



Techniques for Big Smallmouth and Walleye

Reflections from Northern Ontario

BY COLIN MCKEOWN

smallmouth

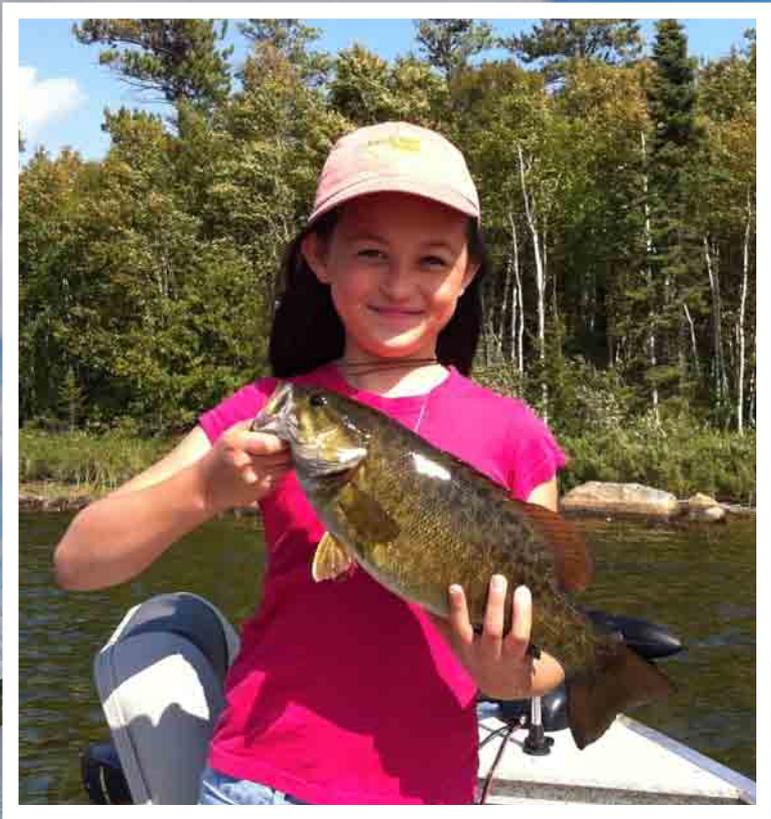
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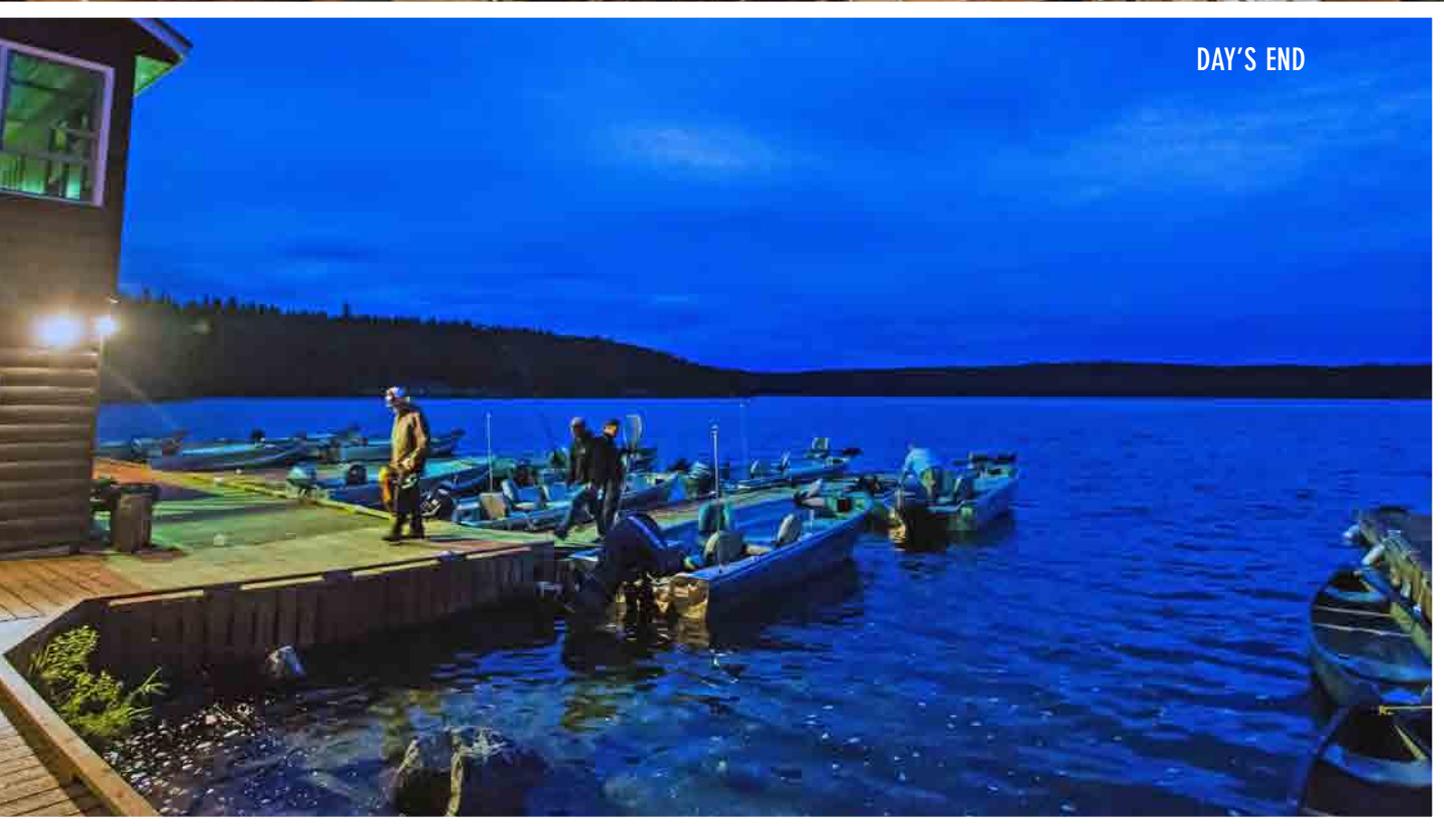
I love Northern Ontario. Its vast wilderness is blessed with much scenic beauty and majestic wildlife. But what I love best about the North is the fishing. Monstrous pike that will savagely strike at flies, massive smallmouth that devour a surface popper, and fat walleye which fight surprisingly well in cold water. There is much to love about Northern Ontario—I just wish there were more opportunities to visit this pristine region. Thankfully, fate intervened to grant that wish.



