

# Breaking Laker Rules

Target your biggest laker of the year this spring. *By Noel Vick*



This Lake Superior leviathan ate a Spin-N-Glo behind an Opti Dodger in early spring. "I never got an exact weight, as I released the fish," says Jim Hudson. "But it was 44½ inches long by 26 inches in girth. That puts it in the 35- to 37-pound range by weight calculator. The fish came out of 80 feet of water off a rock reef with a 20-foot stretch behind the rigger."

**N**onconformity is in Jim Hudson's blood. Despite being an actual officer of the law, when it comes to breaking those unwritten laws of the woods and waters, he's an outlaw.

Tell him one thing and he's sure to do another, or at least question your thinking. There might be a better way. Take lake trout for instance. Both reason and results drive Great Lakes anglers to pursue these bottom-huggers in the summer, Memorial Day to Labor Day. It's common knowledge you can't target them any sooner or later.

Hudson isn't biting, however. Early in the spring of 2007, Hudson, an accomplished Lake Superior fishing in the Apostle Islands area, was buttoning-up a theory he'd been concocting for several seasons. His base premise was that big lake trout can be singled out and caught as winter surrenders to spring. Even the mere notion bucks convention!

Lake trout anglers in early spring usually have browns on the brain anyway. Those jewel-studded footballs are the reason for the season, and the action can be ballistic. Hudson hadn't completely tired of brutish browns—he just wanted to see if he could catch something big.

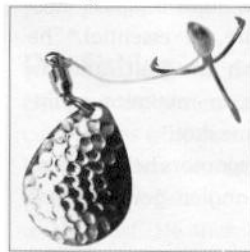
Hudson is a big fish guy. And when he catches one, mental notes are taken. "Where was I?" "How deep was it?" "What was the water temp?" "Were small and big fish mixed?" That's the one. Were big and small fish mixed? Largely, Hudson thought not.

The theory came together last spring at ice out when Hudson and a co-conspirator shunned the browns to look for big lakers. Although Hudson considers any laker longer than 25 inches to be "big," the duo opened with a 25-pounder, which was quickly outdone by a giant 35-pound leviathan. Not your typical fish on a typical March day. That spring saw 16 fish over 20 pounds. And in Hudson-like fashion, method molds with madness.

"There's a hierarchy at certain times of the year," says Hudson, thwarting the idea that his pattern is a fluke. "Big fish push out little fish. I'm always looking for patterns that target the biggest fish in the system."

Hudson's core premise is that big fish displace little fish during certain times of the year and that temperature is the key.

"Lake trout prefer temps from the upper 30s to lower 50s," he said, equating "preferred" to times when they're active and catchable.



A 12-inch Reel Flasher (top) or an 8-inch Opti Dodger pulls a Spin-N-Glo in front of a No. 2 treble hook on a 16-inch leader of 50-pound fluorocarbon. A Colorado spinner blade adds flash and vibrations behind the flasher.

On the Great Lakes, Lake Superior most notably, stratification doesn't happen until summer. Depths to 150-feet can be a uniform temp and the cool water gives lakers free range.

"Lakers can be as shallow as 10 feet or

deeper than a 150. Temperature doesn't contain them; neither does oxygen, because it's pretty uniform as well," Hudson says.

At ice out, with water temps are in the 30s, pretty much top to bottom, deep and shallow. This continues through May, when surface temps rise above 50 degrees; the layering begins, and lakers descend.

Hudson's pattern centers on this balanced water temp epoch, when big fish outnumber little fish in certain, identifiable areas.

"Lakers can be anywhere in the water column, and should share classic structure," the coaching continues, "but I find that the right spots hold mostly if not all larger fish."

A classic "right spot" is a steep, breaking wall of a rock shoal. Some shoals are petite; others as spacious as a football field; both can hold fish.

"I'm looking for a fast break, one that can start as shallow as 15 or 20 feet and drop quickly to 130 or 150 feet. The steeper the better."

The same goes for hard falling shorelines, including those tumbling off islands.

