



Working the Walleye Factory

Fresno produces more of these delicious fish per acre than any other reservoir in Montana. Here's how to put some in your cooler. **By Tom Dickson**

On a warm evening in mid-May, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks fisheries biologist Cody Nagel and I drive past grasslands and wheat fields until we reach Fresno Reservoir, a Milk River impoundment that flows into Hill County from Canada. After rigging our spinning rods with small leadhead jigs tipped with rubber minnow look-alikes—live minnows aren't allowed in the reservoir—we wade into the shallows of a quiet bay and begin casting. Other than the faint “plop” of the jigs hitting the water, the only other sounds are the distant hum of a powerboat and the cooing of mourning doves flying in and out of cottonwood stands lining the shore.

Located 14 miles west of Havre on the Hi-Line and owned and operated by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), Fresno was built in 1939 to supply water for irrigation and municipalities and to control flooding. The 5,700-acre impoundment also provides opportunities for boating and fishing.

Though Fresno produces northern pike, yellow perch, black crappies, and lake whitefish, most anglers seek the reservoir's

numerous walleye. “It’s a walleye factory,” Nagel says. He explains that the Milk River, flowing through the fertile farmlands of southern Alberta, supplies the reservoir with nutrients that fuel production of zooplankton and invertebrates that young walleye eat. The addition of Fresno’s abundant walleye spawning and rearing habitats and cool but not cold water for adults in summer creates “ideal conditions for strong natural reproduction,” Nagel says.

Since 2014, FWP fall netting surveys



TYPICAL An angler and his son show off a typical Fresno “eater”-size walleye.

have averaged 16.4 *Sander vitreus*, or walleye, per net, the highest abundance in the state. Anglers target this close cousin to the yellow perch and sauger for its white, bone-free fillets. Nagel says catch rates from late April through June are 0.5 to 0.7 fish per hour. In other words, on average, an angler who fishes there for four hours catches two or three walleye.

That’s twice the state average. Limits of five walleye are common, even from shore. Most of the fish tend to be “eaters,” three-year-old fish in the 14- to 16-inch range.

ABUNDANT BUT NOT BIG

That’s Fresno’s good news. The bad news, at least for some anglers, is that these prairie walleye don’t grow as big as those in Canyon Ferry, Tiber, and Fort Peck Reservoirs. It’s an ecosystem issue. Nagel explains that as abundant young walleye grow, they need to eat bigger food—ideally, 5- to 10-inch perch or crappies—to reach the 25-inch-plus size that anglers consider trophies. “Fresno just can’t grow the number of perch and crappies needed to provide a larger forage option,” he

says. That’s because the reservoir’s abundant midsize walleye eat up almost all of the forage fish before the perch and crappies grow large enough to feed larger walleye. What’s more, the reservoir has relatively few suckers and other forage species that fatten walleye in other reservoirs. Cisco, an oily salmonid that produces big walleye (including the state record) on the much deeper Tiber, about 85 miles to the west, can’t survive in the relatively shallow Fresno.

Stocking additional young walleye, a management strategy used on some other reservoirs with different ecological conditions, wouldn’t work on Fresno. “You need the right balance between forage and predator fish species to achieve a long-term sustainable walleye population and size structure,” Nagel says. “Hatchery fish would disrupt that by adding more pressure on the limited forage base. It would end up reducing the average walleye size because there’d be that many more mouths to feed.”

WATER UP, WATER DOWN

The reservoir’s yo-yoing water levels pose another fisheries management challenge. Some Montana reservoirs, such as Nelson near Malta, are off-site storage impound-

ments where water levels remain relatively steady, as in a natural lake. But Fresno is a “flow-through” reservoir, meaning the river runs to, through, and out of the impoundment. That increases water fluctuations. Nagel says Fresno rises and drops as much as 20 feet in a given year as the BOR holds water from spring runoff, then releases it during summer to downstream irrigators. “When water levels drop, you lose a lot of the rock and vegetation habitat in the shallows that young-of-the-year fish need to avoid predators,” Nagel says.

