

## Three-Way River Rigs by Dave Csanda

Colorful jigs and dressings, vibrating bladebaits, flashy jigging spoons -- all are more glamorous than the lowly and humble three-way rig; nothing sexy about a swivel, hook, line, and sinker. Unless you're a walleye on the verge of deciding whether or not to pounce on that morsel bobbing and weaving just above your eyeballs, tethered in place by the aforementioned rigging. Hunger proximity, vulnerability, and opportunity become a convincing argument.

Three-way rigs aren't fancy, but they're certainly effective. And seldom used, if at all. The three-way's strength is its ability to hold a bait or lure a set distance off bottom, with the rig held in place by a weight of sufficient size for depth, current, or desired motion. Three-ways are traditionally popular among anglers who anchor and sit and soak live bait; or those who cast from the bank, tighten the line, lean the rod in a forked stick, and let nature take its course. Time, patience, and lively critters do the work. All you need do is reel 'em in when they decide to cooperate.

Mobile anglers, however, often overlook three-way rigging. It's a deadly and versatile rigging for a multitude of baits or lures. Troll upstream, drift downstream, hover in place, and all the above. Even reel it up and cast it a time or two before imparting boat movement to position your offering.

Unlike slipsinker riggings so popular in lakes and reservoirs, three-ways don't slip, and you don't feed line to a biter. Excess line in current creates drag and forfeits sensitivity and control. Not good in river current. When you sense a bite, simply drop the rod tip a smidgen while the rig itself collapses back toward the fish. As it tightens again, sweepset upward to set the hook.

**General Tips for Rivers --** Maintain both a short leader and a short dropper. A short dropper keeps your lure or bait near bottom where the fish are. Fifteen inches is a good start. Longer droppers position the bait higher above bottom-hugging walleyes hunkered down tight to allow the current to pass over their heads. Too far off bottom and you don't get a strike. Short leaders, meanwhile, reduce excessive sway in current, minimize snags, and retain control. Start at two feet and fine-tune as necessary.

Use sufficient weight to match depth and current; don't overkill or underestimate. A properly weighted rig should lift-drop under increased tension when you lift the rod tip, slipping slightly downcurrent before settling to bottom again. Weight style is open, though bell sinkers in the 1- to 3-ounce range are typical; go heavier if current is excessive or for deep water. Bell sinkers, pyramids, cylindrical weights -- nearly anything other than traditional slipsinker versions. Substitute a heavy jig for the sinker to double your chances, simultaneously presenting a lure on and slightly above bottom (Dubuque Rig). [Click on illustration to view larger version.](#)

**Livebait Rigs --** Standard river setup: a lip-hooked minnow, known in some circles as the Wolf River Rig. This rig offers all the advantages and none of the drawbacks; it holds bait in place just off bottom, whether you're casting, hovering, anchored, or trolling. Switch back and forth between these tactics without reregging. Just apply it in a different fashion. As a weight settles to bottom, the rig pulls tight and the bait or lure extends downstream, swinging, swaying, dancing in current. Don't be in a hurry to move it. The current-bait combo does all the work for you. Put it in a potential spot -- a current break or eddy -- and be patient.

**Floater Rigs --** All the deadly advantages of a plain-hook livebait rig, plus a couple more. First, the flotation of the jighead keeps the bait from drooping toward bottom in areas of reduced current or slack water. Second, a floating jighead bobs and weaves in current, adding action and attraction even when the sinker is at rest on bottom. Third, floating heads add color and profile options, creating bigger or bulkier baits. Perhaps the second most underused adaptation to three-ways.

**Crankbaits --** Undoubtedly the most underused though superb three-way option for rivers. Cranks that are run behind a three-way swivel wiggle and wobble in current, even when the sinker is at rest in an anchored position. Troll upstream, and they go nuts in the current. They also perform well for trolling downstream; move along slightly faster than the current to make the bait wiggle. From an anchored position, a crankbait will wobble in place if current is sufficient.

**Shallow-diving cranks, notably minnow-imitators, excel for rivers.** Perhaps lengthen the dropper slightly to accommodate the diving depth of the lure, which won't be more than a few inches on a short leader. Perhaps shorten the leader slightly to prevent the lure from diving and snagging bottom. Rig accordingly. You might assume that large or gaudy crankbaits would work best in dark water, but small to medium minnow-imitators (2 to 4 inches) tend to produce best, particularly if the fish are a bit inactive. Color or forage patterns? Match the forage in clear water -- silver for smelt or shad, perch for perch. Go gaudy in darker water -- visible fire tiger or clown. Experiment between subtle balsa baits and more aggressive plastic models with internal rattles.

