

Fishing Tournament Trends: Kayak and catch-photo-release gaining popularity



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By **James Proffitt, Great Lakes Now**

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Every year thousands of anglers participate in fishing tournaments across the Great Lakes, with prizes ranging from a couple hundred bucks to tens of thousands of dollars. Some, like the Lake Erie Fall Brawl, offer new fishing boats valued at more than \$100,000 as top prizes. Some events are targeted toward professional anglers, while others pair a professional angler and an amateur angler. Many are friends and family-oriented, often benefitting a conservation angle or a local charity.

No matter the stakes, it's always fun to see the biggest fish people can hook and land.

Two new tournament trends that have been gaining traction in the past few years involve using much smaller boats to go after fish, and after catching the fish, being much nicer to them.

Goodbye frying pan, hello cell phone

That's the gist of catch-and-release tournaments, such as those operated by apps and sites like [FishDonkey](#) and [TourneyX](#). The traditional "weigh-in" doesn't happen onshore in front of spectators and other anglers. Instead, it happens continuously in cyberspace, allowing anglers and spectators to stay up-to-date on the angling action in real time. And all the fish are released after being netted and documented.

"They'll just snap a good quality picture of the fish with something that's very precise. The fish is tucked up to the end, the mouth is closed and your hands not covering anything," explained Chuck Earls, who is the first – and only – [Lake Erie kayak fishing guide licensed](#) by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. "They've dialed it in pretty good."

Some catch-and-release tournaments use a combination of weight and length to determine winners. And if you're thinking how easy it might be to cheat, think again.

"If you can imagine it, it's happened. People are going to cheat, you know?" Earls said. "There's been guys that have photoshopped different tails on there, there've been people that cut tails off fish then covered the gap with their hand holding the fish down. A friend of mine owns the Ketch Board company, which is often the only legal measuring board you can use to measure fish." Earls said anglers have been known to flex cheaper plastic measuring boards to produce a "longer" fish.

Those things can happen, he said, when people are fishing for big money, like the [Kayak Trail Bass Fishing Championship](#) with a \$100,000 grand prize. That's why digital tournaments are thorough, often including requirements that officials can examine metadata of all images and videos.

In addition to large winnings, Earls said, the rise of catch-photo-release fishing tournaments opens up new outdoors opportunities for anglers. And those tournaments are especially amenable to kayak anglers, who don't have live-wells to keep fish in, usually needed for traditional live-fish weigh-ins.

"I think the key thing to promote with kayak fishing is these guys are trying to make sure they're not just beating up on fish, so that's why the catch-photo-release is so big: snap a picture and get that thing back where it's going," he said.

And that's perfect for attracting new anglers who may not be so interested in killing or eating fish.

"It absolutely brings in those people," Earls said. "I catch walleye and eat them, but I also let a lot go. I try to be very open with everyone so I say, 'Whatever you decide to do is fine with me, I'm good with it.'"

By providing big water boating opportunities for a fraction of the costs associated with traditional fishing boats, kayak angling and tournaments also draw in new anglers who want to get out on the water – and fish competitively. And according to Earls, the more the merrier.

He said at least one major Lake Erie walleye tournament will soon announce the addition of kayaks in either a special category or in conjunction with the open category, and additionally the Lake Erie Fall Brawl will also host a kayak division in the 2022 event.



Lake Erie kayak guide Chuck Earls sits offshore with a nice fish in Cleveland. (Photo courtesy of Chuck Earls)

Below is a short list of 2022 Great Lakes fishing tournaments. Drop in the comments if you know of more:

Lake Erie

[Clemens Boats Great Lakes Largemouth Series](#)
Largemouth Bass
When: 20 events beginning April 24
Where: Multiple locations from Toledo to Cleveland area

[FishCrazy Walleye Spring Derby](#)
Walleye
When: April 17 – May 28
Where: Ohio Lake Erie and tributary waters

[Lake Erie Fall Brawl](#)
Walleye
When: October 15 – November 27
Where: Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania Lake Erie waters

