

Scouting A New Lake

FISHING THESE SECRET SPOTS by Bill Diedrich*

Ever since you made reservations for your Canadian fly-in fishing trip at the sports show, great fishing has been a topic of conversation. "Fish all over the lake, fish every cast, fish literally jumping in the boat." You pull into the seaplane base, unload your gear, check in with your host, and obtain the lake map with the "secret" spots marked on it. The outfitter's helpful—he marks 6 or 8 spots on the map—and you're ready for the long-anticipated adventure.

Or are you? After all, how do you begin learning a new lake with only a crude map depicting a rough

outline of the lake, a few islands, a rock or two you should try to avoid, and those half-dozen fishing spots the outfitter marked?

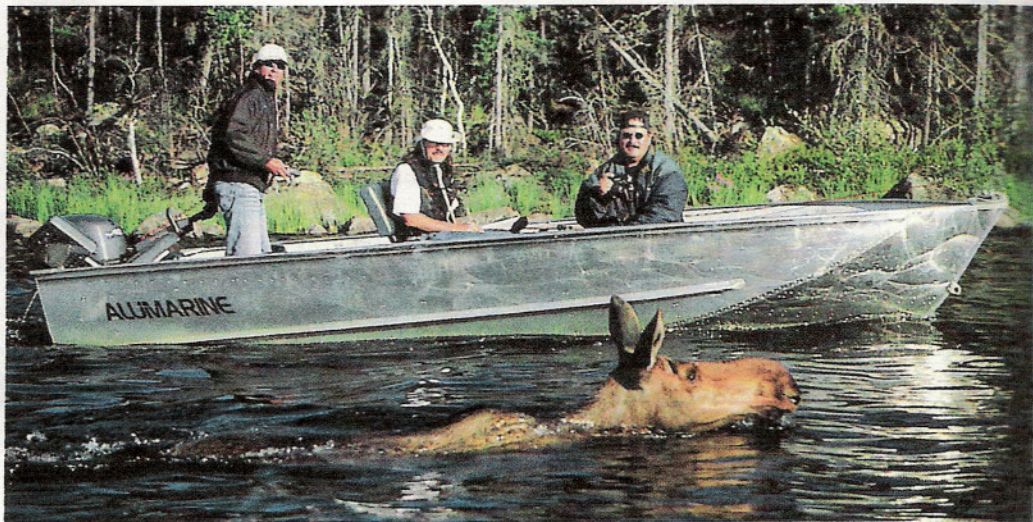
Catching fish on every cast is perhaps true at times if you're in the right spot. Canadian fly-in lakes can be teeming with fish—in certain places. However, Buck Perry, one of my early fishing gurus, said, "Most of the time, most of the water contains no fish." Perry later refined it to, "Ninety percent of the fish are in ten percent of the lake." Even in Canada.

Some anglers claim they just troll the shoreline. There can be lots of downtime with this method, however, until you find one of those "ten-percent" spots. Again back to Perry, who said, "The shoreline is used to hold the water in the lake."

Among our fishing group, finding new spots on a lake is almost as much fun as catching fish. We have one guy who has on occasion found a spot of his own, but his specialty is weasel-fish out of other people's spots. And he's good at it.

Let's examine several methods that include both a visual and an electronic approach with sonar to finding prime fishing spots. For space purposes, we'll limit our discussion to Canadian Shield lakes found in wilderness regions like Ontario and the northern half of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. These methods are not necessarily unique to these waters, so they can with minor adjustments be applied to many types of lakes. But these lakes are classic examples because they're full of structure and fish, yet typically lack a good hydrographic map to steer you in the right direction.

As I look at a crude map or begin running a lake to look for potential fish-holding spots, I look for four major features: shoreline points, inlets or outlets of rivers and streams, islands,



Keep a sharp eye out. I hear there are some real mooses around here.

and certain types of rocks or rock formations. I also check the marked fishing spots from the outfitter for these lake features to look for patterns.

First, proceeding to the marked spots, I get an idea of the type of structure that the outfitter thought should hold fish. I then fish these spots to get an idea of the depth where fish may be holding. If they produce, I begin looking for similar spots.

Points along the shoreline are natural fish-holding structures for virtually all species of fish. Points usually are easy to pick out on a map or to see visually as you're flying into camp. Points extending well out into the lake tend to be more productive than small points.

Islands do two things: they can be considered warning signs for sunken islands or reefs in the area, so approach these areas cautiously; it's best not to wreck your lower unit the first day out. In addition to providing a navigation alert, these may be prime fishing spots. Certain shallow reefs might have been walleye spawning sites, and in the early part of the season, they may still hold walleyes. Other deeper reefs and sunken islands in the area might be great summer spots.

Rivers and streams entering or leaving the lake can be fish-holding magnets, particularly in the early season. Current draws both forage and gamefish, particularly walleyes.

Finally, look at shoreline rocks, for which I have two simple rules, with the occasional exception. Shorelines containing baseball- to basketball-sized rocks are indicators of fish-holding potential. Shorelines containing large, smooth, flat rocks that extend into the water, however, are usually poor spots because

they provide few hiding places for forage fish. Tall, steep rock cliffs or palisades are generally poor spots as well. Typically, this type of rock extends far down into deep water with no food shelf near the area.