Hudson's third structural submission is where whitefish are. "Mud humps over flats," Hudson said, identifying the ace in his back pocket. "Whitefish use the humps, so naturally, lakers do, too. I've pulled a half-digested 20-inch whitefish out of a fish's mouth."

A typical Hudson-hump sprouts from 100- to 130-foot flats, rising 20 to 50 feet. They're softer than the adjoining flat and physically large—many span hundreds of acres.

Eventually, the water layers by temperature, usually on or around Memorial Day weekend. Fish are snapping, too, but 15 inchers rub elbows with 35 inchers, making pre-sorting spots by the size of its residents nearly impossible.

The preferred 40- to 50-something degree range has stratified into bands. That's when lakers go bellies to the floor in depths beyond 100 feet. Sure, they'll rise to lacerate pods of baitfish, but you can't tell if big fish are working without passing baits through the school.

So summer meanders toward Labor Day weekend, another holiday marker of note: The year's second period when big



Alewife and Kevorkian patterns (second and fourth down on left) are Hudson's magnum spoon faves. Others work for jumbo lakers too.

fish chase little fish away.

"Cooler air combined with autumn winds brings the surface temp down," explains Hudson "At some point water temps unify throughout the water column." This, he says, reintroduces conditions where big fish bully small fish, forcing lesser lakers to find alternative haunts.

As a footnote, Hudson knows where the juveniles go. "They head into 5 to 50 feet of water, on rocky shoals and sandy beaches, chasing smaller food, like smelt, lake shiners, and smaller herring." Locating them is a study in finding forage. And if the big dogs aren't happening out over prime structure, heck, there's nothing wrong with conceding poundage, making it up in volume.

Meanwhile, back on the meatier side of town, Hudson targets the big boys with a four-rod spread of magnum spoons and Worden's Spin-N-Glos behind dodgers or flashers. The spinning floaters go on a leader of 50-pound fluorocarbon just 12 to 16 inches long. He uses a size 0 Spin-N-Glo, which is 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches long—a real honker. Behind that go a couple of glow beads and a No. 2 heavy duty treble. The Reel Flasher is a 12-incher sold by Capt. John King in Manistee, Michigan ([michigansportsman.com](http://michigansportsman.com)) while the dodger is from Opti Tackle. With the circular motion of the Reel Flasher, Hudson adds a small Colorado spinner blade via a split ring to a ball bearing swivel. The spinner doesn't actually spin, but the displacement and flash behind the Spin-N-Glo and an inch or so in front of the hook seem to get more strikes.

"Greens, whites and purples are my best colors for flashers and dodgers with glow or white/chartreuse my go-to Spin-N-Glo colors," Hudson says. His spoons are Jim's Flashbacks, made in Duluth, Minnesota. Proven patterns are Alewife and Kevorkian.

His monster 35-pounder, incidentally, came on a green Spin-N-Glo behind a green/chrome Opti dodger.

His spread generally starts with a low flasher or dodger on 50-pound braid behind a Dipsy or Slide Diver, a higher spoon on one of his two Cannon downriggers, a low flasher or dodger on the other rigger and then another higher spoon on another diving disk. Lures get stretched back about 20 feet.

While speeds of 1.5 to 1.7 mph are accepted norms for targeting lake trout, Hudson again deviates from the norm.

"I troll faster than normal, moving at 2.0 to 2.5 mph. The increased speed seems to trigger big fish. My bait is swimming faster, so it gets noticed."

Hudson's patterns have proven themselves on Lake Superior, yet he believes that the "big fish snubbing little fish" phenomenon occurs elsewhere.

Lake Michigan's rocky structure such as that around Door County, Wisconsin and up to the Bays de Noc, should present similar circumstances, as should rocky areas of lakes Huron and Ontario.

Early this spring, when you see that lunatic trolling yonder while you're boating another boilerplate brown, stroke that beard, rub your eyes, and remember what Hudson said.

It's time to reel in and move. GLA