

Early Season 'Eyes by Ted Takasaki and Scott Richardson

Do you believe that walleyes don't fight? Try manhandling a 7-pound walleye that slams a jig in five feet of water. Now try doing it in spring.

"In the spring of the year, they are really quite feisty," said South Dakota fishing guide Gary Gangle.

He remembers his first trophy walleye. He was 8 and fishing with an ice fishing pole with his dad from a 12-foot boat on South Dakota's Roy Lake when the monster fish took his bait. With no net in the boat – there wasn't room - Gangle fought the beast to the surface three times before his father could get a hand on it. It weighed 11 pounds.

Now 60, Gangle has two even bigger walleyes, 12 pounds each, to his credit.

They both came from Roy Lake, too.

"Roy Lake used to have some of the biggest trophy walleyes in the state, and it still does," said Gangle, a retired computer science high school teacher who has lived and fished in the area all his life. "The walleye population has been fabulous the last five or six years. We see real nice fish of 28 to 32 inches. We're looking at 8 to 11 pounds. Those are some nice quality fish."

That may explain why it's a favorite destination of fishing legend Al Lindner. The late outdoor communicator Tony Dean also visited often.

South Dakota game officials want to keep the walleye population in good shape. Many lakes have a slot protecting walleyes from 16 to 20 inches. The state allows anglers to take only one fish over the slot.

If Roy Lake doesn't suit you, the region has 48 lakes within 20 minutes near Roy Lake Resort, which serves as Gangle's headquarters. The lakes average 500 to 2,500 acres, about the size of Roy Lake. They are almost all relatively shallow. Some are no more than 10 feet deep. Others are about 20 feet at the deepest.

Roy Lake is fed by three lake chains. Rain and snow melt have pushed water levels to the max, according to Gangle. High water has created even more lakes connected to the others, rich in the nutrients that support a strong forage base of minnows, young-of-the-year game fish, crawfish, frogs and more. As a result, walleyes grow huge.

The state has no closed walleye season, so it's a favorite of anglers looking for early-season action. Earliest time to go is around Tax Day, April 15 or so, as the ice recedes. Action picks up as the water warms over 50 degrees F.

Gangle said pitching jigs is the tactic of choice. He likes 7-foot medium-light action spinning rods, though some people like to get by with shorter. Line should be 8-pound-test.

Weather conditions, like wind and depth of water, dictate jig size. They can range from 1/16- to 1/4-ounce. Changing up is simple with Lindy's new X-Change jig, which range from 1/16- to 3/8-ounce sizes. Simply snap one head off and snap the other on without ever having to re-tie.

The line is actually attached to a 2/0 Max Gap hook.



The easy-off, easy-on feature also lets anglers experiment with color. Gangle often uses chartreuse, but he isn't afraid to experiment with red, green and yellow. He said black is good when walleyes are keying on bullheads or leeches. Some people try jigs with hair, like the Fuzz-E-Grub jig. He also has luck with Max Gap Techni-Glo Jigs when the water is dingy. Subtle is best when water is crystal clear, which it is after spring turnover, he said.

The favorite dressings he uses on his jigs are fathead minnows, leeches or plastic trailers. He wants the "crippled minnow" look when he's using minnows, so he'll put the hook through the mouth, out the eye and push the hook into the side of the bait.

Finding the best places to fish on glacial lakes early in the year is simple. A map will reveal the inlets and shallow bays where the water will be slightly warmer. The lakes have plenty of structure, like points, to choose from and some feature weed lines though others are clean-bottomed.

Gangle has lived through two periods when water levels dropped in South Dakota and lake levels fell to low levels. Some even dried up. Lake levels began rising again in the mid-1990s and are higher than ever. The recently-flooded lakes have lots of shoreline cover, like blow-downs, he said. Concentrate on shallow lakes first. Water will warm in them first.

"I always start with lakes that average 10 to 12 feet deep and move to the lakes 20-feet deep later on," he said.

Once you're launched, lick your finger, hold it up into the air and head toward the wind-blown areas where the breeze blows the tiny plankton that ignite the food chain. Small fish chase the plankton; game fish chase the small fish. "Wind is a factor we use quite often," Gangle said.

Pitching jigs toward shore is a great way to connect with active, aggressive fish.

In spring, trophy fish tend to be more active in low-light conditions of early morning and evening. But, action can be non-stop.

"You can catch walleyes all day long if you have some chop, even on bright sunny days," he said. Some people think color is critical. Others scent. Gangle thinks depth and action are most important. Be subtle in cold water. Simply drag or subtly pop the bait. Be more aggressive as water temperature rises.