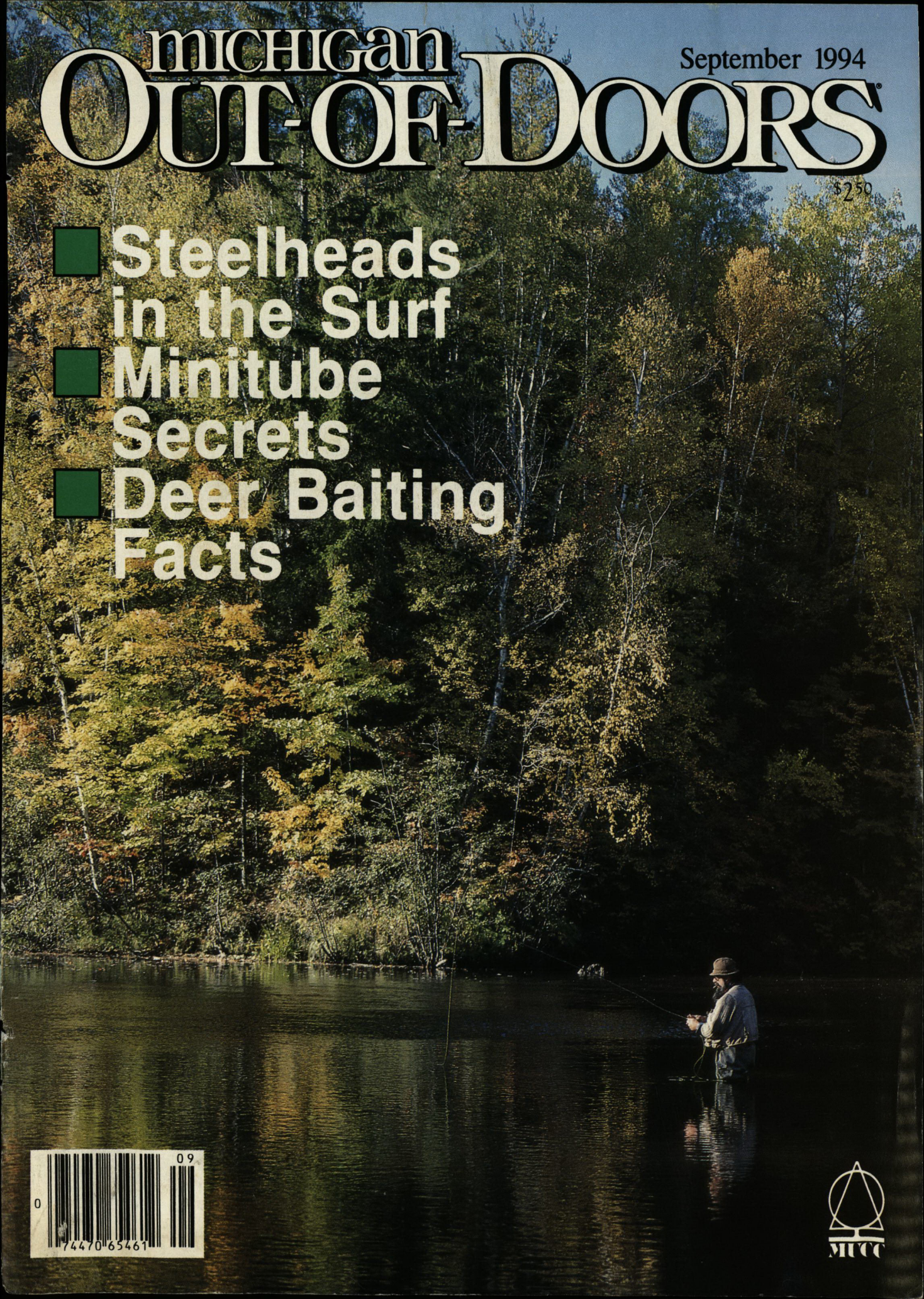


michigan OUT-OF-DOORS

September 1994

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There have been numerous outdoor celebrities that Michiganians have had the honor of knowing, either personally or through their television pro-

grams or articles. The likes of Mort Neff and Ben East who spent the better part of their 90-plus years roaming Michigan in search of outdoor adventures are two well-known examples. Both died in recent years, leaving behind a legacy based on respect and concern for our natural resources.

Another I feel fits into this category, who like both Neff and East was over 90 years old when he died, was Homer LeBlanc, often called Mr. Muskie.

