

Detroit River – Jigging Tips & Hot Spots

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The Detroit River provides a wide range of walleye fishing options during the spring and early summer. Many people use the same techniques and fish the same areas every time they hit the river. This strategy won't deliver nearly the numbers or quality of fish as adapting your presentation to changing conditions on the river. Here are some of the basic patterns that the river goes through and how you should plan to fish them. We cover jigging and trolling in this article and will cover handling in a future edition.

Early Spring

When we talk about early spring, we mean early spring – the boat ramp is open, the icebergs have drifted into Lake Erie, and you can safely hit the water. This could begin as early as the third week of March in a warm year and will last until the second week of April. You might think you're getting a jump on the action but the fish have been there for a while – particularly the big females. These fish are going to be somewhat lethargic, the water is probably going to be muddy, and the numbers won't be there yet. Your objective is to get a trophy fish in the boat.

There are certain areas of the river that produce big fish every year. The top three are: Trenton Channel to Humbug Marina, the Canadian side from the salt docks to Fighting Island, and Pier 500 (Ecorse channel) to the BASF wall. The majority of the big fish are coming into the river from Lake Erie, not Lake St Clair, so the southern half of the river is your best bet early on. We like to use a 5/8 ounce to 3/4 ounce long shank jig in bright colors with a 4-5" emerald shiner minnow during this time of year – we might even go up to a one ounce jig in dirty or fast moving water to get their attention. Hot colors are orange, chartreuse, and green or some combination of these three. Orange is our favorite color jig if the water is dirty.

Jigging can best be described as S L O W. For us it's more like a hold and drop, than a jigging motion. Our technique involves finding the bottom once you're vertical and then lifting the jig about six to ten inches off the bottom. Hold it there for 5-10 seconds and then lower the rod tip to make sure you're still positioned correctly. Bites this time of year are a mushy feeling that requires a quick hook set. The majority of your fish are probably going to come on your stinger hook rather than the main jig (see our stinger hook video for more details).

The Main Event

The main season for the Detroit River generally runs from the second week of April until mid-May. This is when the river is packed full of fish including lots of hungry males. Limits are common and most of the larger fish have moved back out to Lake Erie. The fish are more aggressive, and you probably won't need any minnows. The water is clearing up, and you will hook up with some bonus smallmouth bass and muskie as well (season is closed). Once you move into the May timeframe silver bass (white bass) can become a major problem depending on which part of the river you are fishing (forget about the Trenton channel for a couple weeks).

Key areas from north to south during the main event include the Roostertail, Ren Cen, Corp of Engineers, Steel Mills, Mud Island, Trenton Channel, and Celeron Island. Once we hit late April it's all plastic with our favorite combination being a 5/8 ounce green chartreuse jig and a pearl 3" Berkley power minnow. As the water warms we switch over to 4" brown rubber worm with a chartreuse tail. Both these set ups will work well into May for most of the river. We hook the power minnow lightly through the nose and let the stinger hook swing freely above the minnow. The fish tend to move deeper during this part of the run and some of the better areas can be in

35-40 feet of water. If you're new to river fishing you might need to bump up the size of your jig as you head to deeper water.

Now is the time to experiment with your jigging techniques. If you have the itch to aggressively jig your offering, then this is the time to try it out. Doesn't mean it's going to work, but the fish will tell you what they want. We've had days where a 1-2 foot snap works and other days where dragging the jig on the bottom in the sand near Mud Island produces best. A key part of your strategy needs to be moving around. If you're not on fish and you don't see any nets flying make a move. The fish are on the move and you should be too. Silver bass a problem? Move. Hit a pocket of these aggressive feeders and you'll never get a walleyes attention.

Late Season

This is the transition period for the river. This generally runs from mid-May until early-June. There are still walleye in the river. Fishing traffic on the river starts to taper off as the big crowds head to the lakes. The action will be mostly smaller males along with a few bigger resident river fish that never leave the system. Late season provides you with several new options besides traditional vertical jigging.

