



# MICHIGAN Hunting & Fishing

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## FEATURES

- Early Season Goose Tactics**—by Dan Donarski.....14
- A Port of Kings**—by Mike Modrzyński.....18
- Erie 'Eyes Drift Fishing**—by Mike Zielinski.....24
- Hunt 'Em High**—by P.J. Reilly.....28
- Finessing Hot Weather Bass**—by Bob McNitt.....34
- Early Bowhunting: Tied to the Mast?**—by Charles J. Alsheimer.....38
- Harnessing Arrow Velocity**—by Mark Romanack.....42
- Summer Tips for Walleyes**—by Kenny Darwin.....48
- Deep Diving Crankbaits**—by Tom Irwin.....51
- Lake St. Clair's Hot Muskie Action**—by Mike Zielinski.....54
- New State Record Six-Point**—by Jason Hatfield.....56
- Lessons From the Line**—by Matt Buche.....58
- Floating Michigan's Trout Rivers**—by Greg Frey.....62
- Deer Scents: New Research & Tactics**—by T.R. Michels.....66
- A Look At Some Sluggers**—by Bob Bell.....68
- Small Game Tips for a Shrinking Planet**—by John D. Taylor.....74
- The Homecoming Buck**—by Jack Rodgers.....78
- Frontstuffer Pheasants**—by M.D. Johnson.....83
- The Carp: America's Most Unwanted**—by Darl Black.....88

## DEPARTMENTS

- Editorial**.....12
- From the Field**.....13
- Gear Reviews**.....91
- Sportsman Rendezvous**.....104
- Wild Things & Places**.....114

## REGIONS

- Upper Peninsula**.....92
- Northern Lower Peninsula**.....96
- Southwest Michigan**.....98
- Southeast Michigan**.....100
- Thumb Area**.....102

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# Lake St. Clair's Hot Muskie Action

*Michigan is blessed with the best muskie lake in the country. Lake St. Clair's muskies are the king of freshwater fish and fear nothing. But to catch them you must fish hard.*

by Mike Zielinski

“One thing about muskie fishing on Lake St. Clair,” said Capt. Don Miller, as he set a giant plug to work in the wake of his charter boat *Musky Hunter*, “when the season opens, you’re only one strike away from a new world’s record. Thinking about that keeps me going when things are a little slow.”

Through plain old hard work, lots of hours on the water and mentor muskie fishing legend Homer LeBlanc, Miller is fast gaining a reputation as the top muskie guide in this corner of Muskiedom. Combining many of LeBlanc’s famous trolling techniques and theories with modern technology and equipment, plus a few special twists of his own, Capt. Don Miller continues to build a storehouse of knowledge about these freshwater tigers.

When the assignment came down to check out Lake St. Clair muskie angling with Miller, I jumped at the chance. I headed east down Nine Mile Road from Jefferson Avenue to meet Miller. Lake St. Clair shimmered in the distance, the rising sun lighting up her emerald water with streaks of red and yellow.

The odor of water, seaweed and

fish permeated the onshore breeze where Miller keeps his 22-foot Starcraft moored along a canal behind the home of LeBlanc’s widow at the foot of Nine Mile Road. On the horizon were several fishing boats crossing the lake, heading into the early sunrise.

When I boarded Miller’s boat, I was introduced to charter Capt. Bill Hoch, a Canadian from Leamington, Ontario. Hoch had been a participant in the muskie wars of the 1970s, running boats out of St. Luke’s Club as one of Jack Miner’s hired guns. He has a lot of muskie lore wrapped in his short, compact frame.

“Back then,” Hoch said, “Miner was in competition with a few other muskie charter outfits and our only job was to put muskies in the cooler for customers. We weren’t concerned with catch and release. We figured there were enough fish to go around. Boy, were we wrong!”

As Miller eased us out of the canal and onto Lake St. Clair, the stately lakeside mansions of Grosse Pointe passed to our south. All three of us looked at them, and it was obvious our thoughts were the same, “Just where does all that money come from?”