[Lake Erie Walleye Trail](#)
Walleye
When: Eight events March 26 – September 30
Where: Contiguous waters of Lake Erie

Lake Michigan

[Garmin Tournament Trail](#)
Salmon and trout
When: 11 events beginning April 29
Where: Multiple locations

[Great Lakes Kayak Fishing Series](#)
Salmon (catch and release digital via TourneyX)
When: September 17
Where: Manitowac, Wisconsin

[Great Lakes Kayak Fishing Series](#)
Bass (catch and release digital via TourneyX)
When: June 18
Where: Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin

Lake Ontario

[New York State Lake Ontario Pro/Am Tournament](#)
Trout and salmon
When: June 3 – 4
Where: Lake Ontario (launching in Olcott)

[Lake Ontario Counties Derby](#)
Salmon, trout and walleye
When: Spring May 6 – 15, Summer July 2 – 31, Fall August 19 – September 5
Where: New York and Ontario waters

Lake Huron

[Chantry Chinook Classic Fishing Derby](#)
Salmon and trout
When: July 23 – August 7
Where: Lake Huron/Georgian Bay in Ontario

Michigan Walleye Tour

Walleye
When: June 17 – 18
Where: Oscoda, Michigan

[Ontario Kayak Bass Trail](#)
Bass (catch and release digital via TourneyX)
When: August 13
Where: Georgian Bay Port Severn, Ontario

Lake Superior

[South Shore Fishing Association Spring Shootout](#)
Salmon and trout
When: May 7
Where: Marquette

[South Shore Fishing Association Fall Classic](#)
Salmon and trout
When: August 27
Where: Marquette

Lake St. Clair

[Team Fishing Circuit](#)
Bass (catch and release digital tournament via FishDonkey)
When: July 13
Where: Lake St. Clair, Harrison Township

[Ontario Kayak Bass Trail](#)
Bass (catch and release digital via TourneyX)
When: June 25
Where: Lake St. Clair, Windsor, Ontario

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Featured image: *The Lake Erie Walleye Trail paid \$4,787 to the winning team at their Cast & Jig Open event on April 16, 2022. (Photo Credit: James Proffitt)*

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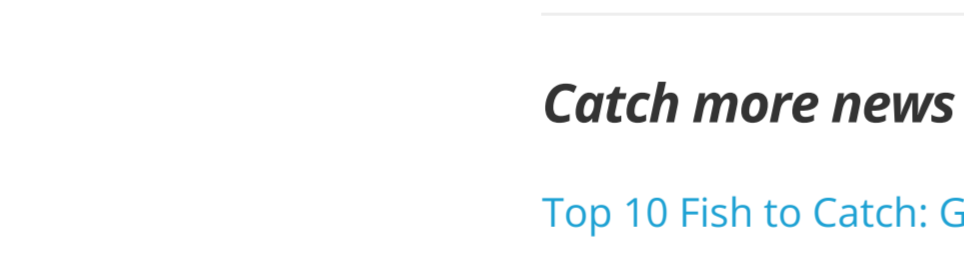
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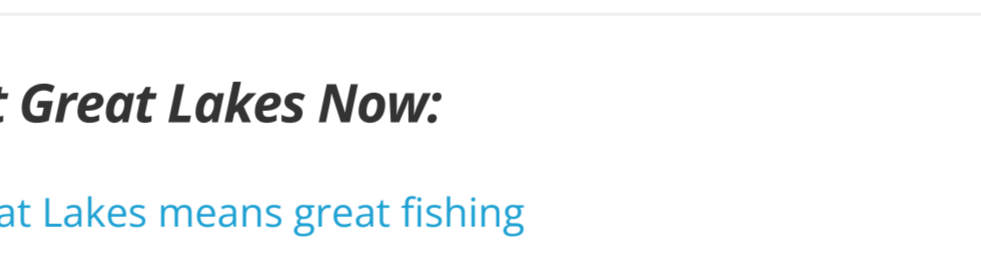
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