**Spinner Rigs --** Used somewhat by river trollers, particularly when they anchor in strong current or troll upstream. When moving downcurrent, however spinners lose rotation, droop, and sometimes tangle with the dropper. Seldom a good shorecasting rig for the same reasons. Limit their use to conditions when blade rotation is assured. Bright colors - orange, chartreuse -- are best in most dingy river conditions.

**Streamer Flies --** Pretty much the same as with minnows lip-hooked on a plain hook, except with fur and feathers rather than fins. A streamer fly rides level behind the swivel, swerving and dancing like a minnow in the current flow. A relatively subtle option, perhaps best in clear water. Squirt on a little scent to spice up the offering.

**Plastic Tails --** Achieve a similar effect with a plastic grub or tube tail on a plain hook. More action, color, bulk, profile, and flotation than a fly

**Trolling --** Trolling works best with an artificial lure that wobbles or spins in the current; use current to your advantage. Crankbaits wiggle in place when you hover, vibrate madly when you troll upcurrent. Note whether fish prefer an upstream, aggressive wobble; a subtle hover; or even trolling downcurrent (moving swiftly enough to wiggle, not throb the lure).

**Drifting --** While not considered a primary three-way technique in current, nothing says you can't simply drift along with the flow, lifting the sinker on and off bottom. This tactic works best with a floater rig and minnow, since rigs moving at the same speed as the current fail to significantly rotate spinner blades or wobble crankbaits. A floating jighead, however, suspends the bait. Even a minnow lip-hooked on a plain hook droops down and is less effective than when held in a stationary position.

**Moving downstream, a heavy weight might trail behind you.** Consider switching to a lighter sinker and using the thrust of your outboard or electric motor to slow your drift, causing the three-way rig to swing downcurrent from the boat, placing water resistance on

the bait or lure, rather than simply dragging it downstream. Tap your way along as you drift down to the front side of a wingdam.

**Anchoring** – Probably the most popular three-way technique among boaters, particularly during peak spawning runs when waves of walleyes, white bass, or other fish pass through prime spots like eddies. Anchor a short distance upstream of your target, noting that the weighted rig will swing downstream before coming to rest. When fishing in a crowd of boats, anchor along a prime lane of fish passage and wait. Lower your rig to bottom, using a sufficiently heavy sinker to keep it relatively near your boat, not under someone else's boat.

**Shorecasting** – Perhaps the second most popular use for three-way rigs on rivers. Bank fishermen most often toss a weighted rig out into the river and let it soak there. Since shorecasters lack the mobility of boat anglers, they want to cast a long distance and keep the rig in place on the bottom, which requires substantial sinker weight. Most use a plain hook baited with a lip-hooked or tail-hooked minnow. A floating jighead tipped with a minnow also is an excellent option.

Excessive line in current creates a bow, particularly when cast across the flow, rather than downstream. To retain the best control, tighten your line as much as possible, minimizing the amount of line making contact with the current. Place the rod in a rod holder, lean it across a forked stick stuck in the mud, or hold the rod tip upright, with a slight bend in the rod tip. Even a light bite will make the rod tip bob up and down, indicating the strike. A reel with a clicker feature betrays line moving out when a fish hits. Or loop a rubber band around the line just forward of your rod tip to further indicate line moving out under a strike.

**Pier Fishing** – Allows a blend of tactics employed when anchoring and shorecasting. As with shorecasting, toss a three-way rig along a current break or into the heart of an eddy, and let it sit -- the old soak-and-wait routine. As with anchoring, simply lean your rod tip over the railing, lower a three-way rig to bottom, and let it soak in place. The current will wiggle and wobble your offering, even if the sinker isn't moving. And similar to fishing from a boat, walk around the edge of the pier while lift-dropping your three-way on and off bottom; foot trolling, as it were.

Afoot or afloat, three-ways are indeed versatile systems not to be taken lightly; use sufficient weight to keep the rig in place in the current. And don't overcomplicate their use. They get your bait down and stable in current. What could be more effective?