MORNING START, HAWK LAKE LODGE



{ TECHNIQUES FOR BIG SMALLMOUTH AND WALLEYE }



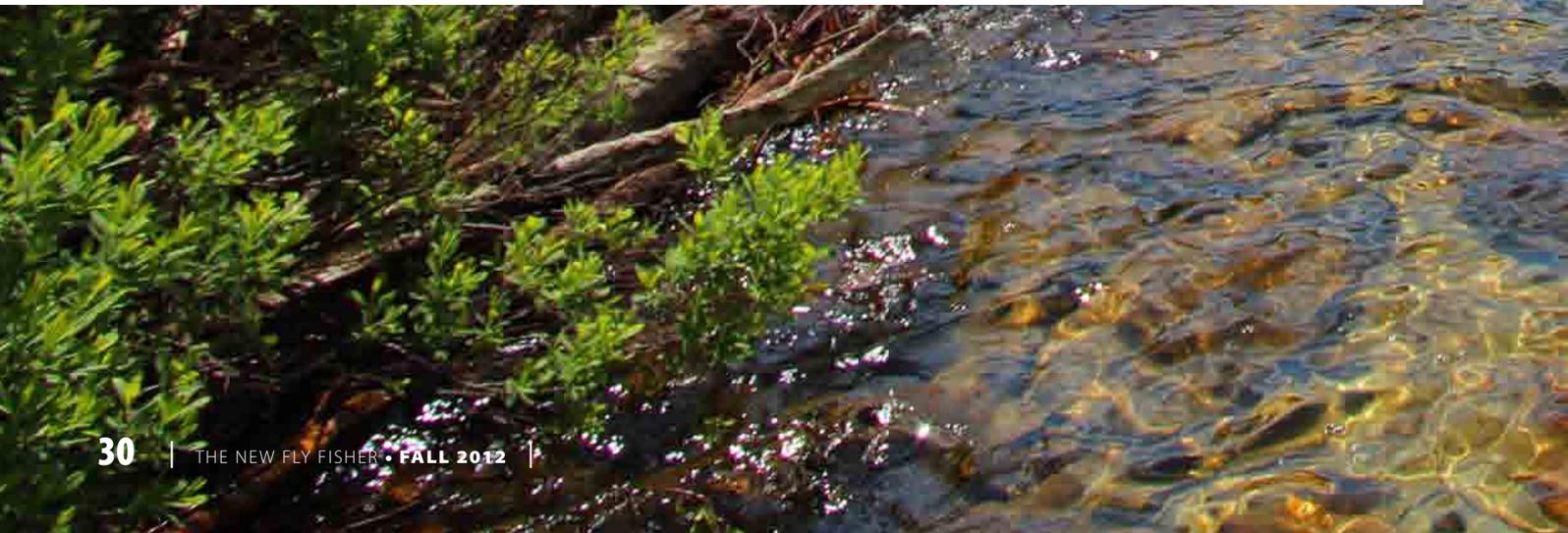