- The first option is trolling bottom bouncers and crawler harnesses downstream. This can get a little tricky and requires some practice but it's a nice break from two months of jigging. We use a three-ounce bouncer, 30" Walleye Kid Custom Crawler Harness™ (Detroit River Edition), and a #5 or #6 blade to get their attention. The objective to head downstream just slightly faster than the current to get your crawler harness blades spinning. Make sure you're trying this technique on a relatively clean bottom to avoid frustrating snags and lost gear. Mud Island and the area near Celeron Island are both good choices. *Check out our "Detroit River – Bottom Bouncing" article for a detailed plan to getting you prepared for this great alternative to jigging.*
- The second option is to head out of the river and hit the shallow water a little ways into Lake Erie. When the fish leave the river they stop out near the banana dike for a couple weeks. On a calm day it's a great place to try because the fish are there in BIG numbers. We use the same bottom bouncer set up and fish in 10-20 feet of water. Keep the speed slow at around 1.0 MPH. Don't be afraid to try this as early as mid May if the fishing is slow on the river.

Area Profile

There are about 20-30 key areas on the Detroit River that produce fish every year. Better known areas are the Trenton Channel, Mud Island, Fighting Island, Belle Isle Bridge, Steel Mills, BASF wall, and the Rouge. Lesser known areas include Two Rocks, Golf Course, Corp of Engineers, Post Office, Cop Shop, Hospital, and the Green Shed. This section profiles the Trenton Channel.

Trenton Channel

When you mention the Trenton channel you get everything from "that's the only place you need to fish" to "that's the last place on earth I'd ever go". The right answer is probably somewhere in between. There is no doubt that this area can be a great place to fish and produces both monsters and numbers every year. Three of the five biggest fish we've caught on the Detroit River have come from the Trenton channel even though we spend only a small fraction of our time in this area. The biggest fish I've ever seen caught, a 14 lb giant came from the southern end of this area as well.

You're going to see lots of boats and you're going to snag lots of rocks – that's part of the game here. The key areas are the large boulders in 7-12 feet of water south of the Detroit Edison plant, the turn just north of Humbug Marina, and the Grosse Ile side of the Trenton channel just south of the Edison plant.

If you catch a fish in the Trenton channel it is critical that you start up your boat, head up river and drift the exact same area again. Fish are there for a reason and there is more than one fish in a spot nearly every time. Getting a waypoint on your GPS immediately when a fish hits is a must - if you wait even 10 seconds you've drifted off the spot and missed the opportunity to lock in a hot area. This is true for the entire river system but applies more to the Trenton channel because the large number of bottom obstructions that create unique and very specific holding patterns for the fish.

New! Get a copy of Lance Valentine's Walleye 101 "Detroit River Hot Spots" DVD. This 55 minute video cover 20 hot spots from Wyandotte to the Belle Isle Bridge. Lance shows you maps, GPS coordinates, sonar, and proper techniques. Available at www.WalleyeKid.com

A Word About Snags

Lots of expensive new rods end up as two ice fishing rods every week on the river. Your boat is moving downstream at 5 MPH, your FireLine doesn't stretch, and if you pull back and try to rip the snag out your rod will snap – we've done it!

When you get a snag follow these simple steps:

- Point your rod at the snag and quickly snap it up and down several times, if the snag doesn't come out immediately open the bail
- Let out 10-15 feet of line and repeat the process, if the snag doesn't come out quickly do the following: Point the rod at the snag, hold the spool so the drag doesn't let line out, and wait for the jig to release, the stinger to rip, or the line to snap. Be careful...NEVER wrap the FireLine around your finger or hand as it will cut you bad!

Safety First

The Detroit River can be a deadly place if you're not careful. Water temps are often below 40 degrees early in the year and survival time is low. You might get lucky and fall out near a crowd but if you're alone or away from a pack of boats you've got a problem. We wear our life jackets from the time we leave the ramp until the time we get back. Sunshine and light winds might make you feel comfortable on the water but don't be fooled – play it safe.

If you're interested in learning more you can watch some of our web videos, attend a Walleye 101 River Fishing Seminar, or go on an Educational Charter with former PWT pro and fishing educator Lance Valentine. More details are available at Walleye101.com or WalleyeKid.com

***See you on the water,
Walleye Kid***

About the Authors: Chris Merbler is a 16-year-old tournament fisherman. He has top ten finishes in both the GNWC and Mack's Lure tournaments with his partner and dad Ron Merbler. Chris and Ron produce and distribute Walleye Kid Custom Crawler Harnesses™ and are publishers of the Walleye Kid Fishing Phone Book™ – a great resource that has over 300 listings for bait store, boat ramps, motels, and much more for the Detroit River, Lake Erie, Lake St Clair and Houghton Lake. Visit www.WalleyeKid.com for more information.