Without access to sonar, the places marked on the lake by the outfitter, and the potential spots you find using visual clues, will likely represent most of the fishing spots for your trip. Occasionally, a little luck can help, too.

Sonar, however, can provide a great deal of information. Two of its most important functions are revealing bottom contour and fish. Let's hit the water using both visual observations and sonar.

First, a couple notes on sonar. A common mistake when using a portable sonar with a suction-cup-style transducer mount is not placing the transducer far enough down on the transom. As a result, no high-speed readings are obtained.

Locate an area on the transom between two hull strakes. Then stick the transducer onto this area, positioning it about halfway between the motor and the side of the boat. Slide the suction cup down so the bottom edge of the cup is just above the bottom of the transom. This ensures that the transducer extends below the bottom of the boat. Positioned properly, you can usually get a high-speed reading even with a 25 hp outboard motor. Tie a safety cord to a transom handle or boat brace

so the transducer cord won't be accidentally cut by the propeller if the suction cup lets go.

Your first time on the water, set the depth function to "manual" rather than "auto." Manual provides an extended picture across the screen without continual changes in depth scale. In many Canadian walleye lakes, a 40- or 60-foot depth setting is adequate—unless it's also a deep lake trout lake. Also, know the projected battery life for your portable sonar. I've used sonar units that run 8 hours a day for at least 5 days on lantern batteries or D cells. I've also used units that run on AA batteries that are dead in one day. Bring spare batteries.

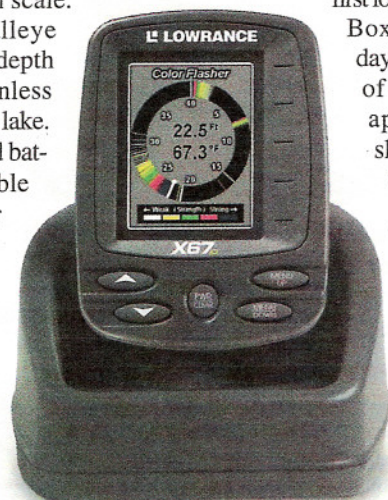
As soon as you hit the water, turn the unit on and head to a likely fishing spot. Frequently glance at the sonar as you move down the lake. This provides an idea of general depth, as well as indicating areas of hard or soft bottom and possible transition zones between them. It also alerts you to shallow water and the need to slow down. Rocks seem to grow like weeds on some of these lakes, and they come up fast out of nowhere. Also visually

check the shoreline as you as you move down the lake to note potential fishing spots, looking for those baseball and basketball rocks.

Consider one of my early sonar experiences from one of my first Canadian fishing trips. I had just purchased my first locator, a Lowrance "Green Box." The first or second day out, an interesting piece of underwater structure appeared, and I began slowly following it. I was intent on the locator read-

out, not wishing to miss any underwater information. I was totally focused on the bright red bulb, calling out fishing information to my partner, informing him that the structure is coming up rapidly. Suddenly, we

heard the dull thud of aluminum hitting rock. I had run into a small but visible island. The moral: watch your locator, but don't overdo it. Be aware of your surroundings. When you near a shoreline point, check it out with your sonar. How far into the lake does it extend? Does it break sharply or gradually into deep water? Are there any fish present on top of, off to the sides of, or along the base of a reef? Does the





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reef consist of large boulders or small rocks? Then check out the fishing.

You'll discover midlake humps as you run from spot to spot, in the middle of nowhere. And in many cases they're virtually untouched by anglers. Check 'em out. Is there a shallow side and a deep side? Is there a gradual break or a steep break? Does the underwater hump have fingers extending out from it? Establish shoreline markings to locate the spot again unless, of course, you brought along a GPS unit. Then check out the fishing.

Making a zigzag pattern in your exploration process can lead to discovering more spots. Work your way out deeper on a somewhat perpendicular course to shore, and then angle back in. Get a sense of the types of structures and drop-offs—steep or gradual. It's a great way to discover underwater points.

Your sonar unit, along with boat control, helps you keep lures at the proper depth. Anticipating moving into shallower or deeper water based on the sonar readout determines how much line to bring in or let out.

Weeds can play a major role in your fishing. Look for them in bays and on shallow flats. All sonar, regardless of style, can display weeds. In the early part of the season, weedgrowth is just beginning to sprout. These 6-, 12-, 18-inch-tall weeds may not be visible to the eye, particularly in tea-stained water, but they show up on a locator. These can be great clues for good early-season pike fishing in back bays. Later in the season, the tops of cabbage weeds can be seen on the surface as weedbeds mature. Deep weedlines can hold walleyes as well as pike much of the summer.

Learning to read a lake starts with a few tips from your outfitter, but it doesn't end there. Learning the lake involves looking for the four primary surface signs in tandem with reading your sonar unit. The more you know about the lake, the better chance you have of finding that 10 percent of the lake that holds the fish. ■

**Bill Diedrich is a longtime contributor to In-Fisherman publications on electronics topics. He also serves as the Electronics Doc, answering common questions on In-Fisherman's Web site, www.in-fisherman.com.*