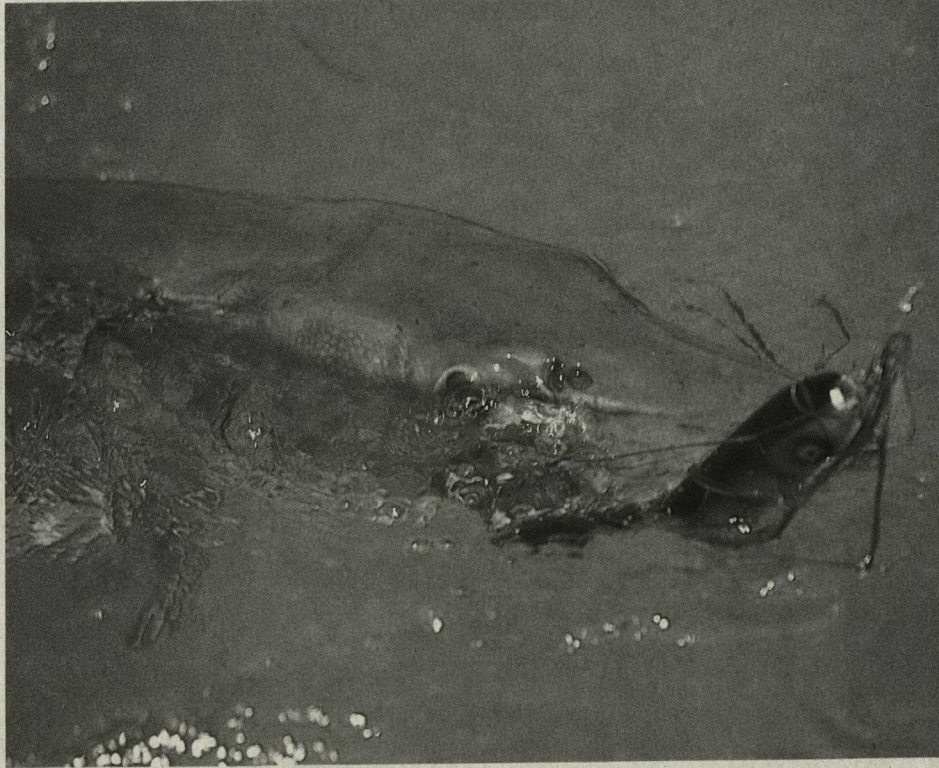
LeBlanc lived in St. Clair Shores, only a short canal trip to his beloved Lake St. Clair, where he fished for muskies for the better part of his life. LeBlanc, who was inducted into the Freshwater Hall of Fame and was a legend in the fishing fraternity, was always ready to teach others the successful methods he developed for catching muskies. I would like to share some of his techniques in this account.

Over the past decade muskies have undergone changes in Lake St. Clair, 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 approach has been advocated and promoted by both

Homer LeBlanc (left) poses with Mike O'Hara, who won the first Homer LeBlanc Muskie Classic last September.

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



Fishing

By Chuck Lichon
Photos by the Author

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 postspawn 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



The late Homer

MICHIGAN OUT-OF-DOORS

plantings involved, their survival relies on natural reproduction.

Muskies have been an integral part of the massive fisheries 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

The Believer is one of the most popular lures used on Lake St. Clair for muskies, as this photo attests.

Tips

anglers, unless they expect to mount one of these toothy monsters, will release the fish back to the water in order to insure 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, eight-ounce monster.

Muskies present a remarkable challenge for those who pursue them. Once you hook a trophy muskie and

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 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 four to five miles per hour, using one of several lures, including the popular Believer, which is a takeoff of LeBlanc's Swim Whiz.

LeBlanc wrote a very comprehensive book titled "Muskie Fishing Fact and Fantasy, Lore and Lures." It contains almost anything you want to know about the sport and then some.

LeBlanc describes a typical setup for muskies consisting of five- to six-foot heavy-action rods, with reels capable of holding at least 250 yards of 40- to 50-pound test line and four to six 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.

Muskies are fearless and will readily strike a lure even in the prop wash. When they hit their target, they can reach a speed from 25 to 40 mph.

Noted charter Captain 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 six to seven feet long) and will add more challenge if a muskie elects to hit one of them.

LeBlanc had a simple rod setup that allows several rods (two per person) to be used to fish various depths and distances from the boat without fouling up lines. Starting with the right, or starboard side of the boat, he would use a long 10- or 12-foot hollow glass rod set in on a rod holder amidship with the rod pointed outward and upward. He

If You Go

BOAT LAUNCHES

Metro Beach (Black Creek), five miles east of Mount Clemens.

