubbrush along the shorelines multiplied. Then the rains and snowmelt came, inundating new growth. Young trees and brush were rapidly flooded. Also, once large islands, with trees rising 10 feet above the low water level, now became large flats covered by relatively deep water, with treetops rising within 10 to 20 feet of the surface.



Tom Johnson tickles the tops of timber for western reservoir 'eyes.

Most anglers avoid these brushy snag-infested areas, feeling they're too difficult to fish, and that large quantities of tackle will be lost. And hooked fish would be too difficult to land due to the snags. But learn how to fish submerged brush and these snaggy areas can become golden opportunities.

Flooded trees and brush congregate baitfish and provide cover and ambush points for predators like walleyes. Treetops exposed to sunlight form algae and host colonies of insects and small aquatic life, attracting minnows and small fish that use the cover for protection. Large numbers of walleyes also use these areas, taking advantage of baitfish that stray too far from cover. Walleye anglers should do the same when 'eyes stray too far out of the wood.

CASTING OPTIONS

These are not weed areas where fouled lures can be ripped out of cover; they're flooded tamarack and cedar, young willow and cottonwood trees, and brush. Thus tactics vary somewhat from fishing weedbeds, though similarities exist.

In relatively small areas or in distinct concentration points, try a slipbobber baited with a leech or minnow. Float the bait either just

above thick cover, or down alongside sparser wood. When a walleye pulls the bobber below the surface, point your rod tip at the bobber, reel up slack, and sweepset upward. Use a hard set with a long tough rod, like an 8½-foot Eagle Claw Crosswings SST, to get the fish up and out of the brush as quickly as possible, minimizing its ability to tangle line in the brush.

If the brush rises to within 5 feet of the surface, casting shallow crankbaits like Storm Baby ThunderSticks or Normark Shallow Shad Raps can be excellent. Again, use a medium-heavy rod, this time with abrasion-resistant line like 12- to 14-pound Trilene XT. Don't be gentle. As soon as a walleye strikes, pull it up and out of the wood. Land the fish as quickly as possible to keep it from diving and becoming hopelessly entangled.

In large standing trees, pitch light round-head or swimming jigs in and around the wood. Northland's Weed Weasel or Fire-Eye Jig, or Bait Rigs' Slo Poke, tipped with livebait or Berkley Power Grubs, tempts strikes. Vertically jig the bait alongside large trunks, right down to the bottom, then raise a few feet, jigging, and repeating, to cover different depths for fish suspended in the branches.

*Tom Johnson, an In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail pro from Denver, Colorado, heads up Eagle Claw's pro staff.

TROLLING OPTIONS

If large areas of brush or treetops lie deeper than 5 feet beneath the surface, trolling may be a better option to effectively cover water and locate pockets of active walleyes. The key is to present lures or baits just above the trees and brush, making occasional contact with the upper fringe, without digging down into it and snagging. A minimum of 10-pound-test low-stretch tough monofilament is critical. Preferably use a 7- to 7½-foot long-handled casting rod or flippin' stick that can be slipped into a rod holder for trolling.

One trolling option incorporates a light-weight 1/8- to 1/4-ounce bottom bouncer, using as light a weight as possible to barely tick timber without snagging. I use Quick Change bottom bouncers to easily adjust the desired weight as conditions warrant. Attach an 18-inch leader with a two-hook spinner-crawler harness, using an in-line float to help prevent the harness from dropping into the trees. Spinner blades are optional; keep 'em small if you use 'em.

Try to keep your presentation as vertical as possible, despite the light weight. Lower your bottom bouncer until it barely contacts treetops or brush, then slightly raise your rod tip. Now drift or use your electric bowmount motor to slowly move over the cover. Tick. Free swim. Tick again. When you feel a strike, quickly set the hook, keep your rod tip up, and don't allow the fish to dive into the brush.

If a hooked fish becomes tangled in wood cover, move the boat directly over it, lay your

rod down in the boat, grasp the line in your hand, and slowly increase pressure on the line. You'll feel the fish easier and avoid breaking rod tips. Pressure often causes a tree branch to break or brush to pull loose, hopefully with a big fish still attached to the end of your line.

For covering large stands of flooded timber faster, troll crankbaits over the tops of the trees or brush, barely skipping lures above the underwater forest. Each crankbait model is different, with the combination of line length and diameter determining running depth. For information on the dive curves of different crankbait models, refer to *Crankbaits in Depth* or *Precision Trolling* by Dr. Steven Holt and Tom Irwin, or *Crankbait Depth Guide* by Mike McClelland.

