

Changes for Success

By Jim Stephen

During first pre-dawn minutes when the sky begins to pink, adrenaline tingles our bodies and soaring expectations of lunker walleyes send us riding a crest of white foam to our hot spot.

Then the biteless minutes can lengthen into hours. Frustration sets in.

Other fishermen are catching fish. Armed with knowledge and skill acquired through hard fishing days, we don't want to admit our livewell is empty and ask what they are using.

That's what we do later, back at the boat landing: Ask questions, exchange information. On the lake we persist in dragging our scorned stickbait past tantalizing fish images showing on our graph. They bit like crazy on the same plug last fall and there's no reason why they shouldn't now, right?

Guess again.

I made that mistake one opening day on a popular reservoir by washing the paint off a tooth-scarred perch-colored crankbait for most of the morning.

Water temperature was about the same as the previous fall, sky slightly overcast,

water nicely ruffled. Stable weather for three consecutive days. Ideal conditions for a hot bite. My graph displayed fish. Other boats were netting fish.

I thought, great, after waiting all winter, opening day was fast going out the bilge pump. I sat there drinking a cup of coffee with my feet propped on three full tackle boxes of some of the finest lures ever conceived by America's talented fishing lure engineers.

Each separate compartment in those tackle boxes represented a brilliant flash of past inspiration, selected and paid for with hard cash, for an anticipated specific fishing situation requiring the ultimate artificial to save the day.

And now I was using a couple hundred dollars of plastic, hooks, and paint for a foot rest.

That excursion was a prime example of how reluctant we can become to change from previous effective tactics that currently are not producing fish, to try a sharp right hand turn and experiment with a pat-

tern that might save a fishing trip.

I opened a box and found a couple of walking sinkers still in their packages, purchased no doubt, with some fine fishing in mind when I heard they were the hot item every serious fisherman couldn't do without. I had promptly condemned them to the darkest recesses of my tackle box, alongside jars of pork trailers and under packages of crappie rigs still stapled shut. (Jigs are the only item for crappies, right?)

Most of us have a good, unused idea somewhere in our tackle boxes.

I gave a small mental shrug. The stickbait was ineffective, so what did I have to lose by tying on a crawler harness with double hooks, a half dozen red beads and a small yellow Indiana blade? In my cooler, two dozen plump crawlers were sleeping with my sandwiches.

One of the crawlers volunteered as bait. I lowered the rig over the side, flicked the electric on, and trolled with the sinker wire just ticking bottom. I quickly ran downwind, straight across a big stump-strewn underwater hump where my graph showed

Trying a variety of lures is a must for increasing your fishing success when you aren't having much.

the same fish I had failed to catch earlier.

My anticipation thinned as I passed the far breakline and the graph image plummeted to deep fishless water. Undaunted, I returned, this time upwind. On the way back the rod tip very s-l-o-w-l-y formed an arc, then began throbbing. I felt the head-shaking thump of a fish.

The walleye wasn't a monster—but it was a walleye. The others that followed came from the same year class—just the right broiler size to produce golden brown filets. Changing tactics and paying attention to details made the difference in the trip. I never took a fish running downwind.

The creeping speed and pulsating attraction of the spinner blade turned on the fish, not the stickbait's faster presentation. The walleyes preferred the slower upwind offering—they didn't have to chase it—just suck in the harness as it passed and hang on. That change in technique produced a limit of five fish.

