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Lake St. Clair's Muskie

Thanks to catch-and-release, muskie fishing on this 450-square-mile lake just keeps on getting better and better. Here's how you can get in on this great action.

by Chuck Lichon

At one time, Lake St. Clair had a muskie population that was considered by the locals to be "fairly" decent. But you still had to have a bit of luck on your side in order to land one of these aggressive predators. Many anglers would say that fishing for muskies was like deer hunting — if you got just one, you were fortunate.

But over the past decade, muskie numbers have changed, including the average size and weight. This change apparently is in response to the progressively more restrictive regulations imposed not only by the Department of Natural Resources but by local muskie groups on both sides of the lake.

A catch-and-release attitude has been advocated and promoted by both Michigan and Ontario muskie clubs, as well as by many of the charter captains. Along with an increase in the legal size limit to 42 inches from the previous 40 inches (30 inches before that), a significant change has taken place in this 450-square-mile lake, to a point where it now is not unusual to pick up two or three of these Great Lakes muskies on any given day during the season.

There are at least two distinct groups of Great Lakes muskies in this shallow body of water, one of which spawns in the north region and then disperses southward to inhabit the entire western side of the lake. These post-spawn muskies move progressively southward throughout the summer season. Another group resides and apparently spawns in the southeastern (Ontario) part of the lake. Great

Lakes muskies are all native to this area, as well as to any part of the Great Lakes, and since there are no plantings involved, their survival relies on natural reproduction.

Muskies have been an integral part of the massive fishery program within Lake St. Clair, having been fished primarily as a trophy species rather than a food source. This probably has added to the survival of the species since most anglers, unless they expect to mount one of these toothy monsters, will release the fish back to the water in order to ensure the continuance of successful natural reproduction and adequate future populations.

Although a good-sized muskie can range upwards of 30-plus pounds, some may reach twice this size. The St. Clair record is still on hold from 1940, when Percy Haver landed a 62-pound, 8-ouncer.

Muskies are unique in that they present a remarkable challenge for those who wish to pursue them. Once you hook a trophy muskie and hopefully land it, you will never forget it.

A popular method used to entice muskies into attacking your offering on Lake St. Clair is trolling. Although they will feed most anytime of the day, the best time to troll is during midday, between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. It's an ideal sport for those who do not enjoy rising at 4 a.m. to catch their fish. Try trolling at a speed of about 4 to 5 mph, using one of several lures, including the popular Believer, which is a takeoff of Homer LeBlanc's Swim Whiz. *(Continued)*

LeBlanc is a local muskie angler whose skill and knowledge over the past several decades has gained him national fame. He has written a very comprehensive book titled, *Muskie Fishing Fact & Fancy, Lore & Lures*. The book describes almost anything you wish to know about the sport and then some.

A typical setup for muskies would be 5- to 6-foot heavy-action rods, with reels capable of holding at least 250 yards of 40- to 50-pound-test line and 4 to 6 feet of 100-pound-test leader. The lures can be set anywhere from several feet to a maximum of 40 feet behind the boat. Fifteen to 20 feet is about average.

Since muskies are fearless, they can easily strike a lure even in the prop wash. And when they hit their target, they can reach a speed of from 25 to 40 mph.

Noted charter Capt. Don Miller states that the three most important considerations when hunting muskies are trolling speed, lure color and presentation. The trolling speed is aggressive due to the nature of the species, and the lure color may vary. However, natural colors such as perch or bass are good starters.

The presentation is important in terms of rod placement. Miller says that good rod placement maximizes strike potential. The "down rods" can generally be the most productive. The idea is to keep the lure just at the top of the weeds, hoping a muskie will see it from the depths below. These inside rods are placed with the tip facing down. The outside rods can be more flexible (in the area of 6 to 7 feet long) and will add more challenge if a muskie elects to hit one of these.

One rule of thumb is that if the water is clear, you may want to downsize your lure and pick up the trolling speed. If the water is murky or riled, reverse this process.

Other popular lures include Ivenhow spoons, Pokie Minnows, Spike's Lures and jointed body baits in perch, bass and frog colors.

Don't rule out the use of planer boards. It appears that more and more muskie anglers are using planers with excellent results. Try a variety of lures, placing them 20 to 40 feet back and down to a depth of 1 to 6 feet.

When a muskie hits your offering, keep the line tight and start cranking immediately after you hook him. But when it hits a sucker minnow, let it

Patience can pay off in this case, but don't wait too long because if you decide to release the fish, you don't want it to swallow the hook too deep. The unfortunate aspect about fishing with live bait is that the mortality rates increase significantly, and for this reason, many avid anglers shy away from using them.

Adjust your drag enough to allow the fish to run — but not too fast. It won't take long for a 20- to 30-poundunker to strip out 250 yards of line. I have seen the metal spool of a reel more than once after a muskie made its initial run, even with that amount of line.



The author's son, Jeff, holds a dandy 30-pound muskie caught on Lake St. Clair. Photo by Chuck Lichon.

If you would prefer casting for muskies, try using Redeyes as your choice of lure. This technique is usually used later in the evening along the shallows in the weedbeds. The muskies will tend to move in the shallows as the sun sets, chasing baitfish and giving you an additional challenge.

While casting, work your boat outside the 4- to 6-foot depths just outside a weedbed and cast into the beds. It's important while casting to make sure your lure is visible to the muskie. Any bright-colored topwater lure with a lot of action can be a good producer throughout the summer.

Another method is to use a slip-sinker rig consisting of a wire leader, a 2/0 hook and an egg-sinker of 1/2 to 1 ounce. The bait is a smaller version of the 12-inch sucker minnow. However, in this case, use one-half that size. Work the holes of the lake or surrounding bays, since these are the areas where muskies tend to concentrate. Don't get caught into

productive. Your best bet is to stay away from it, since the activity in the channel is light at best.

Muskies have a mean habit of sometimes following a lure right to the boat, then sinking out of sight. When this happens, try a fast figure eight with your lure just below the surface. It can trigger a vicious strike.

In the late summer or fall you may do well to try the area around Russell Island or near the Grosse Pointe Club. When fishing for muskies you will need to troll from area to area until you get a hit. Also try Anchor Bay and the Metro Park Spillway.

If you find one muskie, you can be reasonably certain that others are in the area.

From early July until mid- to late August is probably the most favorable time to fish for muskies. Late September through late October would also be a good choice. Although you may actually catch more fish in midsummer, the quality of the fishing increases in early fall.

LeBlanc also states in his book that, "Muskie fishing is usually better when the water is not real clear and clean. I like a good ripple on the water, even maybe a touch rough. This obstructs their visibility some. I like a muskie to see a lure, but not too well. If he sees it too clearly, he makes it out as something phoney."

Keep in mind that big fish such as the muskie don't necessarily mean big, sophisticated boats or rigs. You can easily fish for muskies with most any boat that will handle St. Clair waters, but like any new venture, a tip or two from a guide can help net more fish in future trips.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Boat Launches

Metro Beach (Black Creek), five miles east of Mt. Clemens; Selfridge, four miles northeast of Mt. Clemens; Brandenburg Park, one mile southwest of New Baltimore.

Charter Captains

Don Miller, 471 Canterbury Dr., Saline, MI 48176, (313) 429-9551; Don Oke, 3644 Hughes Dr., Warren, MI 48092, (313) 751-3757; Bob Bingle, 8997 Anchor Bay Dr., Fair Haven, MI 48023, (313) 794-3854.

Motels

Contact: Chamber of Commerce, Mt. Clemens, (313) 463-1528. □