

Spring Trolling for Coho Salmon in Indiana



Background

Coho salmon is one of the most popular salmonid species in Indiana. Originally native to the Pacific Ocean, coho were introduced to Lake Michigan in the late 1960s and have enjoyed a strong following by boat, pier, and stream anglers alike. They are excellent eating, and can often be caught using simple techniques. This is as an introduction to coho fishing from a boat during the spring months.

Coho Salmon Biology and Movement

Coho salmon are raised in the hatchery for more than a year before being stocked into tributaries around Lake Michigan. In spring, when they are about 1 ½ years old, they migrate to Lake Michigan to feed and mature. Coho have a diverse diet. They eat various baitfish such as young alewives, shiners and even round gobies. They also eat aquatic invertebrates such as water fleas, midge larvae and freshwater shrimp, and during spring and summer they eat terrestrial insects that get blown into the lake, including flies, lady beetles, and even stinkbugs. Coho spend one or two summers in the lake and then return to the stream in which they were stocked as either 2-year-old “jacks” or fully mature 3 year olds. The peak spawning run typically happens in September and October.

Winter - During winter, coho cruise areas of warm water near harbor mouths and warm-water discharges that attract baitfish, and in deeper, more stable offshore zones in 150+ feet of water.

Spring - As the water warms in early spring, almost all coho in Lake Michigan swim to the southern part of the lake, which usually has the warmest water. Somewhere between mid-April and mid-May they begin to move offshore and up the east and west coasts of the lake.

Summer – During summer, coho seek cool water temperatures (below 60 degrees) and baitfish. They are highly nomadic and can be found anywhere from 60- to 300+ foot depths.

Fall - Once the water cools in late September or early October, the mature fish return to their natal tributary. The immature fish of 1-2 pounds remain, feeding in the lake, typically farther offshore in deeper water.



Your purchase of fishing equipment and motor boat fuel supports boating access and Sport Fish Restoration.

Indiana Fishing Regulation Guide:
<http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/2347.htm>



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When to Troll: Late winter to early spring, February-May. The most consistent action is usually in late March through April. But action can be had as early as February in warmer years, and into May in cooler years.

Where: Lake Michigan, launching from various marinas in four main ports: East Chicago (Pastrick Marina), Hammond (Hammond Marina), Portage (Portage Public Marina or Marina Shores), Michigan City (Washington Park Marina or Trail Creek Marina)

Resources:

Fishing access can be found using the Where to Fish Finder:

<https://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/3591.htm>

DNR Fishing Reports will have updates on where the good action has been recently:

<http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/8270.htm>

The Indiana DNR's Lake Michigan Office can be called for more information at (219) 874-6824

Fishing Regulations: <https://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/2347.htm>

Current (2017) bag limits are five (5) trout and salmon combined, of which no more than three (3) can be lake trout

How: Early in the year, try to find the warmest water possible and start trolling. The Indiana Harbor Ship Canal near Hammond and East Chicago, and the Gary Light harbor (nearest East Chicago, but also reachable from Portage) have warm-water discharges and are usually the first place good coho action starts. The Inland Steel wall area near East Chicago Marina also is a good place for early action in February and March. The mouth of Burns Ditch in Portage and Trail Creek in Michigan City also can have slightly warmer water that attracts coho. As the water temperatures warm in April and May, the action will, in general, spread out and move east, and then eventually move offshore.

Coho are typically found in 15 to 50 feet of water early in the year, although in recent years there has also been an abundance of early-Spring coho found in 150 to 250 feet of water. This guide focuses on catching the shallower coho, which are close to shore and more accessible. Regardless of water depth, coho are usually oriented to the surface, so focus on fishing in the top 15 feet of the water column.

Anglers can troll with up to three lines a person. If you have several people in the boat and want to run multiple lines, should spread them out horizontally to cover more water and avoid tangles.

There is some specialized gear that helps spread out lines. If you are a beginner and don't want to spend a lot of money on salmon gear, you can still have success trolling two to four rods using simple rigs such as body baits or dodgers and flies.

With some specialized gear (described below) even a novice can catch coho in relatively shallow water.



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Planer Boards (top two items) are useful for spreading out lines horizontally. They are used to present flat lines and lead-core trolling line, with a variety of different baits. Some boats will deploy up to four, five or even six planer boards per side if they have enough anglers on board. There are a lot of different types of planer boards. All can be effective if used properly.