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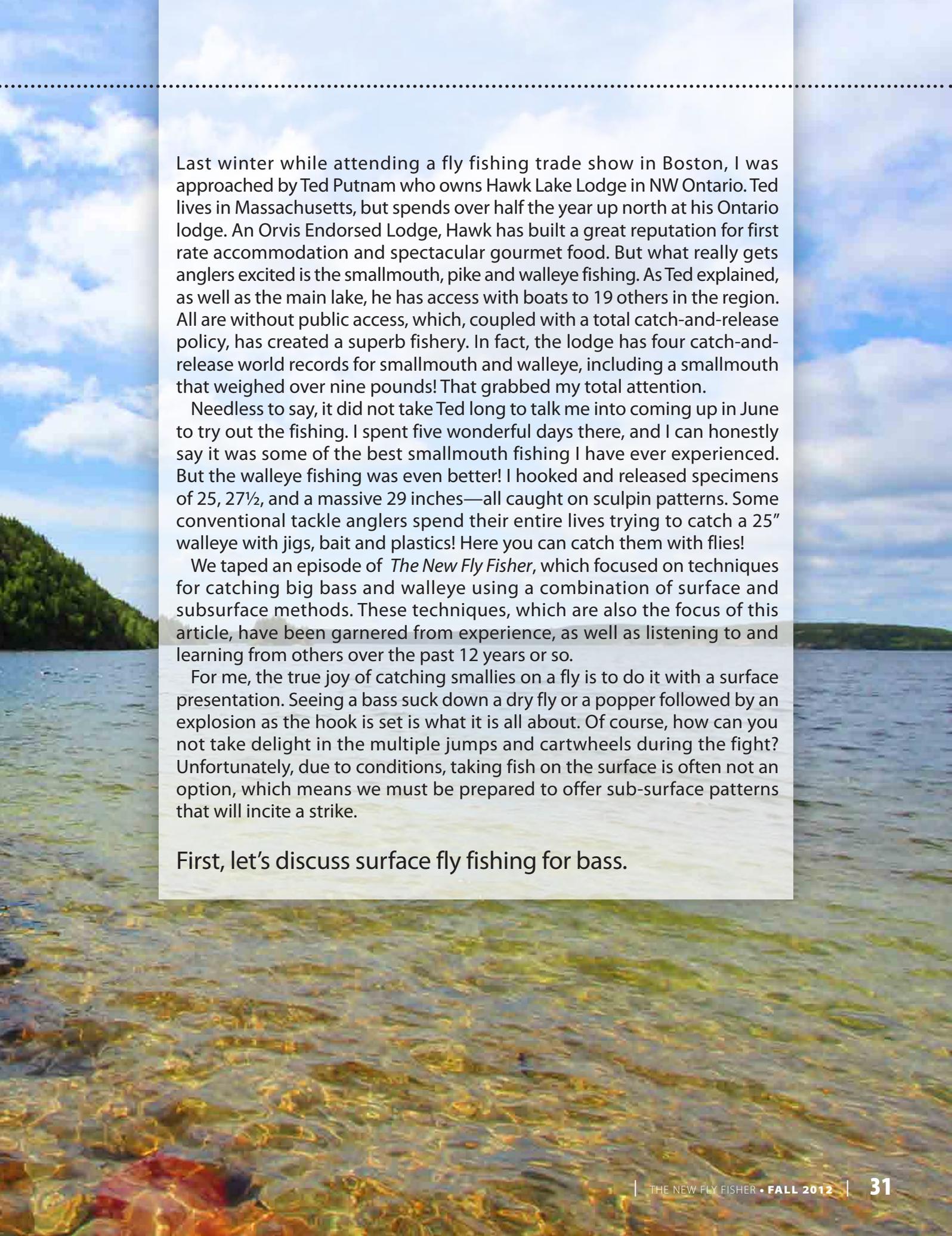




