



# TECH BULLETIN

## OREGON - WASHINGTON

# COLUMBIA RIVER WALLEYE POWER TROLLING

Compiled from the Diaries and Logs of the Luhr Jensen Fishing Research Team.

By Patrick McGann

*The Columbia River produces big walleye... very big walleye. There's no secret about that anymore. Sizes range into the high teens and anglers come here from all over North America to tangle with a genuine wallhanger, and just maybe, get their name in "The Book".*

### POWER TROLLING

Innovation has played a critical role in the relatively new walleye fishery on the Columbia River. The latest tactic, power trolling, is proving to be perhaps the deadliest and most consistent yet for big walleye in the middle stretches of the river.

Power trolling is an aggressive strategy, but there is a method to its madness.

Big walleye spend the warmer half of the year prowling the flats close to the bottom or lying in ambush near rocky structure... in both cases at 20 to 30 feet for fish over 4 pounds. They use their eyes to locate prey and their speed to overcome it. Target prey are shad and squawfish

*Power trolling puts the angler into this aggressive feeding loop.*

smolts, sculpins and the occasional salmon, steelhead or trout smolts.

Walleye are NOT timid feeders. On the contrary, they are ferocious predators. When they see one of these fast-moving forage fish within their range, they strike with an aggressiveness that rivals ANY game fish!

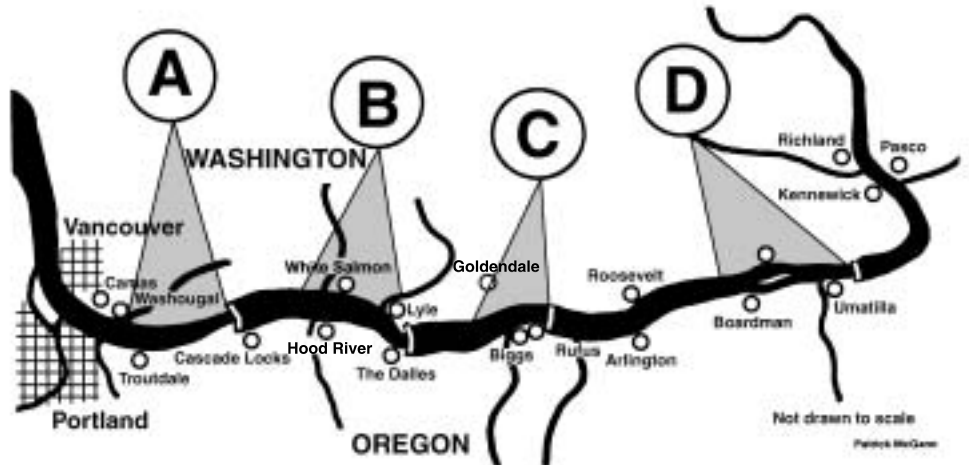
### THE KEY

Power trolling puts the angler into this aggressive feeding loop by realistically imitating the size, shape, color and behavior of the walleye's targeted food source at the depth range where the biggest walleye are lurking.

It requires... absolutely... the conflicting requirements of a lure that looks and acts like the walleye's natural prey, yet can swim in the right depth range, down to 30 feet.

Four plugs, manufactured virtually on top of this trophy fishery, meet both requirements perfectly: the Luhr Jensen

### COLUMBIA RIVER POWER TROLLING HOT SPOTS



- A. Below Bonneville Dam: Swifter water, heaviest pressure (mostly for other species), smallest fish but a growing fishery.
- B. Below The Dalles Dam: Good sleeper bet, nice fish and good quantity, but best structure somewhat difficult to find.
- C. Below John Day Dam: Excellent structure, good quantity and good size range but can get crowded.
- D. Below McNary Dam: Biggest fish, best structure, largest area, lightest pressure, but known as a challenging fishery.

