

For a change of pace, give night-wading a try

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Since man first fashioned a piece of bone into a fishhook, anglers have been the bearers of certain unflattering labels. The best known of these is, of course, "liar," but there's another characterization I find equally objectionable: "Early riser."

While it's true that fish bite well at sunup, not all of us who wield rod and line are early birds. I, for one, would rather remove a 2/0 treble hook from my forearm than get out of bed at 5:30 in the morning to go fishing. Luckily, I don't have to. As those of you who share my aversion to alarm clocks know, game fish feed just as actively at dusk as they do at dawn. And the bite doesn't cease at sundown -- insomniac anglers catch fish all night long.

After dark, large predators abandon their deep-water haunts and sneak into the shallows looking for a midnight snack. You can catch them from boat or shore, but I prefer to get in the water and join the fray. There's nothing quite like wading in the black of night, through shallows alive with aggressive fish. I've had fleeing shiners leap from the water into my chest, and their toothy pursuers brush my legs.

Nocturnal wading is not for the faint of heart. Just when you think things have quieted down, an angry beaver will slap the water, or a bat will throttle past your ear with a leathery thump.

I like to night-wade during the full moon phase -- I can see better, and so can the fish, which helps when you're casting lures. It's also the time of the month when day fishing can be painfully slow. Why does the night bite beat daytime angling during a full moon? Tim Wilson, a biologist with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, offers one possible explanation:

"Some predators like bass and walleye have eyes that are more efficient in low light than their prey," he said. "Their activity pattern is labeled crepuscular, meaning they are most active during the lower light periods at dusk and dawn, when this adaptation gives them an advantage. My guess is that a full moon simulates these low light conditions and might prompt these predators to be more active at night than is normal. During the next day, if these predators have full bellies, well, the hardest fish to catch is one that isn't hungry."

Casting long stickbaits is a popular nighttime-fishing technique, but I favor the irresistible throb of a single Colorado blade spinnerbait. Bass, walleye, pike and musky can home in on its steady vibration from beyond their field of sight. Black is the traditional color choice (it shows up boldly from below against the sky), but on a clear, full-moon night color doesn't matter much. A shiny silver blade will reflect moonlight and provide all the visual attraction you need.

When night-wading, it pays to be thoroughly familiar with the waters you're fishing. Visibility is better if you wade toward the moon rather than away from it, but you'll still have to rely more on memory and ears than eyes. You should know the location of wading hazards like logs, boulders and drop-offs, as well as thick weed beds that could obstruct your casting. If you don't know where the weeds are, you'll end up spending most of the night removing vegetation from your hook instead of fish. And be sure to know the regulations for the area you want to fish.

The full moon is almost here, so why not sleep in and give night-wading a try? You might just run into a big one -- literally.

Night fishing tips

- 1.** Focus on bodies of water with heavy boat traffic and no motor limits. Fish that are terrorized by Jet Skis and cigarette boats all day usually feed most actively at night. Even after the last dock of the season has been pulled in fish tend to adhere to this feeding pattern.
- 2.** Don't be afraid to make some noise. Add a small rattle to your baits for extra auditory appeal.
- 3.** Darker sky equals darker baits. Black and blue lures give the best contrast with the sky during the new (dark) moon phase. On clear full moon nights fish can easily see white or any other color.
- 4.** Keep your retrieves slow. Fish will have more time to zero in on your bait, and they'll miss less often when they strike.
- 5.** Wear a headlamp, but don't shine it on the water. I only turn mine on to unhook fish or retie knots.

-- Dan Morey