

Aggressive Vertical Jigging Techniques

By Rich Stadler

You know the feeling you get when you walk into a store that only sells things made of glass? First you walk around being ever so careful not to bump into anything. After a short time your blood pressure starts to rise. Next thing you know you just want to break everything in the place. If you have ever felt this way, then I have a technique for you when you're in that not-so-subtle mood.

I think that everyone has probably heard of vertical jigging. Mostly used on rivers, you work down stream, slipping with the current in sort of a controlled-position drift. Keeping the line perfectly vertical is the goal, using a bow-mount trolling motor to counteract any outside effects such as back current and wind. Most people will tell you to go as light as possible when it comes to any type of jigging. Sometimes this is correct but I like to go big and obnoxious especially when vertical jigging, especially on dirty, turbid rivers.

In dirty water, what I like to call "the fish's zone of awareness" is extremely small. Big and obnoxious addresses this fact. How big are we talking? One-half ounce, even 1 ounce jigs, sometimes referred to as thumper jigs. The kind of jig most commonly used as a dropper on a Dubuque or 3-way live bait rigs as opposed to being fished vertically. Think about it, most fishermen are using small 1/4 oz jigs with little minnows trying to finesse the fish into biting. That is fine when they are not feeding but when they are feeding it is time to bulk up. Even if the fish are shallow I will still go to the big jigs. There are several reasons for this. Big jigs make more noise when they hit bottom, which makes it easier for the fish to find them. They also are easier to fish with especially if it is windy. They sink faster which means you will have more time on the bottom over the course of the day. The hooks are bigger which increases the hook-up percentage. Lastly, you can put a big minnow on a big jig without losing a lot of hook gap. The fish want to eat so give them a prime rib, not a cocktail wiener!

The best time to vertical jig is when the fish are holding at a certain depth on the break. Looking at a profile of a river from shore to shore there is usually a small flat starting from shore that slowly tapers to the top of the break. The break runs from there down to the main channel at a much steeper angle. The main channel is usually pretty flat. Then there is another break on the other side that tapers up to the flat that is connected to the opposite shore. The fish can be located anywhere so I like to start at the top of the break and work down to the main channel in two-foot increments. For example, the first pass might be in 8ft, the next pass at 10ft and so on. On some rivers like the Illinois the depth the fish are at may only be a couple feet wide. For example, if the break is on a 45-degree angle and the fish are in 13-14ft, you have to hold the boat within a foot as you slip down current. The break can be very steep in places. That makes it hard to stay at the proper depth. Simply put, if the fish are in thirteen feet of water and you are in fifteen, you are not catching fish. If the current is slow and the fish are more spread out, you would be

better off pulling rigs or trolling three-ways and leadcore.

What you have to understand is that the big female saugers don't feed at all times. For most of the time they lay belly to the bottom. Don't get me wrong, they can be caught at any time but it is a lot harder unless they are feeding. I know this because I can feel my jig bump into them. It then becomes a waiting game but when the time comes and they start to feed it is well worth it.

When the conditions are right and the fish are stacked up, vertical jigging is my favorite way to put big fish in the boat. It is the technique I used at Spring Valley to give me two money finishes in the last three years in the MWC. I have a different style of vertical jigging that I believe is responsible for my success.

A 7' rod is the perfect length. Definitely don't go shorter. The reason is that when you do get a fish on one of the rods, you have to keep pressure on it while you drop the other rod. The longer the rod, the more time you have before it is straight up in the air. I like to use two identical rods and reels. If one is different than the other it just does not feel comfortable. Berkley 8 lb Iron Silk gets my vote in the mint green color. Hi-vis line makes it a lot easier to see. This is real handy when trying to keep my lines perfectly vertical. On the end of my main line I tie a duo-loc snap. I tie a one-foot long section of 6 lb test fluorocarbon to the jig and tie a barrel swivel on the other end. I have a bunch of these pre-tied with me. If I get a snag and break the 6 lb line, I just snap on a new one and keep fishing.

As for jigging, I always fish with two rods. Most guys lift both rods at the same time. I want to make as much noise as possible so I alternate. When one rod is going up, the other is going down. This doubles the amount of "thumps" the fish hears. I lift the bait about a foot and a half off bottom and drop it on a tight line as fast as the jig allows. The faster the drop, the more noise it makes when it hits. The fish will usually hit on the drop. As soon as I feel anything that could be a fish, I set the hook immediately. There is nothing subtle about this technique. I can tell you this, you better be holding on tight when the fish hits or you will be short one rod!

Don't be afraid to go heavy even when there is a ton of boats around. River fish are different than lake fish in that they are much harder to spook. They have boats and barges driving over them all day. If anything, the fish will spook shallower or deeper but will still keep feeding.

Next time your vertical jigging on a river, go ahead and make some noise!