**Power Dive® Minnow, Hot Lips Express®** and **Rock Walker™**. The first two feature the unique Tri-Lobe Power Bill® which delivers incredible diving performance without any sacrifice in lure action. The Rock Walker has a highly-reflective brass diving bill that serves as an attractant also. And they all come in the right colors to mimic the walleye's food fish.

What these plugs have allowed walleye anglers to do is to troll, without added weight or an added diving aid, right through the regular dining room of the biggest walleye in the river!

### SPEED KILLS

All these baitfish have one thing in common... a slender, torpedo-shaped body and absolutely no desire to loiter in walleye-infested waters. They're fast movers, and to imitate them, you have to shuck your natural desire to slow down and sit on the fish. In other words... troll f-a-s-t.

Crank it up. It works best from 3 to 4-1/2 m.p.h.. Yes, that's pretty fast for trolling but keep in mind that your actual speed can vary somewhat depending on the speed of the river current.

### GET WAY, WAY BACK

Let out a lot of line. The Power Dive

Minnow and Hot Lips Express will reach maximum depth at less than 100 feet of paid out line. Most of the experts now scoring regularly with this tactic are letting out anywhere from 150 to 200 feet of line, sometimes more, usually right around 170 to 180 feet.

The idea at work here is to give the walleye a little room to move back into the trolling lane after your boat's sound and shadow have moved them out.

### WORK THE BOAT

Most of the time you'll be heading upstream, but there will be current conditions which will require downstream trolling. For example, upstream trolling may increase line drag and pull your lure line up. Remember, the idea here is depth, lure action and speed.

Cover the water. The speed aspect of this technique gives you the advantage over the jigger or slow troller when fish

*... hundreds of yards if not miles of continuous structure.*

are hard to find or scattered. Play the structure. The best is long, stepped cliffs and ledges running up and down the river.

There's plenty of that, hundreds of yards if not miles of continuous structure. It's perfect for power trolling. Locate a shelf or ledge with a break point at 20 to 30 feet and troll the length of it, then work the ledge sides on deeper shelves for suspended fish.

The other place to troll is in the flats. (While you need sonar to effectively find and mark ledges and shelves, you can use NOAA river charts with some degree of reliability to locate the flats.) The only way to work the flats efficiently is to troll, and because fish are isolated and roaming rather than concentrated and sitting still, power trolling is the most efficient way to troll those areas.

### LURE COLOR AND SIZE

There is still a lot of experimenting going on in this category, but the basic colors settling out are *White/Red Head, Silver/Chartreuse Back, Chartreuse/Red Head, Clearwater Flash, Fire Tiger, Purple Tiger* and "*Miss Piggy*". During the summer you'll see more blue and chartreuse, and in the fall you'll see more reds and oranges because, in addition to being a dynamite tactic on walleye, power trolling also suckers salmon and steelhead.

In all, about 14 colors are used commonly, but the list grown by the week. Beyond the basics above, as long as you stick to the basic blue, chartreuse and silver (and orange and red in late summer and early fall), it's largely angler preference.

Lure size isn't as critical. The actual forage fish targeted by this class of walleye are between 5 and 8 inches in length, so anglers use the 1/4 Hot Lips and the 6-inch Power Dive Minnow.

### WHEN

Walleye can be taken on the Columbia year-round, but power trolling is most effective when they are most active. That's

*It works everywhere. Then why are they trolling only below the dams?*

from a week to ten days after the spawn (which is by no means a single, coordinated event; different fish spawn at different times in different parts of the river) through the summer and into the fall with a cutoff occurring roughly when the water at 20 to 30 feet gradually falls through the 45-degree into the 40-degree range.

### WHERE

Everyone power trolling on the Columbia will say that it will work everywhere. Then why are they only trolling below the dams? Four reasons: 1) these walleye anglers know the tailrace areas best. 2) a stronger current seems to help lure action and currents are stronger below the dams. 3) forage fish are more concentrated below dams (where there's less river) than above. 4) the depth characteristics are more favorable below the dams. So, know-



ing that, the best areas to power troll are below Bonneville, The Dalles and especially John Day and McNary Dams.