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Last winter while attending a fly fishing trade show in Boston, I was approached by Ted Putnam who owns Hawk Lake Lodge in NW Ontario. Ted lives in Massachusetts, but spends over half the year up north at his Ontario lodge. An Orvis Endorsed Lodge, Hawk has built a great reputation for first rate accommodation and spectacular gourmet food. But what really gets anglers excited is the smallmouth, pike and walleye fishing. As Ted explained, as well as the main lake, he has access with boats to 19 others in the region. All are without public access, which, coupled with a total catch-and-release policy, has created a superb fishery. In fact, the lodge has four catch-and-release world records for smallmouth and walleye, including a smallmouth that weighed over nine pounds! That grabbed my total attention.

Needless to say, it did not take Ted long to talk me into coming up in June to try out the fishing. I spent five wonderful days there, and I can honestly say it was some of the best smallmouth fishing I have ever experienced. But the walleye fishing was even better! I hooked and released specimens of 25, 27½, and a massive 29 inches—all caught on sculpin patterns. Some conventional tackle anglers spend their entire lives trying to catch a 25" walleye with jigs, bait and plastics! Here you can catch them with flies!

We taped an episode of *The New Fly Fisher*, which focused on techniques for catching big bass and walleye using a combination of surface and subsurface methods. These techniques, which are also the focus of this article, have been garnered from experience, as well as listening to and learning from others over the past 12 years or so.

For me, the true joy of catching smallies on a fly is to do it with a surface presentation. Seeing a bass suck down a dry fly or a popper followed by an explosion as the hook is set is what it is all about. Of course, how can you not take delight in the multiple jumps and cartwheels during the fight? Unfortunately, due to conditions, taking fish on the surface is often not an option, which means we must be prepared to offer sub-surface patterns that will incite a strike.

First, let's discuss surface fly fishing for bass.



Poppers for Bronzbacks

Okay, confession time. I have boxes and boxes of popper flies—way more than I can ever use in my lifetime. In fact, searching for and buying poppers is almost like an addiction. Every time I go into a fly shop anywhere in the world, I check out their selection of poppers. It is amazing the variety of sizes, shapes and colours that are available. Last winter when I was fishing in Belize, a small seashore fly shop had a nice selection of foam poppers used to catch baby tarpon. Of course, I had to have some to try on bass!

