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Of all the fresh water fishes the muskie alone stands atop the food chain. The premier predator of the fresh water environment, the muskie is without a doubt the most feared resident of the fish community and the most prized trophy of the fresh water sportfisherman. Dubbed the fish of 10,000 casts the muskie has a reputation of being hard to master. Stories of anglers preoccupation with the muskie ring reminiscent of Ahab's obsession for the great Moby Dick.

While definitely not a pushover for sportfishing tactics the muskie can be had and there's no better place for anglers to pursue the muskie than the Michigan and Canadian waters of Lake St. Clair. Nicknamed the sixth Great Lake the sprawling Lake St. Clair is considered by many to support the most productive muskie fishing in the world.

Located in southeast Michigan on the border of the U.S. and Canada St. Clair is fed by Lake Huron through the St. Clair River and empties into Lake Erie via the Detroit River. This relatively shallow 256,000 acre lake accommodates a tremendous volume of water completely flushing itself every four days. Because of this the lake remains remarkably clean and clear considering its industrialized surroundings.

"The muskie fishing on St. Clair is the best I've ever seen in 20 plus years," says veteran St. Clair muskie guide Captain Don Miller. According to Don the improved fishing is a direct result of cleaner water and a higher consciousness of fishermen concerning catch and release. Don also credits the change in the minimum size limit from 38 to 40 and again to 42 inches as having a positive effect on the quantity and quality of muskie fishing on St. Clair.

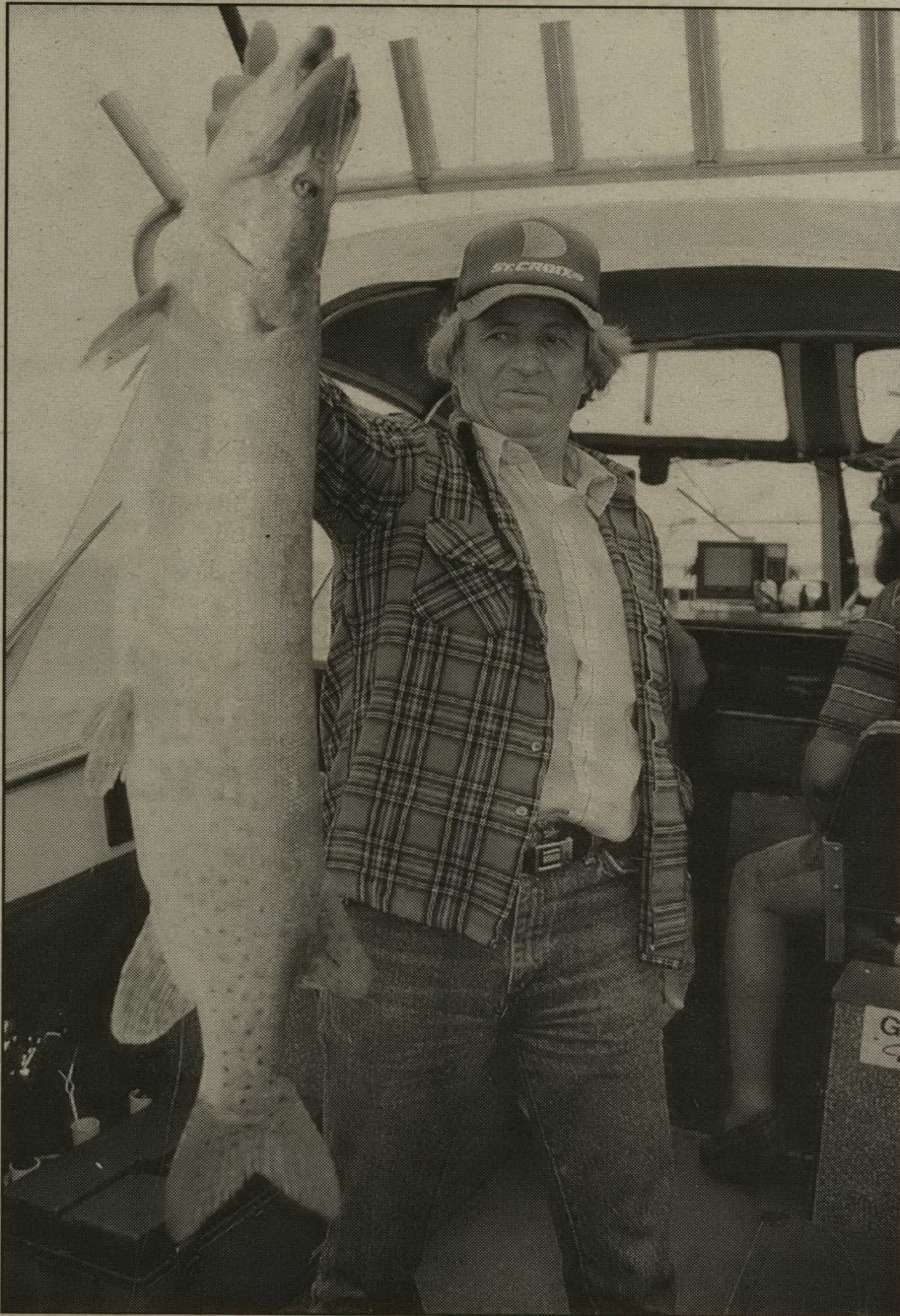
While professional guides and charter captains have targeted muskies for years on Lake St. Clair; Miller now sees more recreational fishermen setting their sights on the muskie. "Muskie clubs have sprung up all around the lake, both in Canada and Michigan. This is good because they all push a strong conservation, catch and release ethic and share information and techniques resulting in more productive all around muskie fishing," states Don.

