

Perch fishing Indiana's Lake Michigan waters



Background

Yellow perch are a popular panfish native to Lake Michigan. They are excellent table fare, and can be caught using simple techniques. Fishing for yellow perch in Indiana has a long tradition. However, due to ecosystem changes driven by invasive species, the perch fishery has changed. This is an overview of the current status of the perch fishery, and a “how-to” guide to perch fishing in Indiana’s waters of Lake Michigan.

Perch Biology and Movement

Yellow perch feed on baitfish such as young alewives, shiners and round gobies. They also eat invertebrates such as water fleas, midge larvae and freshwater shrimp. They spawn from mid-April to mid-June, depending on environmental conditions.

Winter - During winter, perch can be found schooled in harbors, boat slips and warm-water areas that attract baitfish, and also on deep offshore clay flats that hold invertebrates and round gobies.

Spring - As the water warms in spring, pre-spawn perch are often found in 50-80 foot depths. They can concentrate in large schools, often on clay flats. Although some perch can be found in shallower water, most are in deeper water until the spawn ends in June.

Summer - After the spawn, perch move to shallower water. Most remain in 20-50 feet. During this time of year, perch fishing is most consistent as perch seek food and stable water temps between 60 and 70 degrees.

Fall - Once the water cools in late September or early October, perch become more scattered, and may be found near structure like piers and harbors, or farther offshore in deeper water.

Status of Lake Michigan Yellow Perch

Following a recent peak during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the perch population has declined significantly. However, plenty of perch remain. The reason for the decline is mostly because of years of poor spawning success (called “recruitment” by biologists). Two good year-classes (2003 and 2005) supported the fishery throughout the 2000s, but those fish are reaching the end of their lifespan. A period of inconsistent recruitment lasted 10 years, until 2015. The 2015 year-class was the biggest ever recorded, and the 2016 year-class was also better than many in recent history. These two year-classes will start to provide outstanding perch fishing in 2018 and beyond.



Finding Yellow Perch

Locating perch can be a chore, but once found, they can provide fast action. Good electronics help find schools. The best perch anglers systematically drive around until they mark schools on their depth finder. Perch usually hug bottom, although may suspend a few feet. Often perch will be relating to a specific depth or water temperature.

Perch may be concentrated or scattered, depending on environmental conditions. When perch fishing is good, there will often be a cluster of boats in areas holding perch. For anglers without good electronics or knowledge of the fishery, looking for the “perch pack” of boats can help find fish.

For general perch fishing hotspots, look at the maps on Pages 4-6 under “Perch Fishing Locations.”

Checking the DNR’s fishing report is another good idea. It’s at wildlife.IN.gov/dnr/8270.htm.

Tackle

Most perch anglers prefer a light or medium-light action rod with a tip sensitive enough to feel light-biting perch. Spool the reel with 4- to 8-pound monofilament, or 10-pound braided line. Braided line can be better when fishing deep water, because the thin diameter and lack of stretch makes it easier to keep the presentation vertical, near the bottom, and to detect bites. When fishing braided line, a leader of 4- to 8-pound fluorocarbon or monofilament line will help get more bites.