After years of using poppers there are some that have proven to be particularly effective. First, a bit about the shape. Poppers must have a deep concave face. I find the smaller sizes (#8) are the best. Sure, there are times when a big one works well, but, overall, I have found smaller ones are more effective for all sizes of smallmouth. Another important feature is a small tail, usually made of feathers and/or calf tail. It is also important to have rubber legs (short and stiff) projecting from the sides. Even in stillwater, these rubber legs will visually vibrate in the surface film, exciting the bass. Poppers such as Sneaky Pete's I am not that fond of, as they just don't cause enough surface commotion to lure bass up. In terms of colour, I love yellow/orange combinations, green with white, and black. Black seems to be a universal shade that works well on overcast days or towards nightfall when silhouette is critical.







{ TECHNIQUES FOR BIG SMALLMOUTH AND WALLEYE }

Bass take poppers because they imitate many of the creatures bass eat—anything from small frogs to insects, anything that moves and seems to be trying to escape rings the dinner bell for bass!

The key technique is to cast the popper near likely looking structure and let it sit. And I mean sit. Often the fly will be hit 15-20 seconds after it has landed. On our trip to Hawk Lake this often happened. It is hard to avoid the temptation to automatically retrieve or pop the fly as soon as it's hit the water. How often have you turned to talk to a friend and then heard a splash as your fly was taken. That is because you allowed it to sit and let the bass look it over.

When retrieving the popper, make sure it truly splashes and gurgles on the surface. After a few pops, stop and leave it motionless until the splash ring has dissipated. You will be amazed at how often you will see a big bass slowly come to the surface to inhale your offering.

I like to use 8-10 foot level leaders of 10 pound mono, rather than a tapered leader, as I find the weight of the fly combined with a good quality bass fly line makes it easy to cast poppers.

At Hawk Lake, I caught lots and lots of big, aggressive bass on poppers using these techniques. Total nirvana!







{ TECHNIQUES FOR BIG SMALLMOUTH AND WALLEYE }





DUE TO WIDGET LIMITATIONS, VIDEO DOES NOT PLAY IN ZOOM OR FULL SCREEN VIEW



Subsurface Smallmouth

Sometimes the sun is too bright, the water too clear or the atmospheric conditions are just not right to entice smallies into surface takes. That is when, as fly fishers, we must be versatile and adapt our angling techniques to ensure success.

Smallmouths love leeches, crayfish, hellgrammites and minnows, and there is one pattern that imitates all of these creatures—the ubiquitous Woolly Buzzer. Without question, a Woolly Buzzer is my number one subsurface pattern to use for catching smallies. Black, brown, two-tone, beadhead, unweighted—they all work! Over the years, I have developed a number of effective techniques.

The first is to use a short, sink-tip fly line with a short (4-5 foot) leader and a white or black Woolly Buzzer. I cast this rig at subsurface ledges, boulders, fallen trees, and other structure, then “twitch” the fly back. I find that white Woolly Buzzers in sizes #4-#8 to work very well. Smallies will race out from behind structure to grab what they think is either a struggling minnow or a hapless leech. A fly line such as Orvis’ Streamer Stripper (#6 or #7 weight) is perfect for this type of application.

Another technique is to fish a weighted Woolly Buzzer on a 5-6 foot, 10-12 pound leader with an intermediate fly line, usually a 6 six or 7 weight. Beadhead or conehead Woolly Buzzers are ideal, as I want to retrieve these flies in such a way so that they “jig” underwater. To do this, I like to cast near deeper structure, such as fallen logs or big boulders, and let the fly line take the fly down. Once deep enough (I use the countdown method to search different parts of the water column), I start to retrieve the fly using a short and fairly fast hand retrieve. This will make the fly jig, alternately swimming up and sinking down as it comes back. It seems to drive bass and other fish crazy.