Of the four dams, Bonneville is the least favored because of arguably fewer and smaller fish available and less abundant cover. Yet some very nice fish are taken there but it gets hit hardest because it's closest to Portland.

The Dalles has more flats than ledges, so it might have an edge for those without sonar. It has a reputation for having hard-to-find structure. But if you take the time to learn it, you can find some excellent and uncrowded trolling. Stay close to the dam and explore the rip rap along the Oregon shoreline.

The John Day Dam doesn't produce the huge fish McNary on the upstream does but it has an excellent average size in the 6 to 10-lb. range for power trollers. It also has some outstanding structure including stepped ledges that go for miles all the way from the deadline right below the dam down past Biggs to and beyond Miller Island off the mouth of the Deschutes River.

There is an excellent submerged island on the Oregon side of the main channel, just below the deadline. It give you a good quarter-mile troll along stepped ledges set almost uniformly at 10-ft. increments (but that ledge is probably the hardest hit in the

area).

McNary is trophy country. It's the most challenging too. Before the dam was erected, there were dozens of small, rocky islands, now submerged. These offer outstanding walleye structure, but require a good hand with a sonar.

A troller can spend years and never cover all the good channels and cover there. There are also good, isolated flats. The better water seems to be a little farther below the dam rather than closer to it.

### NUTS AND BOLTS

To power troll, you'll need a boat that can handle the Columbia. It should be high-sided and relatively powerful, but bass boats work quite well, providing you keep a close eye on the wind, especially in the Columbia River Gorge.

There really is no ideal rod-reel combination, but a stout rod with plenty of hook-setting power is recommended, such as a heavy action steelhead rod. Some use a lighter rod in order to judge lure action by rod tip movement.

**NOTE:** Work back over 200 feet and is move at the upper end of the speed range, or move at the slower end of the scale and let out 150 to 180 feet.

Heavier line gives you an advantage in setting the hook with the long line distances involved, while lighter line (limp 12-lb.) with less drag in the water allows deeper diving and better lure action. (Use 10- to 20-lb. test line).

**NOTE:** by late summer, salmon and steelhead start showing up, so it's not a good idea to be using light line at that time of year! Reels are generally big baitcasters with fast retrieves and tight drags, though spinning reels can be used.

### AND FINALLY

Once you get used to the idea that speed means more fish, power trolling is easy. Use the right plugs, the best colors, stay either on rocky structure or in the flats at the right depth zones (the Luhr Jensen deep divers do that for you) let out enough line, go fast (if in doubt, go faster), keep your bow upstream, and even on your first time out, you stand an excellent chance of catching big walleye.

## LUHR-JENSEN TECH CAPSULE

**TACTIC:** Power Trolling

**SPECIES:** Walleye, 4 to 10 pounds commonly, range to 18 pounds.

**WHERE:** Middle stretches of the Columbia River

**BEST BETS:** Top four miles below McNary, John Day, The Dalles, Bonneville Dams . . . in that order.

**LURES:** Luhr-Jensen #600 *Power Dive® Minnow*, 1/4, 1/2 and 3/4 *Hot Lips Express®* and 3/4 *Rock Walker™* crankbaits. Colors: *White/Red Head, Clearwater Flash, Chartreuse Shad, Silver/Blue Top/ Orange Belly, "Miss Piggy", Silver/Chartreuse, Silver/Blue Top, Hot Head, Fire Tiger and Purple Tiger.*

**CONCEPT:** Troll fast, let out a lot of line, use a realistic crankbait that can dive 20 to 30 feet.

**RIVER REPORTS:** *McNary* - High Desert Marine, Hermiston 541-567-8419; *John Day* - Dinty's Market, Biggs 541-739-2236; *The Dalles* - Dinty's Market West 541-298-1894; *Bonneville*, Covert's Landing, Cascade Locks 541-374-8577.