

REV UP FOR
MOTOWN MUSKIES!

SPECIAL NIGHT-BITE ACTION ISSUE

Musky Hunter

NORTH AMERICA'S MUSKY AUTHORITY

SEPTEMBER 1995



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- RELIVE THE LEECH L. UPRISING

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Musky Hunter

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1995

FEATURES

20 TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE NIGHT

NIGHT
ACTION

MHM's Editor tells how to maximize night feeding periods. *By Jim Saric*

26 NIGHT MUSKIES: AN ONGOING MYSTERY

NIGHT
ACTION

Musky anglers have continued to overlook one of the best patterns for big muskies. *By Joe Bucher*

32 LIVING ON THE EDGE FOR NIGHT MUSKIES

NIGHT
ACTION

Keeping contact with the weed edge can put you onto more night muskies this year. *By Steve Heiting*

34 LIVE BAIT TACTICS FOR NIGHT BRAWLERS

NIGHT
ACTION

After dark, muskies can be suckers for suckers. *By Jeff Hagemann*

36 NIGHT SAFETY

NIGHT
ACTION

Everything that can go wrong by day is compounded by darkness. Play it safe! *By Lou Eich*

38 TOP 10 LIST FOR NIGHT MUSKIES

NIGHT
ACTION

Follow these tips to hot action after sundown. *By Rick Landaal*

40 HEY, WAIT A MINUTE ... WHAT ABOUT DARK WATER AFTER DARK?

NIGHT
ACTION

Don't overlook flowages for great night action. *By John Myhre*

42 THE SLOPPY TRUTH ABOUT DAYTIME MUSKIES

I'll order "soup" on any hot summer's day. *By Pete Maina*

46 WHERE & WHEN DO MUSKIES FEED?

Part II of "Tuning In To Trophies" — based on a Canadian musky telemetry study. *By Larry Ramsell*

52 MOTOR CITY MAULERS

Detroit ... Motown ... muskies ... believe it! *By Mike Zielinski*

56 LEECH LAKE'S MUSKY UPRISING

Forty years ago the muskies went nuts ... here's the scoop from those who were there. *By Tom Davis*

DEPARTMENTS

5 EDITOR'S LINE

Are tournaments for us? Part 2

6 MUSKY FOLLOWS

Greetings from Italy

10 MUSKY MATTERS

Tournament anglers: try small baits

18 JOE BUCHER'S MOON SECRETS

64 CLASSIFIED ADS

65 READERS' PHOTOS

66 PARTING LINE



"Night Strike," by wildlife artist Terry Doughty. Contact the artist at: 1065 Alfred Street, Brookfield, WI 53005, (414) 786-1480.

MOTOR CITY MAULERS

"The biologists used terms like 'huge,' 'extra large' and 'jumbo' when referring to the fish we saw."

Believe it ... Detroit ... Motown ... muskies

By CAPT. MIKE J. ZIELINSKI

In Michigan, Lake St. Clair is synonymous with muskies and musky fishing. This is not news in the world of serious musky angling. What might be news are the musky happenings just south of Lake St. Clair, along the Detroit River.

Many big muskies are products of large river systems. The St. Clair River-Lake St. Clair-Detroit River-Lake Erie complex is really one giant river running from Lake Huron to the Niagara River. With all this fast-flowing water, Lake St. Clair flushes itself about every 18 months while Lake Erie completes the job approximately every five years. This seems like an instant in time when compared with Lake Superior that requires nearly 1,000 years to accomplish the same task. As a result, this system is able to correct many of the ills forced on it by man over the last century.

Since industrialization began along the Detroit River nearly 200 years ago, this 28-mile stretch of water linking Lake St. Clair with Lake Erie has been subjected to horrendous environmental damage. It peaked during the 1960s, when so much industrial waste was added to its swiftly flowing waters, that fish consumption advisories and total fishing bans were enacted. The discovery of high levels of mercury, other heavy metals and toxic wastes roused the public's ire, which finally became a political issue in the 1970s. Under the Detroit River Remedial Action Plan (RAP), major steel, chemical, and automobile manufacturers were legislated into cleaning up their acts. Those that didn't were either fined into submission or left the state entirely, causing some economic hardship during the 1970s in the Detroit Metro area. There is still a long way to go in this area.