Trolling is the number one technique for taking St. Clair muskies. A trolling pattern developed by legendary muskie fisherman Homer LeBlanc in the 1930s and '40s on Lake St. Clair remains the best producer of St. Clair muskies to this day. The only variation to Homer's original trolling technique is the utilization of planer boards to increase the amount of water being covered while trolling.

If there is one key element to LeBlanc's trolling system it's covering as much water as possible. This

Patterns for Lake St. Clair MUSKIES

By Tom Irwin



Bill Heath of Grand Rapids took this St. Clair muskie with the help of muskie expert Don Miller. Photo by Tom Irwin

is done by a combination of speed and lure placement (trolling spread). Speed is critical. The typical trolling speed for St. Clair muskies ranges from 4 to 6 miles per hour. Trolling at this speed allows for a tremendous amount of water to be covered and the more water that is covered the better chance there is of a muskie seeing the bait.

Don Miller lets water clarity dictate how fast he'll troll. In clear water he trolls fast sometimes exceeding 6 miles per hour. In muddy

or stained water he slows his trolling speed down to a minimum of 4 miles per hour. Miller's rationale being that muskies aren't easily duped into striking an artificial bait especially if they get a good look at it. For this reason in clear water Don ups his speed to keep the fish from getting too good a look at the bait, resulting in more reactionary strikes.

The typical St. Clair trolling spread consists of six or eight rods being deployed. Two lines are run

very close to the boat right in the prop wash. These rods, called down rods, are short four to six foot, very stout rods and are positioned downward towards the water. The presence of a boat doesn't seem to intimidate muskies. In fact many muskie trollers believe muskies are actually attracted to the prop wash where they find easy prey that has been disoriented from the turbulence created by the boat and prop. With short 10 to 20 foot leads the down rods are set to intercept these fish and regardless of the reason, many times the downrods are the most productive set on the boat.

The next set on the spread is the out rods. Out rods are typically 8 to 10 feet in length and are set out parallel to the water at a 45 degree angle to the back of the boat. The lures that are run off the out rods are set back 25 to 35 feet from rod tip to lure. Another out rod can then be positioned at a 90 degree angle off the side of the boat. However more and more anglers are now using planer boards for their third set and for the fourth set if eight lines are being used.

Traditional double ski and mast planer boards are most popular for St. Clair muskies. In line boards will work, however with the fast trolling speed and large lures associated with muskie trolling inline boards don't track as well as the big boards. Releases used in combination with the planer boards must be strong enough to set the hook into the hard boney mouth of a musky. Offshore heavy tension releases work very well for this application.

While large spoons and bucktail spinners will take the occasional muskie on St. Clair, body baits are by far the best producers. Miller basically sticks with three different lures the Swim Whizz, the Wiley and the Believer and of all these the eight inch jointed Believer is his most productive lure.

It's important to note that while these baits do dive some, most of the time St. Clair trollers place keel sinkers four to five feet ahead of the lures for added depth. The amount of weight added dictates how deep the lures will run. Miller sets his spread with the least weight and the longest leads off the planer boards. Typically his planer board leads are 40 feet long and he runs them with 4 ounces of lead. His out rods then are set back 30 feet with 8 ounces of lead and the down rods sport 15 foot leads with 12 ounces of lead.