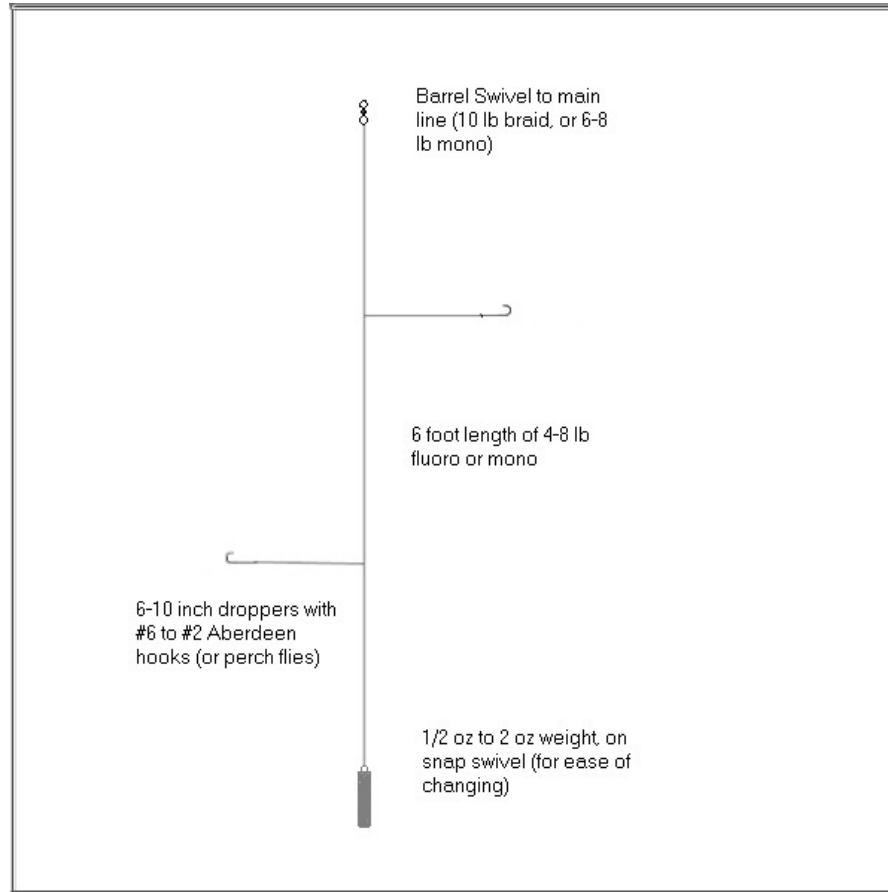
Fishing Tactics

Once the depth and area holding perch has been identified, there are two general tactics: anchoring and fishing vertically with spreader rigs; or drifting/trolling slowly with a spreader rig, small spinner rigs, or small spoons and body baits. If perch are in large schools, anchoring and fishing vertically is usually best. Perch are often aggressive and willing biters, so finding an active school is usually the best strategy. If you are marking perch but cannot get them to bite, moving and finding a new school can pay off. If perch are scattered, drifting or slowly trolling can be more effective than anchoring.

A typical spreader “perch rig” is depicted in the image below. Tie a barrel swivel to the end of your main line (to prevent twist). To the other end of the swivel, tie a length of fluorocarbon or mono line about the length of your rod. At the terminal end of the line, tie a snap swivel. Two or three droppers are then connected to the main line, either by dropper loop, or using “bear paw” type connectors. The droppers can be pre-made snelled hooks, or perch flies available in local tackle stores. Light wire Aberdeen hooks from #2 to #6 are very popular, especially gold ones.

A weight is clipped to the snap swivel. Use just enough to be maintaining contact with the bottom – typically $\frac{3}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ ounce weights are used. Slender pencil weights are best, but bell and pyramid sinkers work too.

Pay attention to the distance of the droppers from the weight. When perch are hugging bottom, the droppers should be closer to the weight. If the perch are suspending, it is usually better to have them farther from the weight. Some anglers tie a hook to the weight eye for a 3rd hook.

