

VENTURE OUTDOORS

Charter captain from Saline chases muskies on Lake St. Clair

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ANN ARBOR NEWS BUREAU

ST. CLAIR SHORES — If there was ever a day to call off a fishing trip, this was it.

Winds gusting as high as 40 mph the night before had churned up the aquatic vegetation, creating line-tangling islands of weeds on the surface of Lake St. Clair. And the wind was still blowing.

But if there's one thing I've learned in my fishing career, it's that you're sure not going to catch 'em if you don't get a lure in the water. And charter boat skipper Don Miller, who had invited me for a day of muskie angling, agreed.

As it was, the rolling waves put Miller's preferred destination — the Belle River area on the Ontario side of the big pond — out of the question. But by hugging the American side, Miller said, we could stay somewhat out of the wind and at least pull some plugs around.

"You can't ignore American water," said Miller, a 39-year-old autoworker from Saline who has been chasing St. Clair muskies for 20 years.

'I think it's a day-to-day thing, but we usually (troll) no slower than 4 and up to about 6 (mph). It depends on the clarity of the water. In clear water, you use smaller baits and troll faster. In stained water, it's the opposite.'

— Don Miller

We trolled just off shore along the Grosse Pointes south of Eight Mile Road, went down toward the Dolphin Channel, then turned around and went back. All the while it was a full-time job for two men — Bill Aughton and Frank Drake, a couple of Miller's buddies — to keep the lines cleared of floating weeds.

The fishing was uneventful for an hour or so until Miller changed a couple of baits, changed the in-line weights so the plugs would ride a little higher and punched up the trolling speed a little. Then, in a minute, we were into a muskie.

We kept the fish on for about two minutes. I never saw it, but imagined it was a good one, based on the

bend in the pole and the singing of the reel.

Forty-five minutes later, right around 11:30 a.m., we hit another fish on a frog-colored Believer. My partner, Andy Flanagan, did a deft job of handling the rod and reel. It took a full five minutes to bring the brute to the net.

It was a good muskie, probably a keeper (42 inches are the regulations that went into effect this year) but we only half-heartedly measured it as we'd already decided to let the fish go and we didn't want to stress it any more than necessary. Miller held it for a few fast photos, and back into the drink it went.

A little more than an hour later,

the clicker on another reel began ratcheting away. I grabbed the rod, but the critter was gone just about as soon as I got hold of it.

Even still, three strikes in two hours is pretty fair action for muskie fishing, anywhere, anytime.

We were running eight lines, all dragging Believers, a popular muskie lure made here in Michigan. We could have used 10 rods; there were five of us aboard. But as Miller put it, "If you can't catch them with eight, you're not going to catch them with 10," and we had all we could do to keep the eight in water weed-free.

We did our damage trolling at 5½ miles per hour — a fairly quick pace, but not so fast as muskie fishing goes.

"I think it's a day-to-day thing, but we usually go no slower than 4 and up to about 6 (mph)," Miller said. "It depends on the clarity of the water. In clear water, you use smaller baits and troll faster. In stained water, it's the opposite."

We were fishing both actually, trying to stay right on the edge of the mixing zone, where the clear water and stained water met.

"That'll hold fish just as good as any piece of structure," Miller said.

Miller fishes for muskies beginning on opening day (the first Saturday in June) until it's time to pull the boat. The action has peaks and valleys — late July, early August and again in fall are best — Miller said, but "This is my 24th trip and I've only pulled two doughnuts."

The fishing is rather typical of trolling, a hybrid of big-lake salmon fishing and walleye tactics. Miller runs some high lines well back of the boat, a couple of rods right in the prop wash and some lines off planer boards. He cuts a pretty wide swath of lake.

But he concentrates his efforts on the uppermost few feet of water. Throughout the day we trolled waters from about 15 to 19 feet, but we didn't come close to bottom. Most of the fish come from within six feet of the surface, Miller said.

"The biggest mistake I see people making is fishing for muskies on the bottom," Miller said. "They're not walleyes. You can't catch a muskie on a bait below his stomach."

Miller prefers naturally colored



Fishing

baits — frog, perch and bass finishes.

We continued to troll through the area for several more hours but never drew another strike. The weather changed throughout the day — clouds, dark clouds, partial sun, back to clouds. But when it finally cleared off and high pressure chased out the stalled weather front, the fishing turned off like a light switch.

Still, three hook-ups and a keeper-sized muskie is nothing to sneer at.

"My heart's in another place," said Miller, as we called it a day. "I've been laying into some big fish at Belle River. There haven't been too many days when I didn't hook into a 30-pound fish over there."

Still, as Miller says, "You can't ignore American water." And a muskie in the boat is a good day of fishing, wherever you go.

For information on Miller's Sport Fishing, write 471 Canterbury, Saline, 48176, or call (313) 429-9551.