You will most likely have to experiment a bit to find what retrieve speed works best. When the bass are in a neutral mood, I find that I really need to slow my retrieve down in order to provoke a strike. Usually, strikes register as a “bump” or weight on your line, which is the signal to set the hook. Often you’ll be rewarded with a big bass somersaulting through the air!

Yet another technique I use is to retrieve a sculpin pattern slowly right near the bottom. This can entice not only big bass, but also big walleye.



SUBSURFACE SMALLMOUTH AND WALLEYE FLIES





The Bonus of Big Walleye – Techniques & Equipment Choices

Most fly fishers don't usually connect walleye with fly fishing. But in Northern Ontario this is often a reality. In northern lakes, walleye usually stay deep, normally in 25-35 feet of water. At Hawk Lake, however, they come up into the shallows to hunt for food because the water temperatures are generally favourable.

The major factor in locating them in the shallows is the time of day. The common name, "walleye", comes from the fact that their eyes, like those of lions, reflect white light. This "eyeshine" is caused by a light-gathering layer (the tapetum lucidum) in the eyes, which allows the fish to see well in the low-light conditions in which they prefer to forage. Consequently, the best time to angle for walleye is just before dark or just after. At Hawk Lake, huge schools of fat walleye would come up from the deep and forage on rocky flats, near points, and on submerged shoals. Usually, they could be caught in water from 6-14 feet deep.

Walleye love minnows and, especially, leeches—just like smallmouth. The number one pattern I have used to catch them is the Woolhead Sculpin in either black or purple.

Woolhead Sculpins

are sold by Reelflies (www.reelflies.ca), –stock number RF4720. Why do I know this? Because I got tired of handing out all my black Woolhead Sculpins everywhere I went fishing for walleye. So I have this information written on a piece of paper in my wallet!

Woolhead Sculpins really work well, but you need to employ them in the right way to succeed. Walleye at any depth are usually within 1-2 feet of the bottom. Sure, in lakes they will suspend, but when they're foraging they normally hug the bottom near structure. I cast Woolhead Sculpins with a full-sinking fly line, usually a 7 or 8 weight in a Type V configuration (4-5 IPS—*inches per second*) with a short leader (3 to 4 feet

at the most) of 12 pound test mono. Use a brand that has excellent abrasion resistance, as the leader will rub against rocks, branches and other debris near the bottom.

I apply fly floatant to the body of any fly pattern I use with this set-up, but especially with Woolheads. This makes the fly buoyant, making it float up off the bottom. On the short leader and anchored with the weight of the sinking fly line, the fly stays within the forage zone up to 2 feet from the bottom. With a slow retrieve, you have a deadly means of catching walleye.