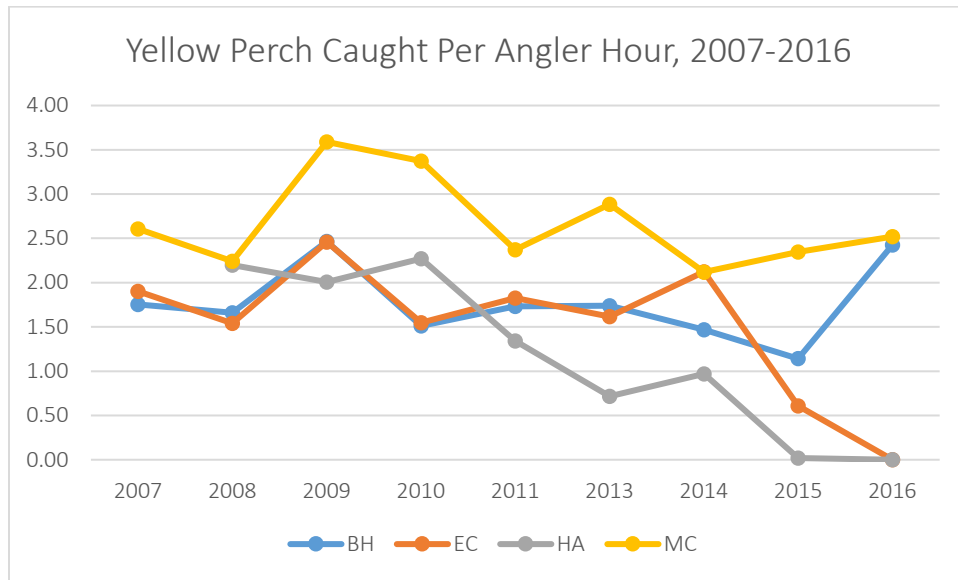


Bait

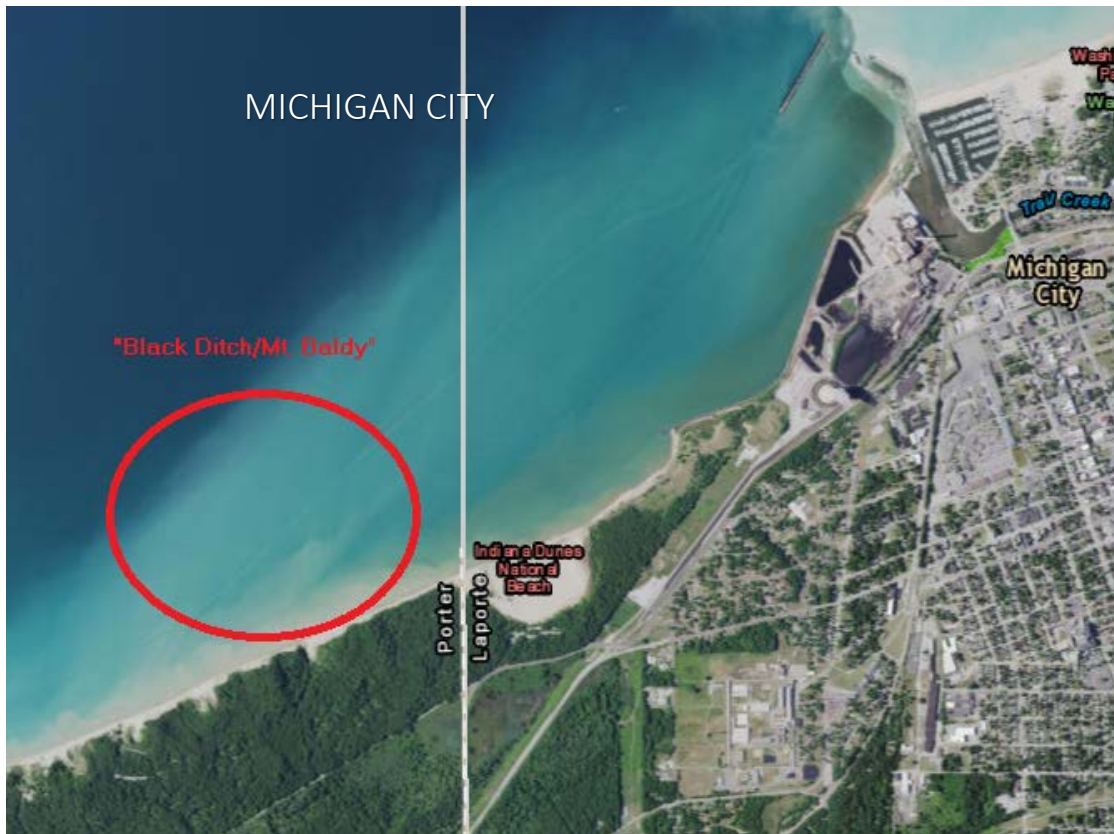
Perch minnows (fatheads or shiners) are the most popular and effective bait. Other options include soft-shell crayfish, cut strips of alewife, bits of cooked shrimp, wigglers, or soft plastics that mimic minnows. If trolling, small crankbaits or jigging spoons can be used.

