



SIZE

SMALL

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BEN BEATTIE

In the pre-dawn hours of a cold January morning, I shuffled through the snow in the driveway to warm up the truck. It didn't start easily, even with the block heater plugged in. I remember thinking to myself, as I glanced at the outside thermometer and saw it read -28°C , "Should I be doing this?" From past experiences, I knew getting out early was the best bet for good walleye fishing, so I erased any thoughts of going back to bed.

An hour later, the familiar sound of a two-stroke gas auger coming to life interrupted the quiet sunrise on northwestern Ontario's Minnitaki Lake. It was too cold to run-and-gun, so I drilled a couple of holes in front of my flip-over ice hut and hoped that I landed on some fish. I climbed inside the hut, fired up the propane heater, and dropped my transducer down the hole. With the flick of a switch, the flasher whirled to life and colours lit up the screen with two distinct marks just off bottom.

"Bingo!" I said aloud, having a good idea of what was going to happen.

The next two hours can best be described as what ice-fishing dreams are made of: hungry and aggressive walleye smashing lures. Watching the flasher screen, at times I could see two fish rising up to greet my bait, before feeling the telltale thump of a solid hit. The bite was on. No matter what I put in front of the fish, they ate it,

A downsized approach for icing winter walleye.



and I hadn't even opened up my bag of minnows.

As quickly as it all began, though, it ended. They stopped as if someone had hit an off switch. I kept marking fish, but they wouldn't bite. Live bait didn't help, either. The marks on the flasher would inspect my offerings and simply sink back to bottom. No question, I'd already had a great day and could have packed up then and there, but part of me wanted to solve this puzzle.

I'd caught a lot of fish that morning on a large horizontal jigging bait. I had the same one in my panfish box, except it was the smallest size made. I tied it on, sent it toward bottom, and watched the flasher screen. Just

as before, a thick red mark appeared below the bait. This time, however, the mark didn't sink back to bottom; it hit. "Downsizing!" I said to myself with a chuckle, as I brought another protesting walleye to the hole.

Downsizing isn't a new concept, but is often overlooked as the solution to making fish hit. Many anglers instead choose to run-and-gun and search for active fish, when they could change their approach and catch the fish they're sitting on top of by downsizing their offerings.

Electronic Advantage

Electronic units like flashers or traditional graphs are the most important tools to have on the ice for knowing when to switch to the small stuff. Like in the example above, my flasher told me those fish were still there. Without it, I would have thought they'd moved on – and I would have done the same.

Electronics also allow you to gauge fish activity levels by watching how they react to your lures and movements. Watching a fish rise off bottom, look at your bait, and not hit gives you valuable information. In most cases, it tells you to try something different.

This could be as simple as modifying your jigging stroke, but more often than not, it means switching up your presentation. Switching colours can make a difference, but changing the style and the size of your bait will



have a bigger impact on triggering fish to strike. On-ice electronics provide the clues needed to figure out what baits are going to catch fish on any given day.

Time it Right

There are other clues, besides what you can see on ice electronics, that will tell you when to try smaller baits. The most obvious ones have to do with time of day and time of year. Both affect fish activity levels, which is a key indicator for when to downsize. As a rule of thumb, less active fish are more likely to go after smaller baits.

On a day-to-day basis, walleye typically feed actively in the morning and again in the last few hours of daylight. These windows of opportunity are often referred to as prime times and are why getting out of bed early in the morning and/or fishing until dark can be so important. During mid-day, however, walleye activity levels tend to drop and they can be reluctant to chase baits. Inactive fish are more likely to hit small baits, so downsizing during mid-day hours makes sense.

Time of year also plays a role in how active walleye are. In general, early ice and last ice are known for good action, while mid-winter is usually tougher fishing. It's a cold and dark world under the ice during mid-winter and walleye metabolism is at its lowest, so they tend to be the least active during this time. A good bet for catching walleye then is to downsize baits and fish them slower than you normally would.

Small and Smaller

Downsizing can be as simple as switching from a 1/8-ounce to a 1/16-ounce jig or from a 3-inch to a 1-inch spoon. The concept isn't complicated. Simply try smaller versions of baits that you've had success with in the past. Nearly every tackle manufacturer offers their baits in different sizes. When you head out on the ice, carrying both large and small versions of your favourite walleye baits pays off.