Miller says the biggest mistake he sees novice muskie anglers making on St. Clair is running their lures too deep. "Muskies are sight feeders and their eyes are positioned on the top of their head making it physically impossible for them to sense a bait running below them," says Don. For this reason Miller always runs his baits in the top 50 percent of the water column. This

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means if he's trolling in 20 feet of water he will set his lures to run no deeper than 10 feet.

Occasionally Don will see muskies actually sunning themselves on the surface. When he observes this he runs two lines off planer boards with lures running just below the surface of the water. Miller notes that at times this technique can be super productive and when a big muskie hits on the surface all "heck" breaks loose.

With regard to lure color Miller tends to stick with natural color patterns. Color preference can change from day to day. Because of this it usually pays to experiment with color. Miller's most productive colors include perch, walleye, bass, pike and frog patterns. Don says "sticking with these colors will produce under almost all conditions on Lake St. Clair."

Muskies have a mouth full of big razor sharp teeth. Because of this most St. Clair trollers use a heavy leader. There are two schools of thought concerning the best type of leader to use. Miller prefers to use a four foot length of 100 lb. Trilene Big Game monofilament from the keel sinker to the lure. He feels the mono is less visible to the fish than wire and more subtle allowing for better lure action. Proponents of wire leaders believe that today's fine stranded wire leaders are actually less visible underwater than heavy mono and are much more abrasion resistant allowing for longer leader life. Regardless of which type of leader is used it's important to carefully examine the leader after each fish for knicks, crimps or abrasions.

When a big muskie attacks a lure that is being pulled through the water at four to six miles per hour he truly puts rods, reels and fishing line to the test. Thirty to 40 lb. test Trilene XT is the standard choice of main line for most St. Clair muskie trollers. Reel wise, the old standby Penn 309 is a good choice as are Shimano Triton and Daiwa 47H trolling reels. Reels used for muskie trolling should be well maintained and care should be taken to insure the drag systems are working in a smooth fashion. Rods that are suitable for muskie trolling are made by many manufacturers. Graphite rods can be used for muskie trolling. However most St. Clair trollers opt for fiberglass rods for durability reasons.

Muskies can be taken virtually anywhere on Lake St. Clair. Muskie season opens the first Saturday of June and trolling for muskies remains productive through October and even into November on Indian summer type days. Early in the summer Miller finds the shallow waters of Anchor Bay to be productive. As summer progresses Miller moves into Canadian water

where he works the 10 to 20 foot depths off of Bell River Ontario.

Another summer time hotspot for muskies is the dumping grounds. The dumping grounds located in the southeast portion of Lake St. Clair is probably the most pronounced area of underwater structure available on St. Clair. The result of many years of dumping the dredgings of the man made shipping channel, the dumping grounds consist of crevices, ledges and sunken islands bordered

by the shipping channel on the west end and huge cabbage weed-beds along the southwestern end. The dumping grounds range in depth from 8 to 18 feet. Because of its sporadic depth changes Miller runs his lures shallow and uses his lure spread and boat to virtually comb the entire area.

As summer turns to fall Miller finds that the muskies migrate back towards the northern end of the lake. Fall fishing can be slower than summer time fishing. However this is the time of the year that Miller catches most of his truly big muskies. Miller runs larger lures in the fall, usually no less than eight inch baits and his trophy lure is the 10 inch jointed Believer. Miller also finds that in the fall the muskies tend to move shallower. Water as shallow as 6 and 8 feet isn't too shallow for autumn St. Clair Muskies.

Wind direction plays an important role in Miller's muskie trolling strategy. Being a fairly shallow and weedy body of water a strong wind tends to flush floating weeds into the shore that the wind is blowing into, making efficient trolling impossible. For this reason Miller usually fishes areas where the wind is blowing offshore. This is not only more comfortable for his clients wave wise but results in more fish because the lures aren't constantly fouled with weeds.

Trolling for Lake St. Clair muskies is very productive. Perhaps more productive than any other pattern used on any other body of water for sheer numbers of muskies hooked and landed. I would suggest that anyone interested in learning how to troll for St. Clair muskies go at least once with a reputable charter captain. Don Miller can be contacted at (313) 429-9551. Other St. Clair muskie guides can be contacted through the Michigan Charter Boat Association.

The muskie fishing on Lake St. Clair is certainly a resource worth conserving. While anglers do kill the occasional fish for taxidermy purposes most are carefully handled, photographed and released. This practice helps to insure that Lake St. Clair will remain the best muskie fishing waters not just in Michigan but perhaps the whole world.■