Perch Fishing Locations

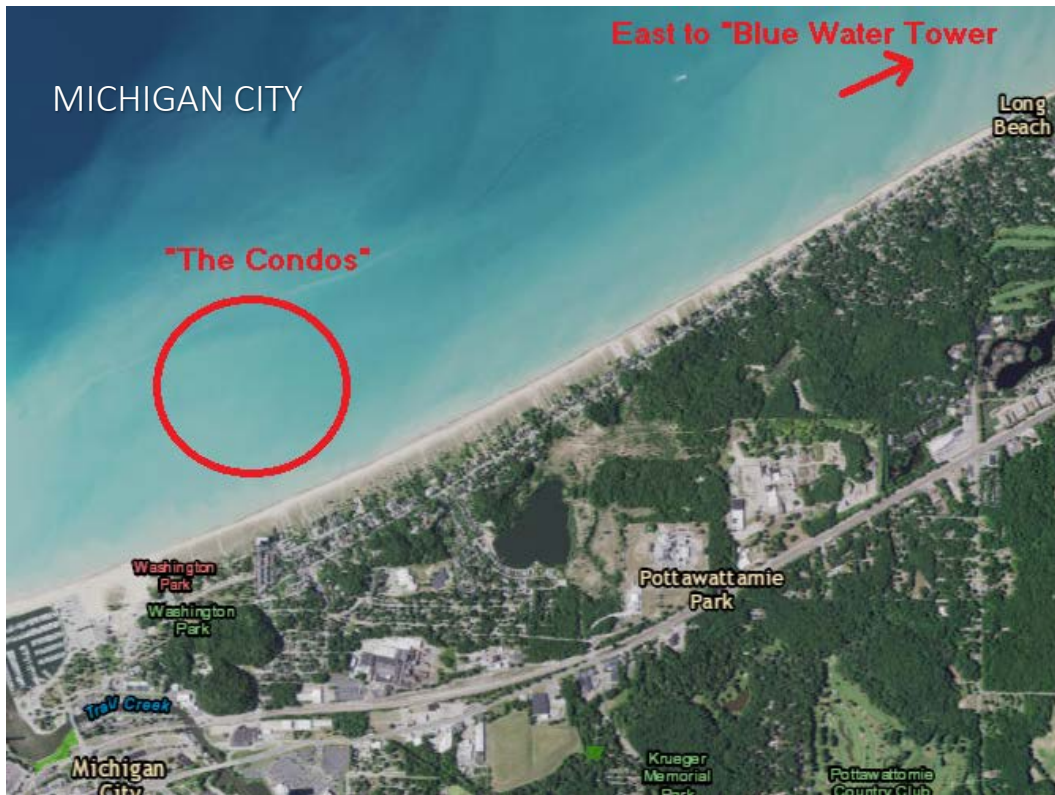
Perch can be found almost anywhere in Indiana's waters of Lake Michigan depending on the season and the environmental conditions such as water clarity and temperature, and location of preferred food items. Historically, every Indiana port has had good perch fishing. However, recently the perch fishing in East Chicago (EC) and Hammond (HA) has been poor, while it has remained average in Burns Harbor (BH) and stayed strong in Michigan City (MC).



Michigan City typically has the most consistent summer perch bite and the highest catch rate. The most popular places are near Mt. Baldy and Black Ditch, just to the west of Mt. Baldy in 20-40 feet of water.



Just east of Michigan City perch anglers often fish near the tall condominium buildings next to Washington Park, and farther east near the blue water tower, which is near the Michigan state line.