With the initial stages of the RAP plan functioning, the Detroit River started to cleanse

itself. While far from pristine, the fast-flowing waters began to take on a greenish hue. The sheen of an oil spill along its surface was now only an occasional happening, and investiga-



The lure selection of Captain Don Miller bears the scars of many battles. Facing page — Miller with a nice musky from the Upper Detroit River aboard his boat, the "Musky Hunter."

tions were conducted to discover the sources to stop those that did. Boat traffic increased dramatically, and walleye fishing, long a mainstay of the river, became phenomenal. Each spring, anglers from across the Midwest head to the Detroit River seemingly in tandem with the walleyes. By the mid 1980s, the Detroit River was touted as the hottest spring walleye spot on the continent, with no closed season and a seemingly endless supply of trophy walleyes from Lake Erie. Then the zebra mussel population explosion hit.

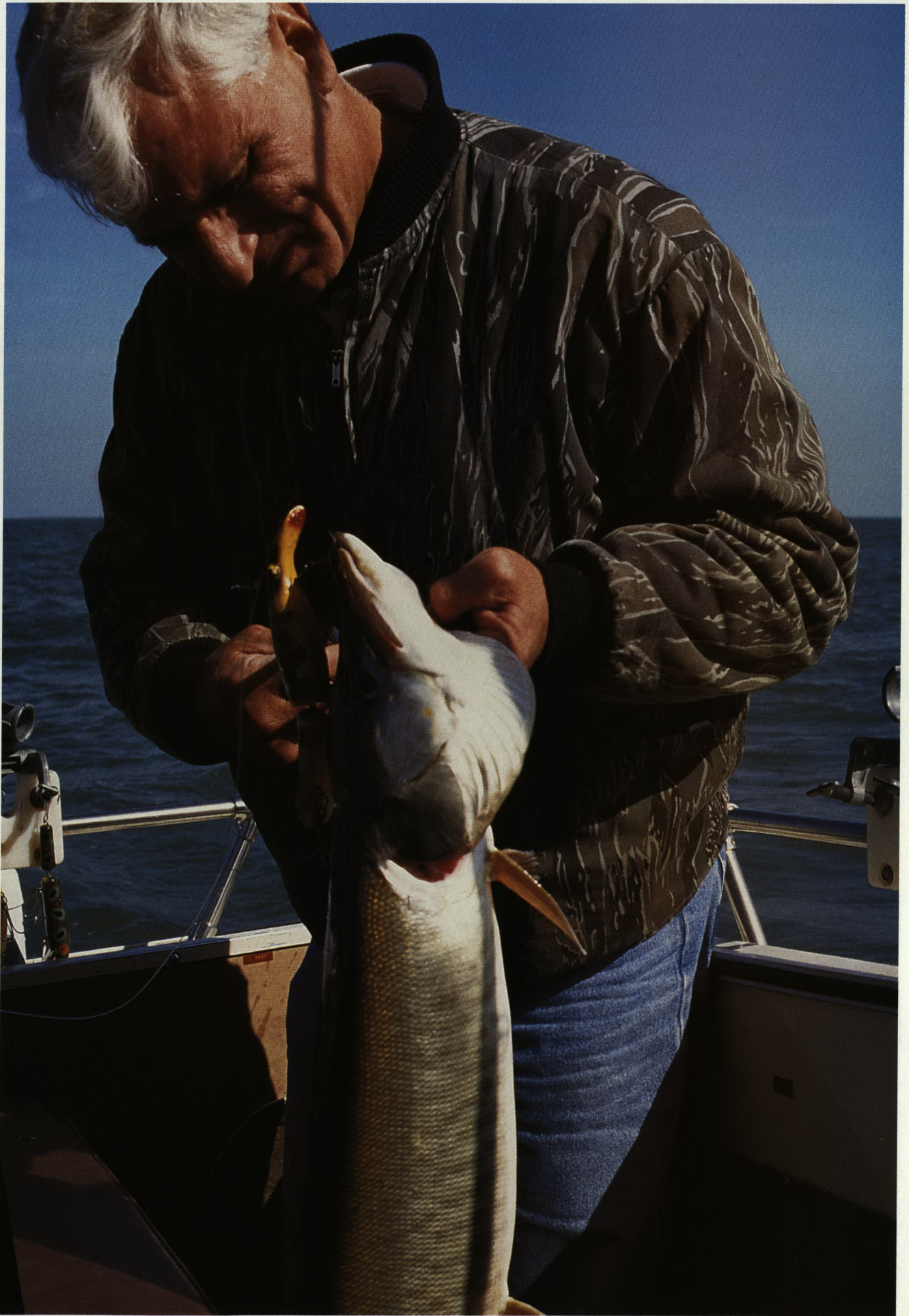
The water in the Detroit River went from green to blue, as clarity increased dramatically.