The Method:

My standard approach to catching walleye through the ice goes like this: start with an artificial bait that's large in profile and loud (rattles), like a Lindy Darter. If I'm marking fish, this bait will quickly tell me if there are any active and aggressive walleye hanging around.

Without success, my next move is almost always to live bait. A jig and a minnow or a minnow-tipped spoon will catch walleye through the ice anywhere in Ontario.

If this still results in marking fish on the flasher, but not catching them, this tells me the fish are in a negative feeding mood and it's time to break out the small stuff.

If downsizing doesn't work, I move to a new location and start the process all over again.



There are times when going super small is necessary to trigger strikes, so also bring panfish-sized baits when chasing finicky winter walleye. Micro-

is the speed at which they're fished. When tempting inactive fish with small baits, slowly fishing them is usually best. A subtle jiggling motion

plastics and maggots that are normally used to tempt perch and crappie can convince even the most lethargic walleye to take notice.

Tipping lures with live bait is an excellent option, but also requires a downsized approach. Minnows in the 1-inch range work well, but often cutting larger minnows into smaller pieces is a better option. Tipping lures with a minnow head or a tail is the preferred method when used with small baits. This also helps prevent short strikes, as the head or tail of the minnow doesn't extend much past the hook.

Another trick when cutting up minnows is to chum your ice hole with the other pieces that aren't going on your hook. When tipping bait with the head of a minnow, cut the rest of it into three or four pieces and drop them down. These slow-falling pieces of bait can attract fish to your hole and get them feeding.

Slow and Slower

Another important aspect of fishing with small baits

Downsized Equipment

When downsizing baits, also downsize the rest of your gear. Light line is essential for maintaining feel with small baits. Six-pound-test monofilament works well, but carrying an ultralight set-up with 4-pound test can be better. Rods in the 30-inch range with ultralight to medium-light power are ideal. Sensitive graphites or rods with spring tips are helpful for detecting light bites on small

tackle. Reels should have smooth drags that won't stick in the cold. This will help prevent breakoffs when using light line.



Also avoid using snap-swivels for attaching lures. These devices are unsightly and inhibit the natural action of many baits. Instead, run an in-line swivel one to two feet up the line, with a piece of leader material from there tied directly to the lure.

Field Tip

To trigger hits, tap your rod with your index finger, giving the subtlest movement to your bait.

with lifts and falls in the 1- to 2-inch range is usually enough. Slowly jigging is a good way to attract fish to your bait. However, getting them to strike can be a lot more difficult.

A common notion is that walleye hit baits on the drop. In my experience, however, they tend to hit after the drop, when the bait is resting motionless. This motionless period can last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes before the strike. Mastering this technique requires the use of on-ice electronics to understand how fish react to your movements and motionless pauses.

Using a set-line is another way to present a slow-moving or motionless bait. Keep set-lines close to the hole you're jigging in – within 10 feet. The theory is that fish are attracted to the jigged bait, but will often choose to eat an easy meal from a nearby set-line.

When it comes to rigging set-lines, simple is better. A tail-hooked minnow with a couple of small split-shot up

the line is ideal. For the best success, set up this with a slip-bobber or on a balanced tip-up with a rod and reel.

Paying attention to on-ice electronics will

give you the information needed to know when to downsize. This technique is ideal for when you've found fish that won't hit standard-sized offerings. Give the small stuff a try this winter, and I guarantee it will help you put more fish on the ice.

Dropper Down

Drop-shot and dropper rigs are excellent choices when downsizing for tough-to-catch walleye. Both work as a jigged or a set-line.

Modified drop-shot rig: Instead of having a weight on the bottom, use a small jig tipped with a minnow. Add a small drop-shot hook 12 to-18 inches up the line and also tip it with a live minnow.

Dropper rig: This easy-to-tie setup performs well because it separates the bait from the weight. The most common types of lures to use with dropper rigs are spoons and horizontal jigging baits. Simply remove the hook from the split-ring and tie a short length of line between the split-ring and the hook. ●



Kelly Beattie with a walleye caught on a micro-spoon.

