

Crank-bait Patterns and Walleyes by Jason Mitchell

So easy to jump to conclusions too fast. I see and hear the same old story unfold so often. A guy will catch one fish on a particular lure and everybody else in the boat switches to that one lure. The gang of fishermen have some luck, get back to shore and try to convince everybody that you needed that one particular lure to catch fish. The truth is, they don't know. Many anglers switch too quickly and jump the gun. That one fish didn't really tell them anything but where to fish.

For many walleye fishermen, trolling means finding that "one magic lure." While fish do definitely seem to prefer some crank-baits over others, we often tend to lose focus of the big picture when out on the water. More often than not, one crank-bait is catching more fish than the rest because that one crank-bait is getting pulled in front of fish. Even where a big school of fish is concerned, the pods of fish making up a school can often be tightly grouped. So often when we are trolling, we want to put more emphasis on the lure itself instead of where the lure is running. If we are trolling four different crank-baits behind the boat, chances are that each crank-bait is running on a different amount of line. As you troll your way along, each crank-bait is taking a different route. As you swing your boat around structure and try to work a depth range, the crank-bait on the shortest amount of line might clip in a little shallower. The crank-bait that is running the furthest back might swing out deeper as you turn the boat. You get the idea. When a rod becomes slack and then bends over from a walleye shaking on the other end, the only thing you know at this point is that you are getting location narrowed down.



The biggest mistake many anglers make after catching a fish is over evaluating the crank-bait and not taking note of where that crank-bait was when the fish hit. Most anglers just jump the gun at this point. The crank-bait might be a chrome Wally Diver so they switch all of the other rods over to chrome Wally Divers. Then, stupid theories develop which have no scientific merit. Let's see, the fish came on a chrome lure because there are minnows in the lake and the sun was out. So what does that mean when the sky is partly cloudy, a little bit of wind is blowing, the fish are feeding on young of the year carp and we are catching fish on night crawlers? We have all of the answers don't we.

When trolling multiple lines, one rod will always catch the most fish. The real art to trolling crank-baits comes from being able to recognize what factors are really at play. Did two fish in a row on the same rod mean that this one particular crank-bait is the only lure fish want or was it the result of location or coincidence? Is one crank-bait running slightly higher, staying clear of debris on the bottom? Is one crank-bait pounding bottom a little harder?

Lure location will always be the number one factor that determines successful trolling. Get a feel for where the lures are running in relation to the bottom. Get a feel for how the rod vibrates as the lure works. Too many people put too much faith in line counter reels. Line counter reels are great for putting you in the ballpark and they give you a reference but there are so many things that can throw them off. Have you ever tested your reels to see if they are calibrated? They aren't all exact; the amount of line you have on the spool also affects how they read. The commonest error that makes your cranks run at different depths on the same amount of line is how you have your rods positioned in the rod holders. The two inside rods might be angled with the tips back and towards the water. The outside rods might be higher and pointing straight out from the boat. Where your rod tip is from the water affects how deep that crank-bait runs. Take notice of where the line meets the water. When a rod tip is positioned high, the line meets the water further back behind the boat, which translates to the crank-bait working slightly higher than what the book says.

So often while I am guiding, one customer will have a "cold rod." Everybody in the boat will be catching fish except one person. We might be trolling Shad Raps and Wally Divers for example and the perch colored Shad Rap hasn't caught a fish yet. The first reaction for most fishermen is to change colors. Usually, however, color plays such a minor role when trying to look at the big picture. Taking for granted that the lure that isn't catching fish is properly tuned, the "cold rod" will often come to life by merely letting out or reeling in line, regardless of what the line counter says.

There are so many variables an angler must consider before considering the actual crankbait itself. Sooner or later, however, there comes a realization that one particular crank-bait or one particular size is working better than another. Number eight Shad Raps might be working better than number fives even though they are both running the same depths. Thunder Sticks might be working better than Wally Divers or vice versa. A big crank that is digging right below the boat might be working better than a small tail gunner out the back. The problem with trying to hit the nail on the head however comes from the fact that change is constant down below and no two fish are the same. Something might be working but for how long?

So you catch four fish on Shad Raps and two of the fish came on the clown color. What does that tell you? Don't let it tell you too much. The worst thing you can do when trolling is put all of your eggs in one basket. Go with what is working by all means, but don't live and die with the one lure that put a couple of fish in the boat right away in the morning. Always keep a few guinea pigs out in the spread. Experiment with the guinea pigs. Believe me, the lines you keep experimenting with are the lines that save your rear because things are always changing down below.

Not every fish in a school is in the same mood and an entire school of fish will switch gears for the better or worst at the flick of a switch. The first four fish might come on Reef Runners or Bomber Long A's for example and the fish might ignore Rattling Rogues and Thundersticks behind snap weights or lead core. By the end of the day, the hot lures can very well be cold and the lures that didn't work earlier suddenly turn on as the moods of the fish change. Over the long haul, I believe we can be much further ahead going 50/50 with lure selection. Keep the proven producers on half your lines and keep experimenting with the other half.

When you have guinea pigs clipped onto half your lines, patterns really begin to emerge because you don't jump to as many conclusions. You get into a zone and know a lot more at the end of each day. You will also be much more confident if you know you can catch fish on four or five different lures. Make the fish prove to you that fluorescent colors work better than chromes. Make the fish prove that Thundersticks are working better than Reef Runners or vice versa. Don't just assume something after one or two fish. In the end remember that what was proven is already past tense. This is exactly why the guinea pigs are so important to keeping up with the ongoing changes below us. I don't know all of the answers but I do know this; when you keep experimenting with half of the lines, there surprisingly isn't as much of a preference or pattern as people would often like to imagine. When a particular preference or pattern does begin to emerge, you know this preference is the real deal, not coincidence. Too often, we make up the preferences and patterns before getting enough information to make those conclusions.

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