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The walleye, more familiarly called a pickerel, is one of Ontario's most popular game fish species. It is also renowned for being the most delectable of freshwater fish, with clean, white meat and a sweet, mild flavour. That being said, there's more to the walleye than its popularity in the pan.

A member of the perch family, the walleye averages between 1.5 and 3 pounds; but in some places, like the Bay of Quinte, it is not uncommon to catch one between 10 and 20 pounds. The female grows larger than the male. This fish gets its name from its pearlescent eyes. The opaqueness is caused by a reflective layer of pigment within the eye. It helps the fish to hunt more effectively at night, in low light or in murky water. The walleye is a metallic-gold colour on its sides with a pale belly. Its back is olive-green with dark bands and is topped with two dorsal fins, one of which is spiny. The bottom of its tail has a white spot. A predatory species, the walleye has a large mouth and sharp teeth. It is native to Canada and prefers cool, deep, windswept lakes and rivers with gravel shoals. It is predominantly nocturnal and is sensitive to light. During the day, it takes cover in the shadows of submerged wood, boulders and aquatic vegetation. Feeding peaks at dusk and dawn, when it moves into shallower water to hunt -- mostly small fish, like yellow perch, invertebrates and insects. It may remain more active during the day if there is a wind-driven chop on the water or when heavy cloud cover reduces brightness.

Shortly after ice-out on the lakes, the walleye seeks suitable areas to spawn. Optimal spawning habitat will have irregular, rocky and/or gravel substrate in 1-6 feet of water where a current clears away sediments, keeping the eggs clean and aerated. The male fish arrive first, often when the water temperature is barely above freezing. Females arrive later. Reproduction occurs during a mass event -- a fish orgy, if you will -- where billions of sperm and eggs are released into the surrounding area. This is known as "broadcast spawning." While one 5-pound female can deposit more than 100,000 eggs, there is no parental care whatsoever. Spawning success is highly variable from year to year and can be impacted by weather. Rapidly increasing water temperatures can cause a premature hatch; and extended colder weather can delay or compromise hatch health, as well as inhibit the production of microcrustaceans that baby walleye eat. After spawning, adult fish disperse to feeding areas. The post-spawn female fish are especially spent and can get a much-needed boost from nearby submerged wood, which studies show tends to attract abundant prey while offering a sheltered place to rest and recuperate.

Last year, the Wolfe Lake Association partnered with the Westport Outdoor Association, the Rideau Valley Conservation Authority and Camp IAWAH to restore valuable walleye spawning habitat on Scanlan Creek, as well as to sink tree bundles in the lake in hopes of supporting the walleye population. Walleye are susceptible to overfishing, erosion, habitat loss, degraded water quality and climate changes that cause lake temperatures to rise. Invasive species are a growing threat. Here, in Fishing Management Zone 18, a slot-size regulation helps protect the walleye. Anglers may only keep fish measuring between 14.7-19.7 inches in length; all others must be released. Walleye season is now closed in FMZ 18 and reopens May 9th.

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