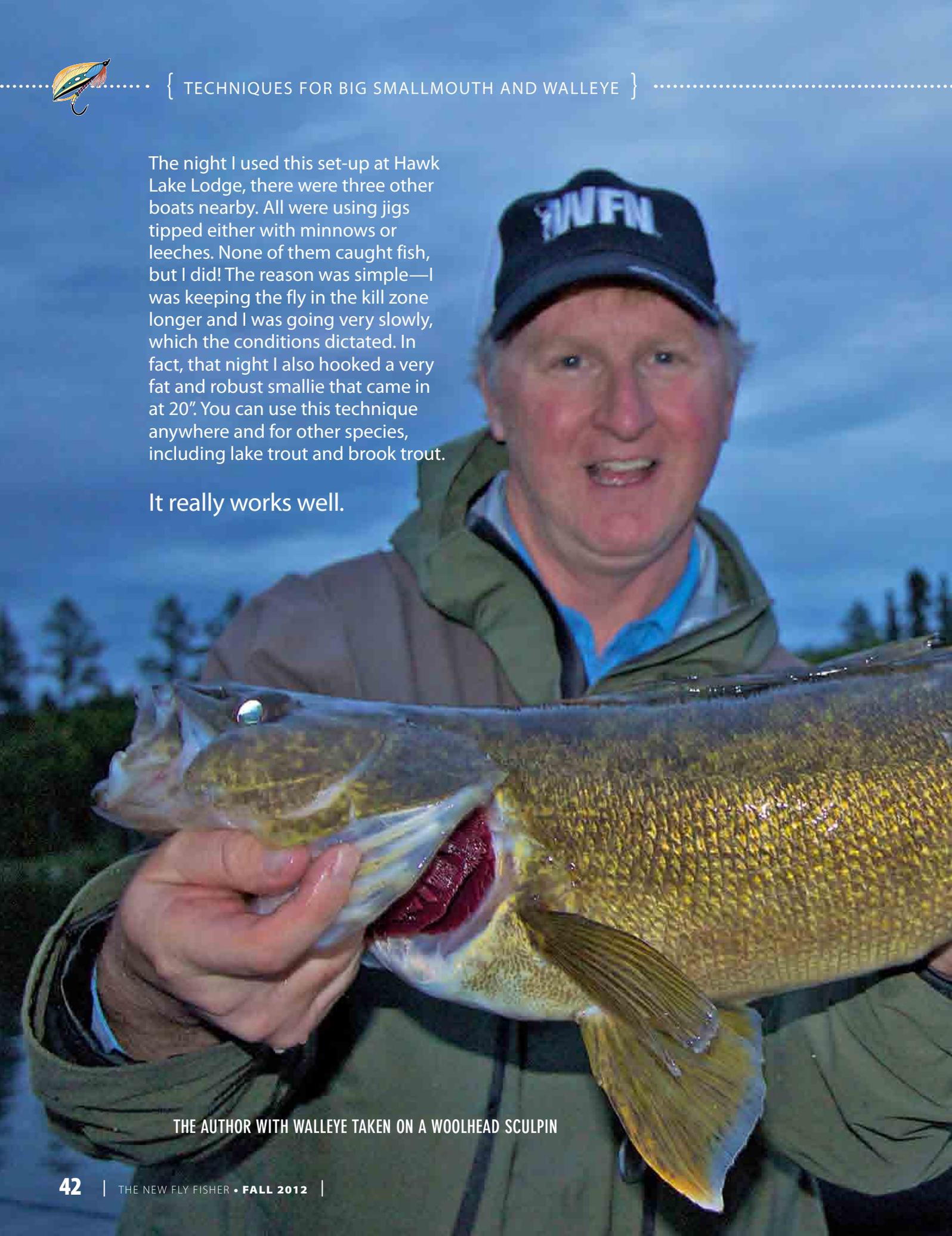


RYAN CHRIS WITH FLY ROD WALLEYE



The night I used this set-up at Hawk Lake Lodge, there were three other boats nearby. All were using jigs tipped either with minnows or leeches. None of them caught fish, but I did! The reason was simple—I was keeping the fly in the kill zone longer and I was going very slowly, which the conditions dictated. In fact, that night I also hooked a very fat and robust smallie that came in at 20". You can use this technique anywhere and for other species, including lake trout and brook trout.