We planed off and headed out into the lake for several miles

before Capt. Miller slowed to trolling speed. I took the wheel, while he and Bill began setting lines.

Miller adheres to the method of running two five-foot rods in the prop wash with the lures only four feet astern, and only inches below the surface. He has also added planer boards to his muskie hunting arsenal. They take the place of the outriggers and the heavy 12-foot long rods once utilized to keep the lures spread. Most of his reels are spooled with 50-lb. test braided dacron line with 100-lb. mono leaders, though Miller uses the new Kevlar lines off his planer boards.

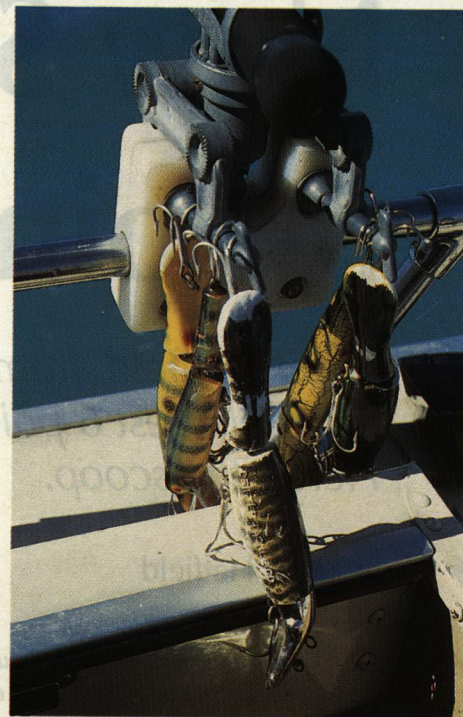
Both Miller and Hoch depend on Believer lures as well as Spike’s Spoons to catch muskies. These lures have the size and color patterns necessary to catch big muskies. They are also durable and handle the stress of landing a large, hard fighting fish like a Great Lakes muskie.

One thing I noticed about Miller’s technique was the amount of time he spent cleaning and changing lures. He and Hoch started with the planer board rod on the port side, removing weeds from each lure being trolled, only to start all over again when the last rod was replaced on the starboard

Mike Zielinski



Above: Capt. Miller shows that big muskies often fall for large lures trolled fast. Right: Teeth marks tell the story of how jointed Believer lures attract savage strikes from monster muskies.



Mike Zielinski

side—almost nonstop. I thought I had to work hard on my charter boat when walleye trolling, but compared to these guys, my job is a snap.

We were into the second hour of a beautiful morning when Miller screamed "Fish on." On their initial run, big muskies can rip line from a reel fast enough to make the drag really buzz. Miller handed me the rod while Bill took the helm.

The fish was into one strong, head-long dash away from the boat. With stiff rods and heavy no-stretch line, the angler feels every move the fish makes, and all the pressure is on the fisherman's hands and forearms. It is almost like wrist-wrestling at long range; there is no easing up on the pressure.

"Reel, Mike, reel," came Miller's command. "You can't pump a muskie like other fish; the only way is to stay on the reel until we have her in the boat."

For a middle-aged guy, landing a big fish can be a little painful. When I first saw the muskie, she was about 50 yards out and heading away from the boat. As the fight progressed, my arthritis applied its nasty jaws to each wrist and began to sink its teeth into the joints. Landing this hard charging

muskie was a matter of enduring the pain long enough to get a net under the fish.

Miller and Hoch got the fish in the net and I went for my camera. While this was a trophy fish, 48 inches long and over 30 pounds, it was returned to fight again. This was the largest muskie I had ever landed.

I was able to shoot fewer than 10 photos before Miller eased the big fish back over the side, holding her upright against the forward motion of the boat as she slowly regained her strength. After about five minutes, the big muskie began to struggle and Miller released it. We watched as she slowly swam across the wavetops, looking almost like a spotted nuclear submarine on the surface.