Selfridge, four miles northeast of Mount Clemens.

Brandenburg Park, one mile southwest of New Baltimore.

CHARTER CAPTAINS

Don Miller, 471 Canterbury Drive, Saline, Mich. 48176, phone 313/429-9551.

Don Oke, 3644 Hughes Drive, Warren, Mich. 48092, phone 313/751-3757.

Bob Bingle, 8997 Anchor Bay Drive, Fair Haven, Mich. 48023, phone 313/794-3854.

MOTELS

Contact: Chamber of Commerce, Mount Clemens, 313/463-1528.

called this the No. 1 rod. With this rod, he would let out approximately 75 feet of line and use a two- or three-ounce keel sinker along with a smaller-sized lure with fast action. He would then troll the lure just one or two feet below the water's surface. On sunshine days, a spinner blade and bucktail lure could be very effective.

The No. 2 rod, consisting of a 4 1/2- or five-foot length, will be located amidship, but pointing downward at an angle toward the stern. The lure will be fished just four feet back of the starboard quarter, using enough weight to get it down about two feet deep.

LeBlanc noted that muskies are very cautious when the water is clear and are wary when there is much light. If you have a lure about two feet down and it is clearly visible, you may need to use a heavier weight to send it deeper until you can barely see it.

Since LeBlanc's book was written, the infamous zebra mussel has invaded Lake St. Clair, resulting in a much clearer water quality. This in itself may force you to fish deeper than LeBlanc suggested.

The No. 3 rod (a 5 1/2- or six-footer) will be at the side of the stern of the boat and pointed straight outward. LeBlanc would use a No. 4 or 5 keel sinker with a Swim Whizz snapped onto the front eye so that it would run near the boat wash, letting out about 30 feet of line.

The No. 4 rod (a 5 1/2-footer) would

LeBlanc had the right medicine for Lake St. Clair

be fished directly astern of the starboard quarter, with rod pointing downward at an angle at the water. This rod would have about 15 feet of line without a six- or eight-ounce cigar sinker to get the lure down about six or eight feet. Again you would use a deep-running lure. No two lures will be within 10 feet of each other.

On the port side of the boat, the No. 5 rod is the same as the No. 1 rod on the opposite side. However, LeBlanc would fish this lure either high, mid-depth, or deep. You can adjust this lure depending on water conditions as well as what depth the muskies are biting.

No. 6 rod is also the same position and pattern as the No. 2 rod. No. 7 rod, same as the No. 3 rod. However, LeBlanc would experiment with this lure at various depths. No. 8 rod is the same as the No. 4 rod, but again it may need to be fished deeper.

LeBlanc would occasionally troll the long No. 1 and No. 5 rods at various distances. Sometimes he would troll them with only 15 feet of line out, using more weight and a deep-diving lure. Or he might also troll the lure with 30 feet of line out.

He did a lot of experimenting with his lines. If, for instance, the winds were blowing and the water was rough, he would troll close to the boat. This allowed for a taut line, which is important in hooking a muskie.

With this pattern of trolling eight rods in rod holders, you can fish several depths and help eliminate line foul-up, no matter how sharply you turn.

When a muskie hits, bring in the long lines and those that are running deep. Never bring in the short lines until you are ready to net the fish. On occasion, you may hook another muskie and have two on at the same time.

A 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, Pikie 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 one to six feet.

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

anglers shy away from 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-pound lunker 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.

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 bait fish and giving you an additional challenge.

While casting, work your boat outside the four- to six-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 top-water 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 one 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 thinking the river channel might be 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 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 phony."

Keep in mind that big fish such as muskies don't necessarily mean big, sophisticated boats or rigs. You can easily fish for muskies with most any boat that will han-

dle St. Clair waters, but like any new venture, a tip or two from a guide can help net more fish in future trips.

Captain Miller, who was a longtime friend and understudy of LeBlanc, worked hard during the early part of 1993 to start the first Homer LeBlanc Fishing Tournament. It was a successful two-day tournament that resulted in several large catches. But the most successful part of the tournament was that LeBlanc was there to witness the event named in his honor. It was a fitting tribute to a man who unselfishly taught others the methods he developed and used to catch Lake St. Clair muskies.

A trademark phrase of LeBlanc's was to "Fish hard! And think like a muskie!" He did. And because of it, we all have learned from him.