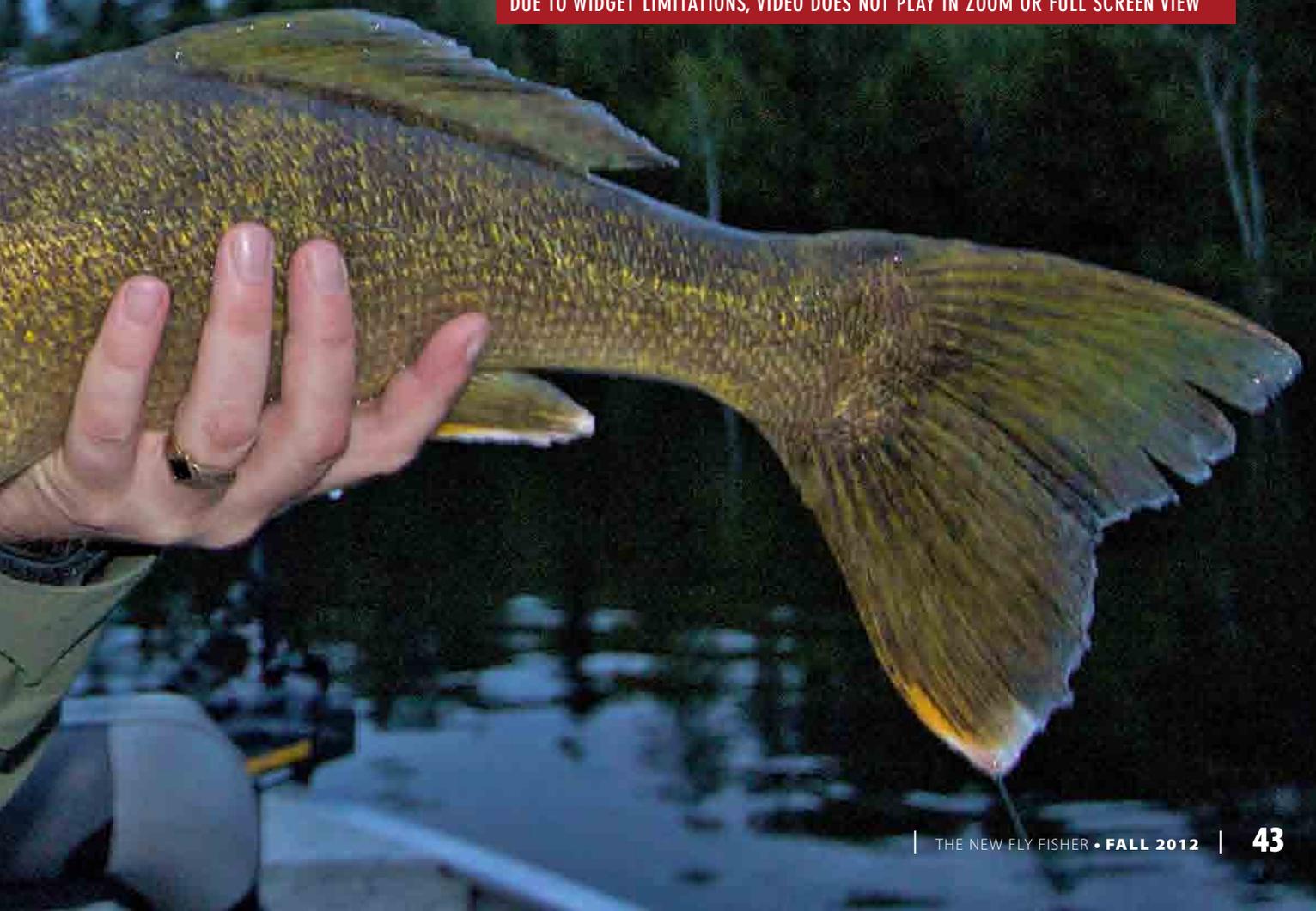
It really works well.



THE AUTHOR WITH WALLEYE TAKEN ON A WOOLHEAD SCULPIN



DUE TO WIDGET LIMITATIONS, VIDEO DOES NOT PLAY IN ZOOM OR FULL SCREEN VIEW





THE DEADLY BEADHEAD WOOLLY BUGGER



CRAYFISH PATTERNS





Epilogue

I have been fishing for smallmouth bass since I was a young boy at my parents' cottage on Georgian Bay. Back then, I had trouble sleeping the night before a planned outing with my father, using Hula Poppers and Rapalas to catch big smallies. Today, as a fly fisher, my delivery method and patterns have changed, but the excitement remains. Every night I was at Hawk Lake I found it just as difficult to sleep as I had when I was a boy at the cottage on Georgian Bay, just thinking about the next day's bass fishing. It is wonderful to still have that anticipation, and at Hawk Lake the promise of trophy fish is sufficient to fuel years of restless nights. ●

DUSK: POPPER TIME!

COREY MCKEOWN—IN HIS
FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS

