

Angler's Guide to Walleye Fishing in Georgia

Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division
Fisheries Management Section
February 2018

Walleye in Georgia

Walleye is the most popular sport fish in the northern states and Canada, but it remains a relatively obscure species to most Georgia anglers. With expanding populations and an excellent reputation as table fare, walleyes are gaining the attention of increasing numbers of Georgia anglers. Walleye is a coolwater fish that is native to the Tennessee River and Coosa River Valley systems that flow through the heart of Fannin, Union, and Towns counties in northeast Georgia and in Dade, Walker and Catoosa counties in northwest Georgia. Rivers with Native American names like the Coosawattee, Conasauga, Etowah, Oostanaula, Toccoa, Nottely, and Hiwasee once contained native walleye populations.

Native walleye declined in the state many years ago for a variety of reasons including loss of spawning habitat and overfishing. To rebuild and expand their distribution across North Georgia, a walleye stocking program was initiated in the 1960s. These early stockings were largely unsuccessful in all but a few mountain lakes; therefore, the walleye stocking program ceased in 1968.

During the 1990s, declining numbers of walleye coupled with the rapid expansion of illegally introduced blueback herring sparked a renewed interest in re-establishing the walleye stocking program. In 2002, a fledgling walleye stocking program was reborn in Georgia. Today, eleven lakes receive annual stockings of walleye. These include lakes Seed, Rabun, Tugalo, Yonah and Hartwell in the Savannah River drainage, lakes Chatuge and Blue Ridge in the Tennessee Valley plus Lake Lanier, Carters Lake, and two lakes in the Rocky Mountain Public Fishing Area.

This guide was written to provide anglers with seasonal information on where, when and how to catch walleye in Georgia. GADNR staff is also available to answer more specific questions. Contact information for walleye lakes in Georgia is provided in the table below.



Reservoir	GADNR Phone Number
Lakes Burton, Seed, Rabun, Tugalo, Yonah, Hartwell, Chatuge and Lanier	706/947-1507, 706/947-1502 770/535-5498
Blue Ridge Lake, Carters Lake, and Rocky Mountain Public Fishing Area	706/295-6102

Late-Winter / Early-Spring Fishing Tips

By late-winter, the natural instincts of adult walleyes draw the population to the spawning grounds for the annual ritual of laying and fertilizing eggs. Identifying potential spawning areas is critical to angling success from February to April. For most lakes in Georgia, the major walleye spawning areas are in the headwaters in very shallow water with rocky bottoms, like the picture below of a major spawning area in the headwaters of Lake Rabun. Pre-spawn walleye stage in deeper water



near the spawning grounds for several weeks while they wait for the water to reach the critical temperature of 48°F to 50°F. No fancy gear or tackle are needed to catch these fish. Simply drifting nightcrawlers slowly along the bottom through these staging areas is the best way to catch pre-spawn walleye. Walleye are finicky feeders and may prefer small jigs tipped with minnows or a curly tailed grub or even a crankbait, such as a sinking Rapala or Shad Rap. Maintain a slow but steady retrieve as you work these lures across the river bottom. Be patient and stay focused for a light tap or steady tug on the line.

Male walleyes will be the first to reach the spawning grounds in late-February, and they will remain in the area through mid-April. At night, male walleyes will swim into very shallow water with rocky bottoms in hopes of finding a female ready to spawn. During the day, they will retreat to the shelter of nearby deeper water to avoid the bright sunshine. Female walleyes behave much differently than their male counterparts. Females will only move in and out of the spawning grounds for brief periods at night to broadcast their eggs onto the rocky bottoms where they will be fertilized by several males. When her heavy egg sac is emptied, she will leave the spawning grounds for the season. Because of the differences in spawning behavior between male and female walleyes, anglers can expect the bulk of their catch to be males that range in size from 2 to 4 lb. GADNR has been stocking walleye into north Georgia lakes since 2001. This is sufficient time to allow many females to reach trophy size. In fact, GADNR biologists have collected walleye over 12 pounds during the spawning season on some lakes. The state record was caught in February 2016 and weighed 14 lb 2 oz.



From March through early-April, walleyes are easiest to catch in the evening hours when they venture into the shallows of the spawning grounds. In fact, some anglers talk about the “golden hour” right before nightfall as the time when walleyes bite best. Shallow water walleyes are most easily caught using a 3/8 oz jig tipped with a live minnow, nightcrawler, or plastic grub. Shallow running minnow imitations are also effective during the nightly spawning run. Whatever your



preference of baits or lures, the presentation is similar. Cast across the rocky structure and make a slow but steady retrieve. The bite is rarely aggressive but feels more like sudden resistance. A slight upward swing of the rod is all that is needed to set the hook. Walleyes in shallow water are easily spooked, so finesse and stealth are critical, even at night. The rocky, shoal areas below the dams at lakes Burton, Seed, Tugalo, and Yonah offer easy bank access for nighttime anglers. Boats are required to reach spawning fish on lakes Tugalo, Hartwell, Lanier, Carters, and Blue Ridge. Use caution when fishing below dams because water levels may rise suddenly. Check water release schedules before your trip.

Late-Spring / Summer Fishing Tips

After the spawning season, walleye return to the main lake to resume their daily ritual of finding food and searching for sheltered resting areas. Because walleye prefer cool water temperatures (65 to 72°F), small schools of walleye will congregate together in deeper water during the summer months where temperatures are more suitable. Walleye orient to structure, especially bottom structure, in their preferred depth zone, only leaving these hiding spots for opportune moments to feed on herring, shad, yellow perch, sunfish, and crayfish. The key to successful walleye fishing in the summer is to determine areas of the lake where walleyes are most likely to congregate. In the mountain lakes, likely congregation areas occur on points and the mouth of coves at target depths that range from 15 to 25-feet in early summer and progressively increase to 30 to 50-feet by summer's end. During the summer, most walleye can be found on the lower half the lake.



The best presentation for walleye in the late-spring and summer months is a simple nightcrawler that is worked slowly along the bottom near structure. Slow trolling can also be effective under low-light and nighttime conditions using a weighted bottom bouncer armed with an in-line spinner and tipped with a nightcrawler or lively blueback herring or even deep diving crankbaits in perch, fire tiger and shad color patterns. Long points, humps, and weed beds on the lower end of the lake are the best places to search for summertime walleyes. Structure fishing with finesse and diligence will ultimately be the keys to hooking into some walleyes during the warmer months.

Several reservoirs in north Georgia are summer standouts because of their relatively small size and ease of locating deepwater fish. Lakes with excellent

summer walleye fishing include Lake Yonah, Lake Tugalo, and Lake Rabun. The search for summer walleye should begin on the lower one-third of the reservoir in the mouth of coves, on long points, or around any deepwater structure. There is one unusual twist to the traditional summertime, deepwater pattern on these lakes. After heavy rain events, walleyes will frequently move into the shallow headwaters to feed in the fast-flowing, turbid waters. These opportunities are unpredictable but worth taking advantage of when they occur because the walleyes that move into the shallows are generally big and hungry!

Fall Fishing Tips

When the tree leaves turn colors during the cool days of October, walleyes emerge from their deepwater refuge to search the shallows for unsuspecting prey. During the fall, walleye actively feed during low light conditions and throughout the night. The moon phase can also influence walleye fishing success, with the best night time fishing occurring under a full moon. Once again, search the points and adjacent flats on the lower one-third of the reservoir at dawn, dusk or at night for shallow water feeding activity.

Cool weather walleye feed on a wide variety of prey items, including blueback herring, shad, yellow perch, bluegill, minnows, and crayfish. During the fall months, walleye will typically bunch up around downed trees and other structures in 20 to 40-feet of water, especially in the outer bends of the river channel. Anglers should nibble around the edges of these structures with a small jig that is tipped with a minnow or nightcrawler. Trolling with live herring or deep-diving crankbaits is a secondary option at this time of year.



Winter Fishing Tips




From December through February, water temperatures on most north Georgia lakes dip into the mid to low 40s. Cold winter temperatures reduce a fish's desire to feed. For those brave enough to endure the cold, live baits presented around bottom structure at depths from 30 to 60-feet, especially near the dam, can produce a few strikes. Although winter walleye may be bunched up, they are largely inactive. Patiently dangling a live herring or medium shiner or even a jigging spoon in front of their nose may be sufficient temptation to draw a strike. If one fish is caught or located, you can be sure that others are nearby. The key to successful winter fishing is to work your baits slowly around every nook and cranny of bottom structures.




























In late winter, warm rains can concentrate walleye in tributary areas of the lake. Tributary runoff is often a few degrees warmer than the main lake and sometimes more turbid in color. These conditions are favorable to the baitfish that walleye prey upon. Follow the warming water to the bait and you will find the predators, including walleye.






Wes Carlton with his state record walleye from Lake Rabun that weighed 14 lb 2 oz.







