

The Saginaw River

Like most waterways in the Midwest back in the 60's/early 70's, the Saginaw River has had a checkered past. During these times it seldom if ever froze over during the winter. It would virtually steam and stay open even in the coldest winter conditions. Gone were the days when my grandfather told me that the ice would be 3 feet thick and thousands of shanties would be bank-to-bank fishing for the 3 P's, Perch, Pike or Pickerel. Pickerel of course was his (Canadian ancestral) name for walleye, along with many other species he'd just as soon call Pickerel versus their real scientific name. The many industrial plants along the rivers length kept a steady flow of hot water and other less desirable components flowing into her and keeping the waters from freezing.

All this has changed in these last 25 years, and even though it still takes a cold winter to freeze things over on the Saginaw River, it happens now quit frequently. You still have to consider that the Saginaw River system drains thousands of miles of other river systems that flow into it's headwaters, so the sheer current mass alone keeps the river open during wet or thaw periods. But during hard freezes, seeing both shanties and snowmobile suit clad fishermen as far as the eye can see both up and down river, has become quit common. But the real fish catching fun doesn't start then, it's just punctuated then and allows anybody with a jigging rod a spud and a pail to set on, an easy access to some great fishing.

Because long before the ice sets in on the Saginaw river, the open waters of Fall, Spring and now even summer (for the most part) play host to a growing biomass of walleye, perch, bass, catfish and drum. All these species are finding the rivers habitat a lot more to their liking now that the waters have cleaned themselves up some.

Like any system with a bounty of catch able fish in it, the techniques used vary and are many, depending on your intended prey and often the time of year you're fishing for them. Few lures can beat the sheer numbers of fish caught through the ice on the Saginaw than the Jigging Rapala. Jigged near bottom, with a morsel of minnow meat hooked to the belly hook of the lure, and your chances for success are greatly increased. And during the open water seasons few things beat a Jig and Minnow offering. Jigging the right sized weighted tidbit straight up and down letting it hit bottom, while slowly drifting in complete unison with the current, catches the majority of all the specie available, especially walleyes. Trolling crank baits like the Dave's Ka Boom Winning Streak, the Storm ¼ ounce Hot-N-Tot or the Rapala #7 Shad Rap all take their share of walleyes during the day and some real monsters during the night time.

And if it's bass you like, the spring and summer fishery on the Saginaw River may be the most under-utilized fishery going. Spinner baits, tubes and a variety of smaller cranks take some impressive smallies and a few large mouths all summer long when fan cast along the old pilings, bridge abutments, docks, ship turn-a round's and rock rip-rap that lines the shorelines for miles on both sides. It may be that there is just too much cover to fish, it's that good. And during these times its nothing to pick up a giant freshwater drum, channel, blue or flathead catfish using the same things you are for bass or walleyes, the fishery has become that diverse.

The key to the very best times too catch fish seems to be both water temperature and forage availability. And without a doubt, the spawning cycle has a lot to do with the walleye fishing success. In my experience the months of November and December are the best times to intercept a truly big walleye. Many of the spring spawners come into the rivers early, following the forage looking for warmers river waters themselves. The spring fishery is also good, but the legal walleye season re-starts almost too late to intercept the spawned out females before they drop back out of the river and back into the Saginaw Bay system. So many of the fish caught are the smaller 2 to 3 pound male hold-overs.