Fresno’s game fish reproduce best when the reservoir has high and stable water levels during April spawning. “That allows walleye,

northern pike, and yellow perch to use the submerged rock, gravel, and vegetation for spawning. Then the young-of-the-year fish can hide out in that shallow-water habitat, producing a strong year class,” Nagel says. “If the water stays high through June, we also can see some great crappie reproduction.”

High water comes with a cost, however. “We lose many adult fish that flush over the spillway during extremely high reservoir levels,” Nagel says.

CHAPTER MEMBERS CHIP IN

FWP and local anglers have no control over Fresno water levels and how that affects the walleye population. But they can improve

IN CLOSE Right: FWP fisheries biologist Cody Nagel casts a small jig into Fresno’s waist-deep waters late one May evening. Below: Though boaters regularly crisscross the 5,700-acre reservoir, most of the best walleye fishing is found close to shore.



TOP TO BOTTOM: ERIC ENGBRETSON; FRESNO WALLEYES

TOP TO BOTTOM: TOM DICKSON; JOHN WARNER



ACTIVE Left: Members of the Walleyes Unlimited Fresno Chapter with trees they haul onto the frozen reservoir to create perch habitat. Right: In summer, chapter members take local kids fishing and sponsor a youth fishing tournament.



recreational amenities at the reservoir. Nate Molstad, president of the Walleyes Unlimited Fresno Chapter, says group members have installed fishing docks, repaired aging boat ramps, built a campground and pavilion, donated picnic tables, and paid for laying gravel on roads. “We try to tackle about anything that anglers need out there,” he says. Members raise funds with a local banquet that attracts 400 to 450 people each April, followed by a month-long raffle of hunting rifles and shotguns. The chapter also holds an annual youth education day, a kids’ fishing tournament, and the Fresno Challenge, which is part of the Montana walleye tournament circuit. Molstad adds that each winter group members work with FWP crews to drag old Christmas trees onto the frozen reservoir; the woody debris sinks with ice-out and provides habitat for perch, a key forage species for walleye.

SHORE FISHING

Not only can anglers catch abundant walleye at Fresno, they can do it from shore throughout much of the open-water season. Catching fish from shore is possible on most walleye reservoirs for a few weeks in spring and fall, when fish cruise the shallows to feed. But walleye typically head to deeper, cooler water in midsummer to chase cold-water forage fish such as cisco. That puts them out of reach for anglers without a boat.

That’s not the case at Fresno. Nagel says most of the reservoir’s underwater fish-holding structure is part of the ledge rock that runs along the shoreline. Forage species such as perch, emerald shiners, and spottail shiners hang out in the rocky shallows. “The middle of the reservoir is just a big mud sink,

with little structure,” he says. “Walleye stage there throughout most of the day, but then they come close to shore during the low-light periods of early morning and evening to feed.”

Most anglers fish from boats, Nagel says, but they often cruise the shallows, casting or trolling near shore. “Usually it can be just as productive wade-fishing Fresno from shore as fishing from a boat,” he says. “Once I figure out where the fish are located, I can catch them from shore all summer long.”

NOT TONIGHT

On this particular spring evening, I’m not having much luck. In two hours all I’ve caught are a few small northern pike. These hard-fighting fish are fun to catch and can be great to eat, but the “hammer handles” I hooked were too small to keep. Nagel points out that the area received four inches of rain during the previous two weeks, rapidly raising water levels and flooding the shoreline. “That will be good for forage fish production later this

summer, but it’s not so good for us tonight,” he says. “The walleye could be anywhere, even over there in the flooded trees.”

At nightfall, he and I don headlamps and tie on crankbaits. Annoyed by bright sunlight, walleye become less spooky and more aggressive after dark. Casting crankbaits allows us to cover more water than we could by jigging.