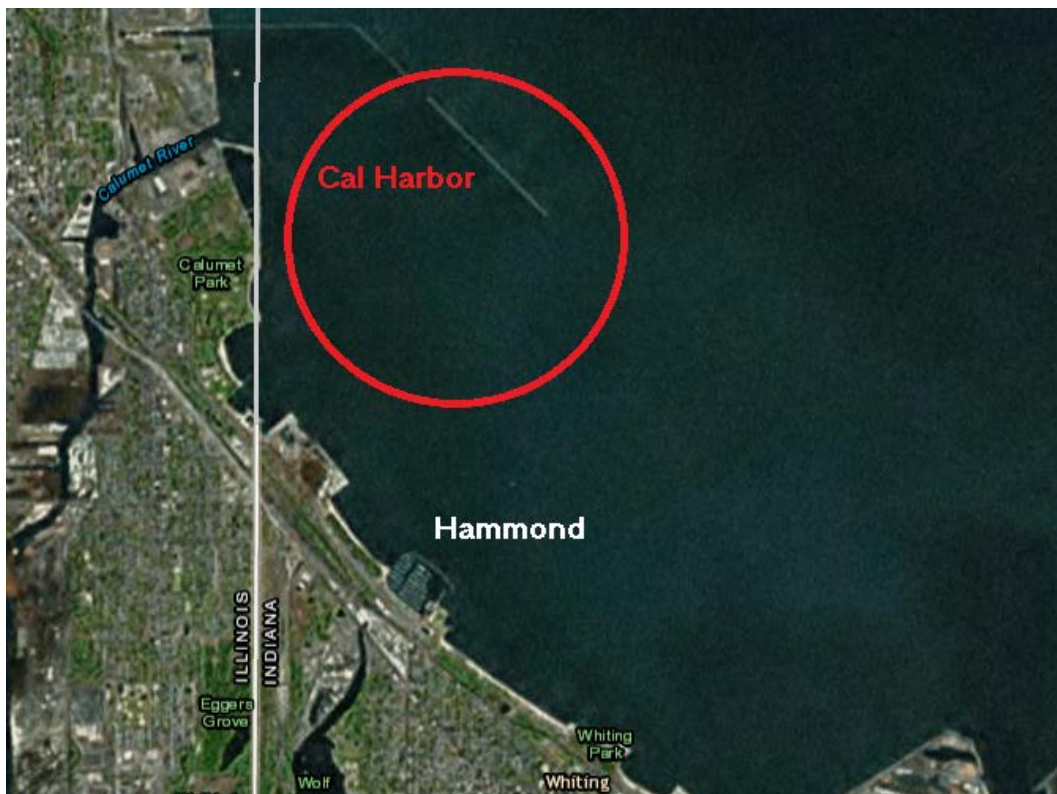
Burns Harbor anglers often search near "The Donut" structure just east of the Port of Indiana in 15-40 feet.



East Chicago anglers will fish near the “Hole in the Wall” and off Gary Light in the 40-60 foot depths, particularly in late fall, winter, and early spring. However, the summer bite can be good as well.