The mussels, which filter about a half liter of water per day, were removing, among other things, the green algae from the water. Without the algae to absorb and retain solar heat, water temperatures began to cool. The now clearer water allowed sunlight to penetrate deeper than anyone could remember. Submerged vegetation flourished in the depths newly exposed to sunlight. This increased plant growth also added to the improving water clarity.

A subtle but pleasant (for anglers) change took place within the Detroit River's musky population as it began to build to numbers never seen in modern times. Muskies were being hooked regularly by spring walleye anglers who would fill the bait shops with glowing tales of huge fish that inhaled five-pound walleyes being brought to the boat. Ice fishermen setting tip-ups for pike on the frozen bays, canals and marinas along the shore of the river began to lose their rigs to big fish that just took the shiners or suckers and headed off, stripping all the line and in some occasions actually snapping the tip-up during the process.

On the Detroit River, serious walleye anglers employ a trolling system called hand-lining. It utilizes 60- to 90-pound steel braided line spooled onto a large, spring-loaded reel attached to the boat's gunwale. Long, slim, sinkers weighing up to 2 pounds are used to get the line to bottom in the Detroit River's heavy current. Up to four leaders made from 25- to 40-pound monofilament and ranging in length from five to 40 feet are connected to the mainline. Large stickbaits such as Nos. 11 and 13 Rapalas, Storm Thundersticks, and Bomber Long A's are run off the leaders. Its simplicity makes handling particularly effective for walleyes after dark but also vulnerable to spawning muskies.

From late March through late April, the muskies seem to be everywhere in the Detroit River, and the handline trollers come in contact



"Jim Johnson, of Grosse Ile, a walleye fishing river rat turned musky hunter, says, 'Once the season opens for muskies that's all I concentrate on. I guess its become almost an addiction to me. I can't help myself.'"

with them on a regular basis. Large muskies are very difficult to land on this rudimentary gear, despite long battles in heavy current. Usually, the fish rips off or just gets tired of the game and smashes the lure or breaks the leader and is gone. Some anglers tell stories of fighting fish on handlines for over an hour, only to have the fish break off a few feet from the boat. Handliners have about three nocturnal musky encounters for every daytime battle.

Ron Welch, a serious walleye angler who utilizes the handline trolling technique for walleyes about 95 percent of the time says, "There are certain hotspots in the Detroit River where I no longer fish for walleyes — the muskies have taken over. Trolling in there is just flirting with disaster. I don't want anything to do with the muskies and certainly don't enjoy the experience of having hooks deeply imbedded in my hand while trying to free some of the muskies I have landed. The muskies I don't land simply tear up my gear, costing me money and walleye fishing time. Now I just avoid these areas."

Jim Johnson, of Grosse Ile, a walleye fishing river rat turned musky hunter, says, "Once the season opens for muskies that's all I concentrate on. I guess its become almost an addiction to me. I can't help myself."

Johnson utilizes single-strand, steel line for his deep water, fast current musky fishing tech-

niques in the Detroit River. July and August are his favorite months to fish for muskies there.

"This time of year (June through August) I look for schools of small walleyes — the muskies eat them like candy. I do this both by using my sonar and also actually catching small walleyes with my handline trolling gear. If I catch six walleyes in an hour, at least one of them will have an open wound from being raked by a musky. It kind of gets one's blood moving when you see that."

While Johnson uses a variety of typical musky lures including the Swim Whiz, Believer and Mason's, his bread-and-butter, get-down-and-dirty lure is the Spoonplug.

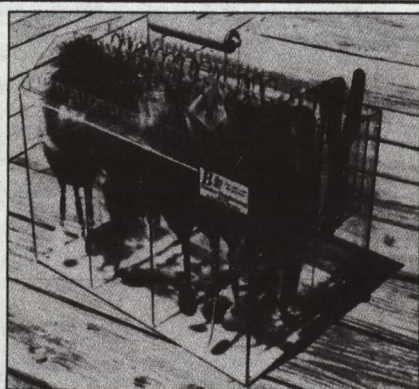
"My trolling runs are relatively short affairs when compared with other musky waters, where anglers can motor for a mile or more," say Johnson. "Some of my hotspots allow passes of only 50 yards or less. I have to be right on with lure presentation and depth to catch fish. The Spoonplug is rugged, accurate in its depth, and dives deep without the use of heavy weights. I love 'em!"