We each head in different directions along shore, wading slowly in waist-deep water while fan-casting in search of cruising fish. Two hours later, around 10 p.m., we meet back at Nagel’s truck. He’s caught one 15-inch walleye. I’ve come up blank. “Most nights between April and October, walleye bite well for 20 minutes to two hours between 7 and 10 p.m.,” he says.

Most nights, but not this one. Still, I’ll be back. I don’t own a boat, and there aren’t many places where I can catch a limit of walleye from shore. It’ll take more than one fishless night to keep me away from this Hi-Line walleye factory. 🐟



INVESTIGATING Cody Nagel cuts open the head of a typical Fresno walleye to remove otoliths (near right) that he will later examine under a microscope to age the fish. Far right: Nagel checks young-of-the-year walleye numbers to see how a new generation is faring.



Fresno walleye through the year

Cody Nagel lives and breathes walleye. He grew up fishing for the glassy-eyed species in North Dakota, and today manages Montana’s most productive walleye water. When he gets off work, Nagel goes walleye fishing—on his own, with his wife and kids, or with a buddy on the walleye tournament circuit. “It’s nuts; I admit it,” he says.

Here’s how this self-described walleye fanatic fishes Fresno through the year:

The season begins in **late April** after ice-out, when fish move from deeper water to shallows to spawn along rocky reefs. Nagel fishes the upper reservoir with Flicker Shads, floating Rapalas, and other shallow-running crankbaits in perch or chartreuse colors.

The action heats up in **May and June** as warming water increases the fish’s metabolism. That’s when Nagel moves down-reservoir and fishes a ½-ounce leadhead jig tipped with half a night crawler or a rubber twister tail or paddle tail in two to ten feet of water. Live minnows are not allowed in Fresno.

Nagel says walleye swim almost anywhere along the lower reservoir that time of year. “No need to drive very far. I stay close

to the campground,” he says.

In **summer**, Nagel switches to a slightly heavier ¼-ounce jig and fishes a bit deeper, in 15 to 20 feet of water, focusing on underwater points where the water drops off quickly. Because walleye don’t like bright sunlight, the best fishing starts in late afternoon when the sun is low and improves after sunset. If jigs don’t produce, he switches to crankbaits, especially after dark.

A simple slip-bobber and worm or leech works, too. “I’ve caught limits from shore on July evenings while my kids are swimming nearby,” he says.

The fishing usually peters out in **August through September**, when young-of-the-year perch and crappie are abundant and walleye prefer the real thing over anglers’ artificial offerings. “Then in **October and November**, if you can stand the cold, things really pick up,” Nagel says. “I fish at night right off the boat ramp with a lantern that attracts zooplankton. Forage fish come right in, with walleye right behind.”

Fresno usually ices over by mid-November. Most years, the ice reaches a safe six

to eight inches by **Christmas**—though you should always check depth by drilling holes before venturing too far out.

Most of the **ice fishing** happens within the main basin and bays, where anglers focus on the deeper water and steep ledges where winter walleye, crappies, and perch concentrate. Nagel says dead or frozen suckers, fished on tip-ups, seem to work best for walleye. Jigging spoons and jigging Rapalas can also produce.



“Some years, ice fishing for walleye on Fresno can be tough,” he says. “I’ve had my best years when forage production was low and the walleye were hungrier than usual.”

Many ice anglers have better luck catching northern pike or lake whitefish. “Whitefish don’t get much attention,” Nagel says. “Fresno has a good population of these great eating fish, and they average three to five pounds.” ■



JUST CAN'T QUIT

Nagel, his wife Dezeræ, and son Brayden troll for walleye with shallow-running crankbaits. “We like the boat, but we mainly fish from shore,” Nagel says. “We’ve caught a lot of limits while my son is right there playing in the water.”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FRESNO WALLEYES; FRESNO WALLEYES; JESSE VARNADO; JOHN WARNER; JOHN WARNER

JOHN WARNER