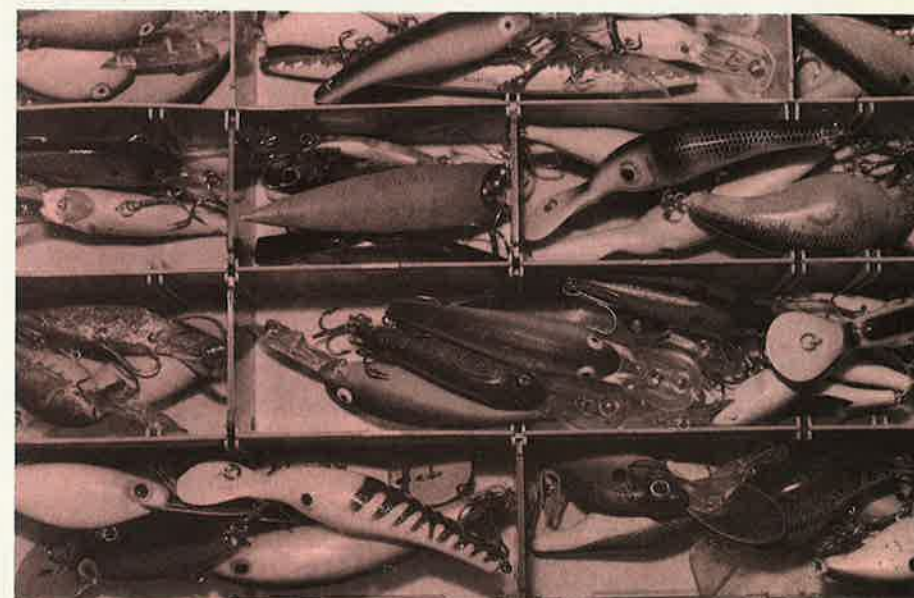
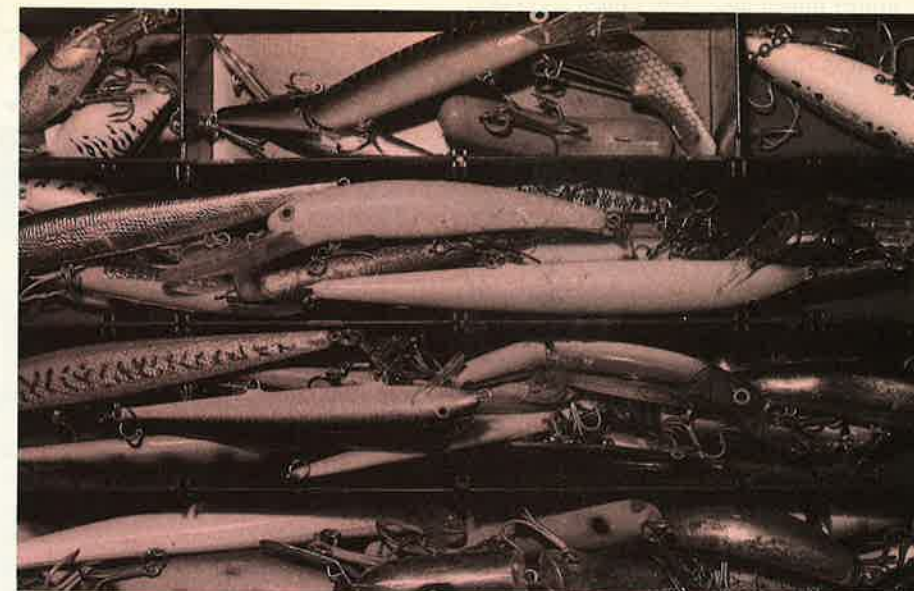
As the water warmed in later weeks, the walleyes turned aggressive, and I tried the walking sinker using floating stickbaits instead of a crawler harness in an area I would never try a crankbait. The snag-infested reservoir bottom required a rig that would telegraph the presence of plug-eating wood, allowing me to lift the lure out of harm's way. The walking sinker saved countless expensive plugs.

On a roll with experimenting, I tried the new high-tech braided lines. The sensitivity and lack of stretch of these new lines coupled with bottom bouncers produces far more hookups in deep water than stretchy mono ever thought of doing.

When you run through weeds you can almost "hear" the sound of the weeds squeaking on the line. I've watched floating weeds wrap around my line, then felt them as the water pressure forced them scraping down the line towards the lure.

With one of my stiffer graphite rods, I can feel the wire of the bottom bouncer ticking its way over gravel.

Fish are caught with just about everything imaginable but how often do we radically change tactics when we're fishing? Could be we get so involved with patterns that worked last week or last year we forget the information we avidly gleaned from articles and books read during the winter. What



Don't Become Set in Your Ways When Fishing



This walleye is an example of what can be caught when trying different fishing methods.

about all the tips from the fishing pros who divulge their winning secrets? Do we listen and then follow their advice?

Most of those secrets and techniques are closed up in our tackle boxes. When was the last time you spotted bottom-hugging walleyes under a school of bait fish, watching the arcs as they rose to feed, ripe for a trolled crankbait, but didn't hit on the offering? The timing was right, but the lure color or lure action might have been off.

Did you change lures every three or four passes? What was the fascination with the dud plug you were towing around? Had to be terribly important if it wasn't catching fish. Maybe it was one your wife gave you for a Christmas present and you felt guilty if you didn't use it.

Then again you might have felt if you took the time to change lures, you would lose precious fishing time. Of course you don't think anything of spending time racing across the lake to a new location in

search of biting fish, so why not use multiple lure changes when you know you've located prime territory, but they won't hit your offering?

That's exactly why pro fisherman carry a number of rods, each rigged differently. Crank in one, pitch out the other. Sixty seconds and you're back in the ball game with a totally new bait. Predator fish are attracted by the "difference" in fish, usually indicating a weak or injured bait-fish that won't have the stamina to elude the attack. If the walleyes are chasing shad, you might need to oversize or undersize your lure to make your bait obvious. Dig out something from your tackle box that doesn't "match the hatch." Wally Diver. Ratlin' Rogue, or jointed Rapala.

During a vacation I found walleyes in eight feet of water in bright daylight simply out of frustration of not catching them on classic breaklines in 15 to 25 feet of water. I ran deep-diving crankbaits, quick