Walleye Fishing Seasonal Calendar at a Glance










Color-Coded Seasonal Index  = Good  = Fair  = Low










RESERVOIR	FEB - APRIL	MAY - SEPT	OCT - JAN
Seed			
Rabun			
Tugalo			
Yonah			
Hartwell			
Lanier			
Blue Ridge			
Carters			
Rocky Mountain Public Fishing Area			




Seasonal Tips, Tactics & Locations by Reservoir

Color-Coded Seasonal Index  = Good  = Fair  = Low

RESERVOIR	FEB – APRIL	MAY – SEPT	OCT – JAN
Seed	<p>Target the headwaters. Fish from Burton Dam downstream to the mouth of Sawmill Creek.</p> 	<p>Fishing is best on the bottom near the dam, especially in late summer. Target downed trees.</p> 	<p>Target bottom structure on the outside bends of the river channel.</p> 
Rabun	<p>Target the headwaters. Fish on shore from the Low Gap Bridge upstream to Seed Dam at night. During the day, fish downstream of the bridge with nightcrawlers, jigs or perch-colored crankbaits.</p> 	<p>Target main lake points and bottom structure in 20-30 feet of water on the lower end of the lake. Live herring, nightcrawlers and shiners work best. At night, cast to shallow points with small crankbaits.</p> 	<p>Target bottom structure on the outer bends of the river channel on the lower half of the lake. At night, walleye move into shallow water on points and adjacent flats to feed on small sunfish and perch.</p> 

RESERVOIR	FEB - APRIL	MAY - SEPT	OCT - JAN
Tugalo	<p>Target the headwaters. Go upstream as far as possible by boat on both river arms to fish. Fish on the bottom with jigs or nightcrawlers.</p> 	<p>Slowly drag nightcrawlers or jigs tipped with a shiner along deepwater points and brush piles in 40-60 ft of water.</p> 	<p>Fish around downed trees out to the edge of the river channel at depths from 30-50 ft. At night, fish the points with small crankbaits or jigs.</p> 
Yonah	<p>Target the headwaters at the base of Tugalo Dam and downstream to the first bend. Drift nightcrawlers across the rocky bottom or slowly troll crankbaits along the rocky banks near the campground.</p> 	<p>Target bottom structure along the bends in the river channel. Drift nightcrawlers on the bottom or use vertical jigs in 45 ft of water from the Big Rock face at mid-lake downstream to the dam.</p> 	<p>Walleye will be concentrated around bottom structure in 20-40-feet of water, especially on the edge of the river channel and in the deep bends of the channel. Use nightcrawlers, minnows or vertical jigs.</p> 
Hartwell	<p>Target the headwaters from the Walker Creek boat ramp all the way to Yonah Dam. Fish with shallow-running crankbaits & floating lures.</p> 	<p>Because of Hartwell's large size, it is difficult to target walleye in the summer months.</p> 	<p>Target standing timber in 30-feet of water on main lake points in the Eastanollee Creek area. A live shiner is the best bait choice.</p> 

RESERVOIR	FEB - APRIL	MAY - SEPT	OCT - JAN
Lanier	<p>Target the headwaters from upstream from Belton Bridge on the Chattahoochee River around the Highway 400 Bridge on the Chestatee River. Use crankbaits, Rapalas, or nightcrawlers.</p> 	<p>Target brush piles in 30-50 feet of water on the lower half of the lake. Live herring or jigs tipped with a minnow are the best bait choices.</p> 	<p>Target brush piles on the lower half of the lake. Also consider vertical jigging with spoons near the edge of the river channel in the mid and upper-lake.</p> 
Blue Ridge	<p>Target the shoal area in the headwaters. Use shallow running crankbaits, floating lures or jigs.</p> 	<p>Target main lake points and deepwater humps near the river channel on the lower end of the lake. Vertical jigs and flex-it spoons are best bets at a depth around 50-ft.</p> 	<p>Target main lake points on the lower end of the lake. Use shallow running crankbaits or jigs fished near the shore during low light conditions.</p> 
Carters	<p>Target the headwaters area from Ridgeway Boat Ramp upstream to the shoals in the Coosawattee River.</p> 	<p>Gradual main lake points and submerged timber offer good fishing in May and June.</p> 	<p>Fishing is best between Ridgeway Boat Ramp down to about the middle of the lake.</p> 

RESERVOIR	FEB – APRIL	MAY – SEPT	OCT – JAN
Rocky Mountain Public Fishing Area Antioch Lake Heath Lake	Early spring walleye will congregate on shallow rocky bottoms. 	Walleye will concentrate near the bottom in deep water on points and structure. 	Fish summer habitat areas. Under low light conditions, fish the shallows. 

For More Information

We hope the tips provided in this fishing guide were helpful and will improve your chances of catching walleye in Georgia. Now that you know where, when, and how to fish for walleye in Georgia, we hope that you will be able to fill your stringer and the dinner plate. For more information about fishing in Georgia, we invite you to visit our website at www.gofishgeorgia.com. Volumes of information are also available on the internet. Here are two favorites:

www.walleyefishingsecrets.com
www.in-fisherman.com/walleye

Good luck and good fishing!



The Wildlife Resources Division is working to benefit the fisheries resources and anglers of Georgia!