A level-wind reel is necessary for precision crankbait trolling above cover. Too much line out, and you frequently snag. Too little line out, and you don't reach the walleye strike zone. Line-counter reels indicate exactly how much line is out, allowing you to fine-tune lure depth. Or simply count the number of passes the level wind takes across the face of your reel to estimate line length. For example, if one pass across the reel equals 10 feet of line, 12 passes equals 120 feet. Such reels also hold plenty of line and provide good cranking power for fighting fish, along with quick line retrieval.

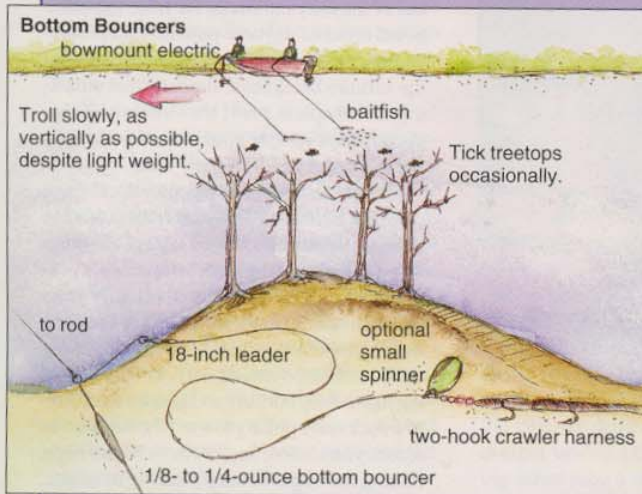
My favorite lures for trolling atop brush are Storm Deep ThunderStick Juniors and #8 or #9 Normark Shad Raps, with the larger

Raps better for attracting larger walleyes. They offer proven combinations of profile and action, plus, the large lip contacts and deflects over an occasional branch. Match the hatch when selecting colors. Black and silver or blue and silver mimic shad or smelt. Try perch or fire tiger when perch are on the menu. And don't overlook the new gaudy clown patterns, either.

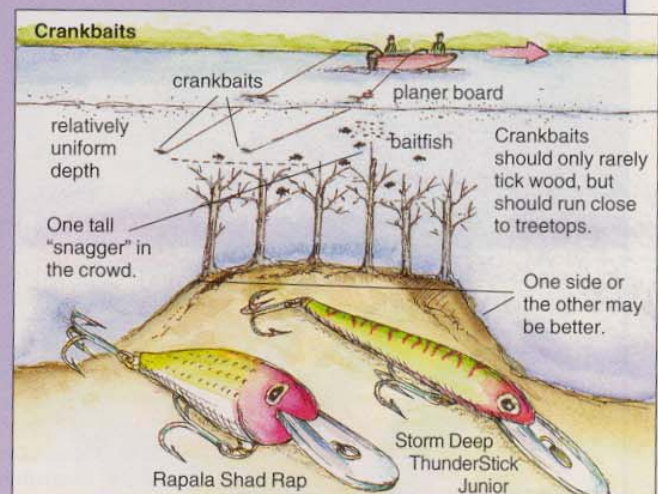
Timber probably isn't the place to add snap weights to your line; they'll likely snag wood and detach. But I like to run two lines with Off-Shore Planer boards—one spread to either side of the boat—and two more lines directly back off each corner of the transom. This increases lateral coverage, and I often catch fish on the outside lines when fish beneath the boat are spooked by the boat's passing.

Lures may occasionally appear to hang on brush, especially on planer boards. When this happens, stop the boat, retrieve non-snagged lines, and back the boat toward the hung lure. Maintain a relatively tight line during your approach. Remove the planer board, then move the boat directly over the snag. Much of the time, that snagged lure has a fish on it. Lift straight up, and you'll often get it up and out of the brush. Be ready with a landing net, because the fish may be big, and you don't want it diving back down again. You may lose a few lures while trolling crankbaits above flooded trees and brush, but that's a small price to pay compared to the rewards. ■

Tickling the Tip Tops of Timber



Trolling submerged timber tops requires positioning lures agonizingly close to the wood while only occasionally touching it, even more so with crankbaits than with lightweight bottom bouncers. Fine-tuning line length is critical to flirting with snags while remaining within the fish zone.



Spend extra time in areas where you see baitfish suspended above or outside the trees. That indicates that walleyes may be above or alongside the wood, aggressively feeding in an area where they're easier to reach.