



FRESHWATER FISH OF AMERICA

WALLEYE

Sander vitreus, (Mitchill. 1818)



Natural History

Walleye are a freshwater fish that live in rivers, natural lakes, and reservoirs. They prefer cooler water temperatures found in both clear and turbid, shallow or deep water. Walleye reproduce at about three to four years of age. They usually spawn in the spring in shallow areas with lots of small gravel and rocks when the water temperature is around 45 degrees Fahrenheit. Their eggs hatch after about 12 to 30 days, depending on water temperature. The newly hatched walleye eat small insects and later switch to leeches, snails, frogs, crayfish, or even small mammals, but mainly eat other fish when they grow older and larger. In areas where fishing is common, they usually live about five to 10 years, where they reach sizes of about 12 to 30 inches long.

Anglers often fish for walleye when it is windy because the wind stirs up the bottom of a lake and makes the water turbid. Walleye are great hunters of food in murky water because of their good eyesight, so anglers are often successful when the wind blows. Anglers call good fishing in the wind the “walleye chop.”

Conservation

Walleye are common throughout the continental United States. They are native to the Great Lakes and Mississippi River drainage basins but have been introduced to many other parts of the United States for sport fishing. Construction of reservoirs has allowed walleye to survive in many new places. They are highly valued as a sport fish and for food. Walleye are managed by regulating fishing seasons, size limits, and creel limits. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Fish Hatchery System and Fish and Wildlife Conservation Offices support states in the conservation and management of walleye.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Size: The largest walleye ever caught was 42 inches long and weighed 25 pounds. The oldest reported age for a walleye is 29 years. On average, they live 5 to 10 years and range from 12 to 30 inches in length.

Range: Walleye are common throughout North America. They are native to the Great Lakes and Mississippi River drainage basins but have been introduced to many other parts of the United States for sport fishing. See map below for distribution.

Habitat: Walleye are found in rivers, natural lakes, and reservoirs. They live in many types of water, including clear, turbid, shallow, deep, cold and cool, but not warm. They are fairly generalist in habitat needs, which is why their range is so wide.

Diet: Newly hatched walleye eat small insects and later switch to leeches, snails, frogs, crayfish, or even small mammals, but mainly eat other fish when they grow older and larger.



Walleye. Photo credit: Sam Stukel/USFWS

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