Hammond anglers often target the weedbeds and the breakwall of Cal Harbor



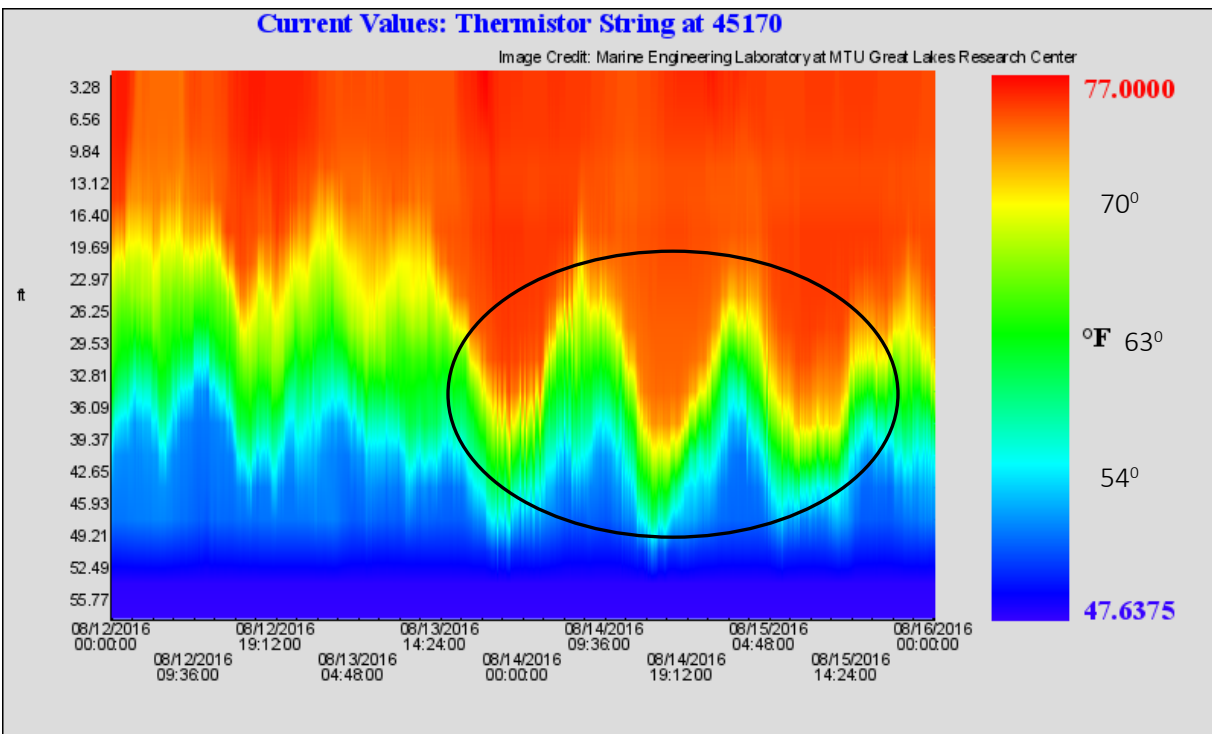
Advanced Summer Perch Tactics: Paying Attention to Water Temperature

Once the lake warms up in early summer, a *thermocline* will form. The warm surface water is less dense than the deeper, colder water, and these two will separate into different layers of water, called the *epilimnion* (upper, warm layer) and the *hypolimnion* (the colder deep layer). The thermocline separates these two water layers. Thermocline depth can be anywhere from 15 to more than 100 feet deep. Strong winds or currents can affect the thermocline or mix the water column from surface to bottom. Lake currents, prevailing winds and other factors combine to move these layers around. Paying attention to the temperature at depth can pay dividends for finding the perch.

Once surface temps surpass 70 degrees and the thermocline has set up (July-September), perch often relate to their preferred summer water temperature. Typically in summer the perch are seeking 60-70 degree water, with 64-68 being ideal. The best resource for learning and monitoring water temperature profiles is the Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant Buoy stationed near Michigan City. The buoy measures the temperature every few feet from the surface to the bottom.

