

Muskies tricky, but plentiful

When northerns head south, their bigger cousins become easier to find

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NEAR TRAVERSE CITY — This river looks like ideal northern pike water. It has a slow current, thick weed beds along the edges in 5-15 feet of water and lots of fat suckers that are the equivalent of pike candy.

It's also 76 degrees, 10 degrees above what northerns prefer, which is why we're here. Fewer northerns mean more of their bigger cousins, the muskellunge, and Anton Sepak figures we have a good shot at nailing some on plugs.

"There is no good time to fish for muskies, so that means every time is a good time to fish them," Sepak said as he tossed a 9-inch, jointed plug into a wide opening in a weed bed. "I've caught as many muskies between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. as I have early in the morning, and a lot more than I've taken evening fishing. I don't know if that holds true for trolling because I don't do much of that, but it's certainly the case when you plug for 'em."

Many anglers are surprised to learn that although muskies are relatively rare catches, they are relatively common. Many northern Michigan lakes have large muskie populations that can be seen routinely on electronic fish finders. But they are one of the hardest fish to tease into striking.

Late July and August are good to try casting plugs and spoons for muskies, especially in slow-flowing rivers with water temperatures of 70-80 degrees. Muskies tolerate higher temperatures than northerns, and water that has a lot of pike usually doesn't have many muskies. That's because pike eggs hatch earlier than muskies each spring, and the muskie eggs hatch just in time to provide dinner for the rapidly growing and ravenous pike fingerlings.

Sepak catches more than his share of muskellunge each year, mostly because he does more than his share of muskie fishing. But he also prepares his tackle carefully and says one of the most important things is to replace the treble hooks that come on the plugs with stainless steel trebles. And then he sharpens all of the hooks on his plugs and spoons to a razor edge.

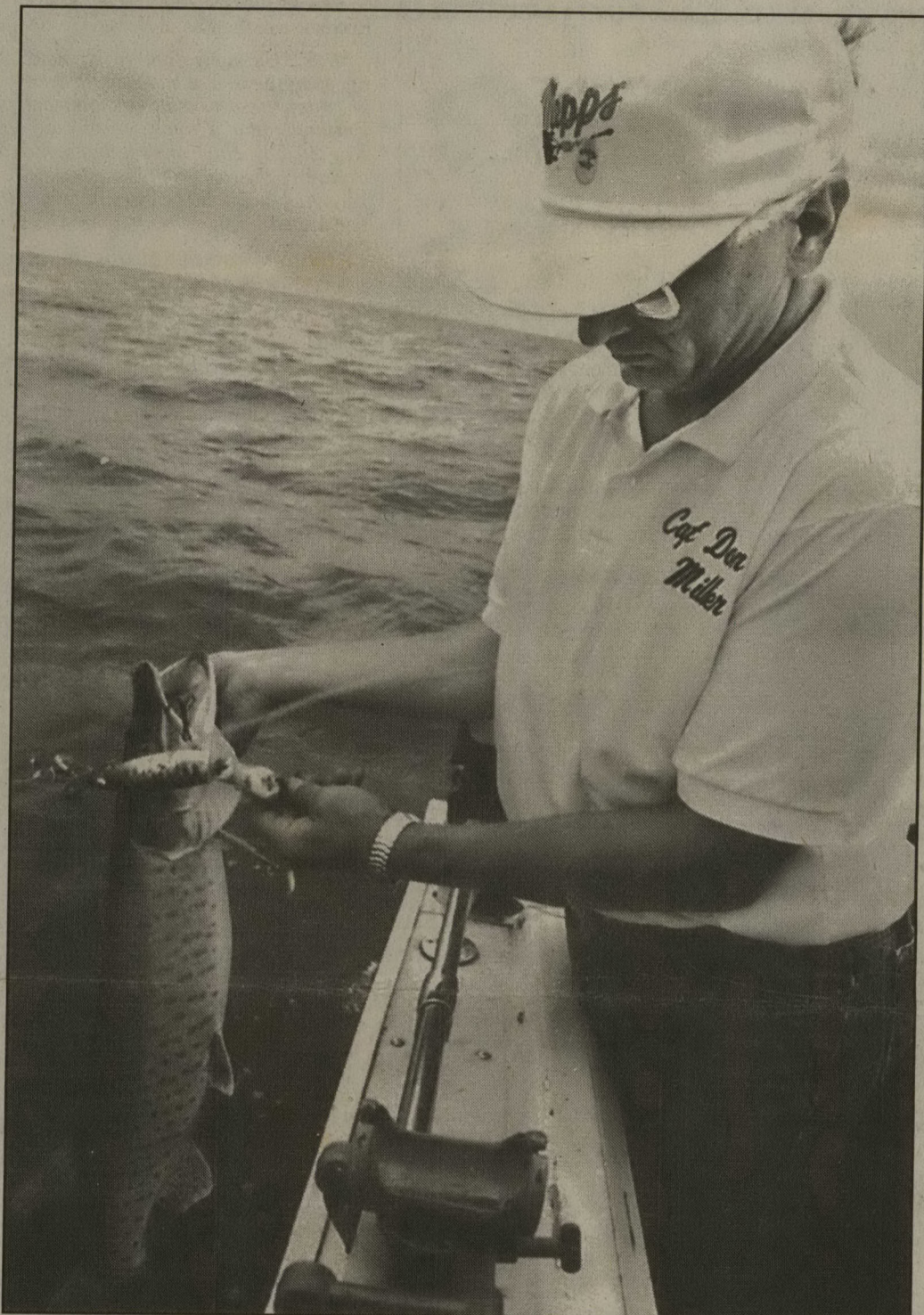
"I triangulate each tine of the treble hooks so that the inside edge is as sharp as a good knife," he said. "The second-most common reason for missing a muskie is because the hooks wouldn't penetrate its bony mouth. The first reason is when understrength hooks straighten out. You can sharpen the hooks with a hand hone, but I use a \$15, battery-operated sharpener I bought five or six years ago. It's a lot more efficient."