Dipsy Divers (left column, second from top) are sinking disks that also plane away from the boat. They are also used with a variety of baits and attractors. Typically, boats will only use one dipsy diver per side of the boat, although two can be used on each side if they have different settings and will not tangle together.

Coho salmon are aggressive and can be drawn into your trolling spread by two general types of **attractors: metal dodgers** (left column, bottom two items, and right column, bottom item) or **plastic rotators** (right column, middle two items). For shallow spring coho, dodgers are the more popular choice.

Now that we've covered the way to separate lines and present lures, let's talk about the different lures.

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Body Baits: Brad's Thin Fish (modern version of Rattlin Thin Fins) are far and away the most popular early-season coho baits. They are pictured above on the far left. Other body baits like Thundersticks, Husky Jerks, X-raps, Flicker Shads, jointed Rapalas, Bay Rat Coho Crushers, and many others take good numbers of fish, as long as they are shallow diving and stay in the top 15 feet of the water column. Bright colors such as orange, firetiger, pink, chrome/blue, and rainbow are usually best, but the "red squiggle" Thin Fish pattern (top left in the picture) has probably taken more coho on southern Lake Michigan than all other body baits combined. Most anglers will run body baits 50 to 100 feet behind their planer boards.

Smaller Trolling Spoons also take cohos. Popular brands are Dreamweaver Super Slims, standard size Michigan Stinger, Pro King, Moonshine, Warrior, and Silver Streak. Again, bright colors with some orange, chartreuse, pink, or red are typically used. They are fished on short lead-core lines (2-5 colors), behind dipsy divers or on downriggers.

As the water warms above 40 degrees, the best presentation, hands-down, becomes the **orange 6-inch dodgers coupled with "peanut flies"** – flashy trolling flies tied directly on treble hooks, pictured at the top right of the image above. Tie your peanut flies on stiff 40- or 50-pound fluorocarbon leader material, and run them 14-18 inches behind the dodger. The stiff line is critical, as the back-and-forth slashing action of the dodger will give the fly a darting and enticing action. Thinner, limp line will not transmit the motion of the dodger to the fly, and will result in few bites. Leader length also matters. The shorter it is, the more aggressive the fly action. A general rule on fly color is to use silvers, blues, greens and golds on sunny and clear days, and use darker colors like purples and blacks on cloudy days. Sometimes it pays to run one or two 8-inch dodgers in orange or chartreuse orange dots. When fish are aggressive, they key in on the one or two dodgers that stand out from the crowd.

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Typical Spread and Tactics:

Early in the year, *before the water warms over 40 degrees*, a typical six-rod spread might be six planer boards with flatlines and body baits, or four planer boards with body baits and two dipsy divers with spoons or dodgers and flies. Let the dipsy divers out until they start to disappear—only 25 to 50 feet of line out on the reel counter. Coho are not shy and are often attracted to the boat.

After the water is warmer than 40 degrees, mix in a few short lead-cores with spoons, and start to include a lot of dodgers and flies, both on dipsy divers, downriggers, or use ½- to 1-ounce keel weights to run them on flat lines behind planer boards. Remember, to avoid tangles, to set your shallowest running presentation on the outside board, and your deepest running presentation on the inside board.

Speed: The colder the water, the slower you will usually want to troll. Most anglers troll between 1.8 and 3.2 mph. Typically, dodgers run better at 1.8 to 2.5 mph. Many spoons and body baits will tolerate faster speeds, if you want to cover water at 3 mph or slightly faster. Vary your trolling speed until you start catching fish. Some days speed is everything. Other days it does not seem to matter.

Depth: Coho often relate to a certain water depth, which may change day-to-day. If you don't have any recent reports, make sure to cover a variety of depths until you get a few bites. Coho can be practically on the beach or out in much deeper water. Coho will frequently be schooled in particular areas, so if you get several bites in one area, it usually pays to circle back and thoroughly fish the area.

Spring coho fishing offers some of the best action to be had on all of Lake Michigan, and coho are arguably the finest eating of all Great Lakes trout and salmon. We at the Lake Michigan fisheries office hope this guide helps you get started successfully chasing coho. For more information and current fishing reports, call our office at (219) 874-6824.