http://greatlakesbuoys.org/station_page.php?station=45170

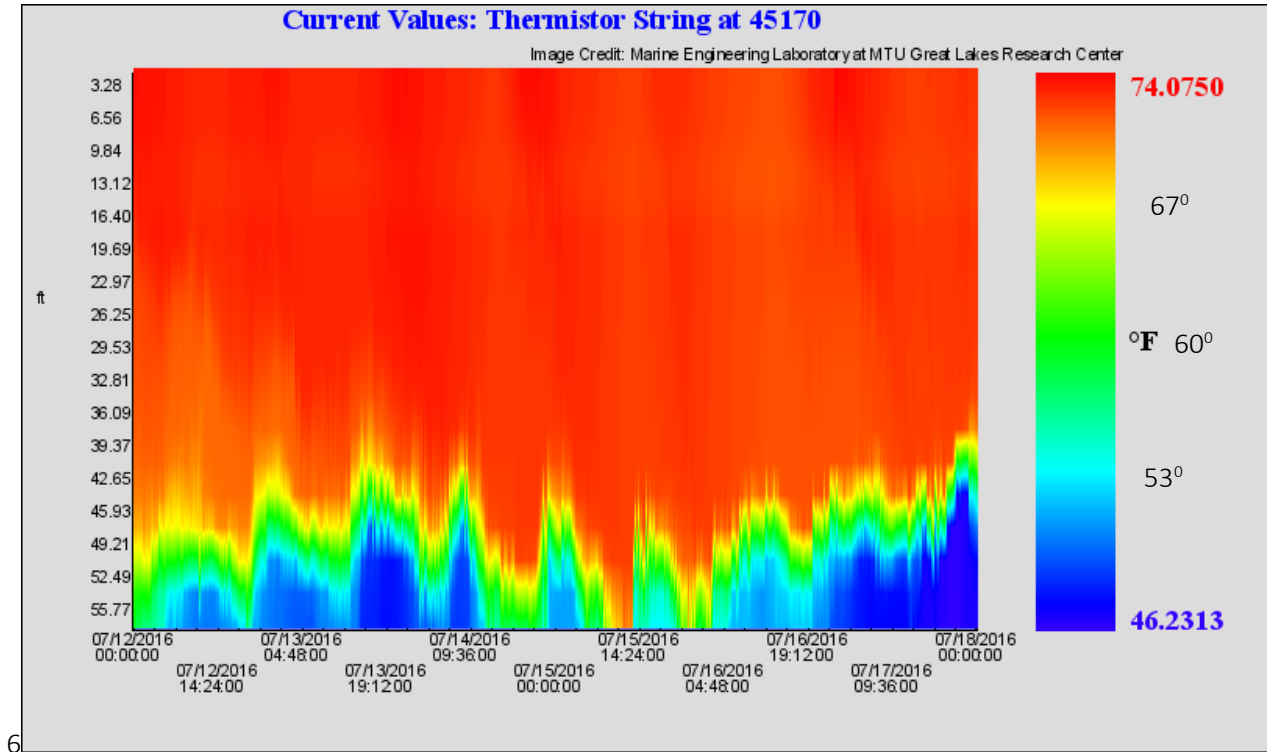
Below is a snapshot from August 12-16, 2016. Depth is on the left axis – this is essentially a side-view of the entire water column.



The yellow and top half of the greenish layer is the approximate temperature (64-68 degrees) at depth to be targeting. Notice how it is wide on the left side of the time series (Aug 12-13) but becomes much narrower on the right side (Aug 14-15, inside the black circle). We'd expect perch to be scattered throughout the 20-35 foot depths on Aug 12 and 13, since there is a wide range of depths containing preferred temperatures. Perch could potentially be more concentrated in specific depths during Aug 14-16, since the "perch layer" is much narrower. However, note that as the green temp band becomes narrower, it also changes in depth dramatically during the time period inside the black circle. Many perch anglers will notice that a hot bite can die quickly – often it is because the water layers are moving up or down, and the perch are following their preferred temperature band to a different depth. Fluctuating temperature-at-depth can quickly change where the perch are found. If you are catching perch and then suddenly cannot find them in the nearby area, it is usually

because there was a shift in the water temperature profile, and the perch moved shallower or deeper to follow their preferred water temperature.

Here is another snapshot from July 12-18, 2016. Note that the temp scale is a bit different. In this case, very warm water is found all the way down to 45 feet. The “perch layer” is very thin, and found between 42 and 55 feet for most of this four-day period. We’d expect to find perch very concentrated in a narrow depth range, due to the warm water being bracketed by very cold 46 degree water.



Even when a strong thermocline exists, perch may still be found over a wide range of depths, depending on many factors. And when no strong thermocline exists in waters 60 feet and shallower, the above advice does not apply. Fishing often and developing a feel for the conditions and the seasonal patterns of perch is a bit of a commitment, but will pay off with more frequent successful outings.

DNR biologists can often provide advice and a current fishing report. The office at 100 W. Water St., Michigan City, is open for walk-ins M-F between 8 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., or by phone at (219) 874-6824 during the same hours. Good luck, perch jerkers!