While trolling is the most popular technique used for catching Detroit River muskies, casting also has its advocates. Tim Keller, of River Rouge, MI, prefers casting for muskies in the swift current of the Detroit River.

"I can cast where the trollers don't dare run their stuff," says Tim. "In the eight-knot current,

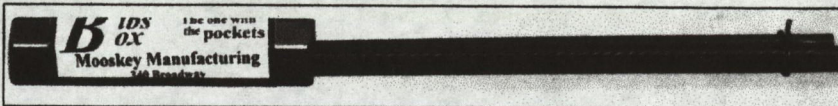
muskies tend to lurk behind obstacles that break the rush of the water. I prefer to cast upstream of the current break and then work the lure as close to the obstacle as possible. I lose a lot of gear this way, but I guess that's just part of the game. I generally throw spoons made locally by Spike's Tackle. They are heavy, and the paint jobs are similar to some of the top musky lures for our area. My best Detroit River musky is a 52-inch fish I released last August. No, I'm not revealing where. In a few years that old gal might be pushing 60 pounds. I've caught her twice now."

While angling success is a good indicator of the musky population in any given body of water, there are other methods that reveal far more. In September of 1993, I accompanied Michigan DNR personnel while they electroshocked a two-acre section of the Trenton Channel along the lower Detroit River. Not only were the fish shocked, so were the biologists. They were astounded by the number of muskies inhabiting this small section of weeds. The water was eight to 14 feet deep, adjoining a 30-foot deep shipping channel. While the biologists captured five immature muskies, we rolled far more than that with the shocking gear. The really big ones were not stunned enough to accurately measure them, but even the biologists used terms like "huge," "extra large" and "jumbo" when referring to the fish we saw.



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What the electroshocking survey also revealed was that in river systems, muskies really do stack up along current breaks and weedlines.

I witnessed another example of the healthy musky population of the Detroit River — while using archery tackle for carp shooting. In Michigan, bowhunters are allowed to pursue roughfish at night. Using small, portable generators and floodlights, the archers take to the shallows in search of big carp, gars and bowfin. The bright lights revealed almost as many muskies using the shallows after dark as roughfish. While we did not see any muskies over 30 inches in length, the numbers were impressive.

The Detroit River forms the eastern border between Michigan and Ontario, Canada. Fishing is conducted on both sides of the river, so most serious anglers also purchase an Ontario license. While it is legal to use two rods in Michigan, Ontario has a one rod per angler regulation.

Musky season in both countries along the Detroit River opens on the first Saturday in June and closes December 31. The size limit for muskies here is 40 inches, with a one fish per day limit. Catch and release fishing is encouraged, and has contributed greatly to the increase in the musky population this area now enjoys.



MOTOR CITY MAULERS: IF YOU GO

While a musky fishery like the Detroit River may not have the aesthetics of a northern lake or river, it has the most important ingredient for most anglers — big fish, and lots of 'em. It is located due east of Interstate 75 and accessible by a number of methods. There are hotels and motels at several of the exits south of the city. These include Eureka and Northline Road exits. These are all urban areas and offer dining and entertainment.

Detroit is a big city with big crime problems, and it is not recommended that anglers utilize boat ramps in the city proper. However, the lower end, where the majority of the fish are, offers a number of well lit and safe areas to facilitate boaters. Elizabeth Park Marina is located in Trenton, MI, just off Jefferson Road, and offers a fine facility which launches boats into the Trenton Channel. Lake Erie Metro park is perhaps the premier launch facility in the area and can be reached by taking the North Huron River Drive exit off I-75 and heading due east to Jefferson. Make a left turn (north) on Jefferson; the park entrance is on the east side about a quarter mile up.

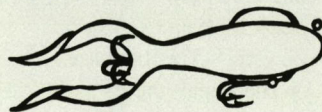
A number of islands are distributed along the river. On the north end, Peche Island has a reputation as a musky producer early in the season and again in the fall. In the central section of the river, the east or Ontario sides of Turkey and Fighting islands are popular with musky hunters. These are perhaps the two most productive areas on the entire system. On the lower end, the riprap along the Livingstone and Amherstburg channels holds fish, as do the flats near Sugar and Celeron Islands. Muskies are inadvertently taken all along the river.

For further information and fishing reports, call Viking Tackle at (313) 388-FISH or the Trenton Lighthouse, (313) 675-7080. To schedule a charter on the Detroit River contact, Horse Island Charters at (313) 692-6746.

— Mike Zielinski



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