Landing that fish was No. 137 of the year for Miller. He had been catching muskies at a 1.5 fish per trip rate since the season opener in June, an impressive string of catches. He was happy about the number of release rates his clients were displaying. Yes, things have changed on Lake St. Clair when it comes to muskie catch-and-release fishing.

There are a lot of fish the size of the one we released in Lake St. Clair, due to the prudent practice of catch-and-release by savvy skip-

pers like Miller and other sport fishermen.

"On my boat, I have an agreement with each client," said Miller. "The fish has to be over 45 inches long or weigh more than 20 pounds before we keep it. What is gratifying to me is to see so many customers happily comply. In fact, we have released fish in the 30- to 40-lb. range lately.

"Let's face it, the cost of putting a trophy muskie on the wall is probably over \$400. Muskies aren't that good to eat either, so why not just enjoy the pleasure of catching one, taking a few photos and then putting it back?"

Miller prides himself on releasing a muskie in good condition. Here are his tips on muskie catch-and-release.

"The key is to reduce the stress and physical injury when the fish is landed, preventing the fish from going into shock. Their best chance of survival is releasing the fish within six minutes of hooking it. Don't play the fish until it is exhausted—get it to the boat, in the net and released.

"Never use a gaff and then try to release a fish. Don't drop the fish in the boat. Leave it in the net

To page 102

until you have a good grip on it, and don't put your fingers in the eye sockets or the touch the gills.

"Grasp the fish behind the head. If the fish is hooked deep, do not cut the hook off and leave it in the fish. A muskie will likely continue to experience stress, so carefully remove the hook. Most fish survive, despite some bleeding. A little blood does not mean

the fish is going to die."

Hopefully, due to Miller and others like him who practice catch and release, Lake St. Clair muskie populations will continue to increase. Perhaps this type of conservation will produce a new world record muskie from Lake St. Clair.

Lake St. Clair water clarity has increased due to zebra mussels. The lake's predatory fish populations seem to be experiencing a population boom.

DNR fisheries biologist Mike

Thomas of the Lake St. Clair station explains it this way.

"With clearer water, sunlight penetrates deeper, stimulating underwater plant growth. This gives more cover to forage such as minnows and crustaceans, thus increasing their numbers. Sight feeders like bass, pike and muskie feed efficiently in clear water, which means their populations should rise."

"I look for movement trends," says Miller. "There are no secrets on Lake St. Clair, and if other knowledgeable anglers are abandoning one area for another, it is because the fish have migrated."

In June, fish seem to congregate near Anchor Bay, off the Clinton River and near the Spillway just south of Metro Beach. During July, fish move to the dumping grounds, and also southeast over to the Canadian side of Lake St. Clair off Pike Creek, Puce River and Belle River. August sees another eastward movement to the Ruscom River and Stoney Point.

When September rolls around, the fish continue a slow eastward movement past the Black Forest to just off the Thames River. In October, muskies head west again, and set up near the Spillway or off the South Channel in front of Grosse Pointe."

I have never actually seen "gold fever" or other such ilks that capture men's souls, but I would bet that muskie fever is right up there with them. All it takes is doing battle with one nice fish and you could be hooked for life. 🍷

August 1996

### MUSKIE CHARTERS, DIRECTIONS & CONTACTS

For those who like to play with fate and tempt the devil by hooking a monster muskie, Lake St. Clair is the hottest spot in the country.

For that muskie trip of a lifetime, Capt. Don Miller can be reached at (313) 429-9551. For fishing information and lake conditions call Lakeside Fishing Shop at (810) 777-7003, Angler Rod & Sports at (810) 329-2253, or Outdoor Adventures at (810) 765-4430.

There are a number of excellent boat launches along Lake St. Clair. The Metropolitan Metro-park has a facility just south of the Clinton River. To get there from I-94, head east on the Metro-Parkway to the park. A daily park sticker plus launch fee is required.

Harley Ensign Memorial Access is at the mouth of the Clinton River and reached by heading east off I-94 on North River Rd 1.6 miles to Bridgeview Rd. Proceed 1/2-mile south to S. River Rd. and turn left for three miles.