This isn't fishing for those who need instant gratification. We had been at it for four hours with no action except a follow behind my big wobbling spoon by a long shape that turned away when it got close enough to see the boat.

We had reached that point in a slow day where we were fishing mechanically, almost soporifically, when I saw something behind Sepak's lure as it swam along the surface 50 feet away. It was a nice muskie with its nose not a foot from the lure, and Sepak was staring at something on shore and hadn't seen it.

"Muskie. There's a muskie," I finally sputtered, and Sepak jerked out of his reverie and saw it. I would have probably done something dumb and spooked the fish, but Sepak has been through this lots of times. He gave the lure a couple of fast twitches, then sped up the retrieve like a crippled bait fish trying to escape. The muskellunge closed to within a couple of inches of the lure, and just when I thought it had to spot the boat and spook, it struck.

It was so close that we got splashed by a bucketful of water that the fish



HUGH GRANNUM/Detroit Free Press

Capt. Don Miller, aboard his boat the Muskie Hunter, prepares to release a muskellunge he landed on a rainy, wavy afternoon this week in Lake St. Clair. All three variants of muskie — spotted, barred and clear — are common in large bodies such as Lake St. Clair.

kicked up with its tail as Sepak set the hook. The muskie made a short, fast run and then thrashed at the surface, rolling wildly, but the 50-pound Kevlar line was more than tough enough. Sepak also had an 18-inch section of 60-pound, single-strand wire between the hook and the lure, which ensured that the fish's dagger-like teeth wouldn't cut him off.

The fight was powerful, but it was over in 10 minutes. We held the fish next to the boat to measure it (42 inches) and used pliers to get the hook out of its jaw. In a couple of minutes, the fish revived and shot off into the dark water with a flip of its tail.

"A 42-incher will go 20, 22 pounds," Sepak said. "I don't even like to take them out of the water to weigh them anymore. I've developed a formula that gives me the weight within a pound if I know the length."

Then we encountered another of those ironies all muskie anglers know. We had fished for hours without a nibble, but less than five minutes after we released Sepak's fish another muskie came out of nowhere and smacked the spoon as I worked it past a midriver weed bed.

This one made a longer run and jumped four times, but again it took less than 10 minutes to boat. The fish was 39 inches, about 16 pounds, and the color pattern was one I've rarely seen, a variety usually referred to as a clear muskie. Most that I've caught have been the barred or spotted, or even combinations of spots and bars, but this beauty was a featureless,

silvery-tan on the sides with a coppery back and dark orange fins. Friends have told me that the clear variant is common in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The three varieties were once considered subspecies, but stocking hatchery fish and other deliberate transfers by man have so mixed the gene pool that all three variants are common in large bodies such as Lake St. Clair.

A 35-pound muskie is huge today, but records say Indian netters took 100-pounders in colonial times. This is one instance in which the fish story could well be true. When you consider that muskies are long-lived (taking 20 years to reach 40 pounds), and that several of more than 60 pounds have been caught in this century, they might well have reached 100 pounds in a time when far fewer people were trying to catch them.

The generally accepted world record is 69 pounds, 11 ounces, caught by Louis Spray in Wisconsin in 1949.

The two fish Sepak and I released were the only ones we hooked (I got another follow but couldn't entice a strike). The muskie is often referred to as the fish of 1,000 casts, and that's a realistic ratio in most places.

An exception is Lake St. Clair, long one of the country's top muskie waters and today experiencing a boom in which trolling anglers often have four to six strikes in a day (the average nationwide is probably about one strike every two days).

"I've boated over 60 fish since July 5 in the past two weeks," said Capt. Don Miller, a muskie guide on the lake.

"That's bound to take a turn on me. It just can't keep up. But this summer has been the best muskie fishing I've ever seen."

The biggest fish he has taken this summer is a 50-incher that went 31½ pounds, but the biggest muskies are virtually always taken in September and October, when the big females go on feeding binges to prepare for spring spawning. And unlike walleye fishermen, Miller isn't complaining so far about the weed growth in the lake, arguing that "the more weed beds, the more muskies. And what really makes me feel good is that we're seeing extra large fish, medium fish and small fish, which means there's a healthy population of spawning muskies out there that will keep this going."

Miller said anglers seem to have become much more receptive to the idea of catch-and-release fishing if they want to catch even bigger muskies in the future. "My anglers killed only two fish so far this year," he says. "Both of those fish were over 45 inches. And the rule on my boat is that if you kill a fish, you can't kill another one unless it's bigger than the last one."

Sepak has a similar rule, and with a 53-inch fish he caught in 1978 on his den wall in Chicago, he figures he might never kill another.

"That fish was 40 pounds, 2 ounces. If I get a 55-incher, I'll mount it. That would be a 45-pounder, but the odds on any muskie fisherman getting one of those in a lifetime are pretty slim. I'd be happy to catch and release 40-50 inches for another 50 years."