

**Special  
Issue!**

# 1999 Fishing Annual

# MICHIGAN

## HUNTING & FISHING

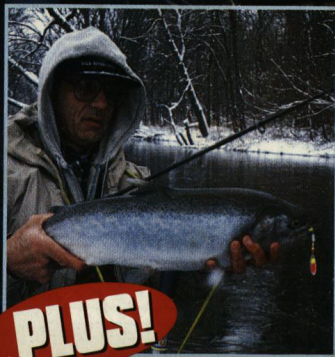
### *The 'EYES Have It*

- Erie's Spring Trophies
- Late Winter Hotspots
- Versatile Spinner Rigs
- Springtime Strategies

### *Last-Ice Perch Destinations*

### **DRUMMOND ISLAND CORNUCOPIA**

### *St. Clair's Monster Muskies*



**PLUS!**

- Slinging Lures For Steelies
- 1999 Rod & Reel Review
- Top Baits for Early Trout
- Spring Gobbler Preview



A PETERSEN PUBLICATION

## Dedicated To Michigan Sportsmen



# MICHIGAN

## HUNTING & FISHING

Volume 17, No. 2

March 1999

## 1999 FISHING ANNUAL

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REALTREE  
America's Most Versatile Camo Pattern.

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MPA The Audit Bureau

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# MONSTER MUSKIES

## of St. Clair

**MUSKIES ARE OFTEN CALLED THE FISH OF A THOUSAND CASTS. BUT THERE ARE MORE WAYS TO TAG THESE WATER WOLVES, AND TROLLING LAKE ST. CLAIR MAY WELL BE THE BEST ONE.**

By BILL PARKER

A flock of cormorants huddled on top of a shipping buoy in the middle of Lake St. Clair and seemed to stand guard like a gang of gargoyles defending the entrance of some medieval lair. The pink tint of the morning sun jabbed and poked at the eastern horizon but couldn't quite break through the cloudy gray awning that blanketed the summer sky. A modest breeze kicked up out of the south and gave the water a slight chop and kept us cool and comfortable in the August heat. "What a great day for fishing," I thought to myself as we motored east out of St. Clair Shores and into Canadian waters.

"Fishing starts as soon as the first bait hits the water," explained veteran charter captain Don Miller of Motor City Muskies. "We sometimes catch them before we get all the lines set."

True to Miller's prophecy, the first line was ripped free of the planer-board line before the second line could be set in the water.

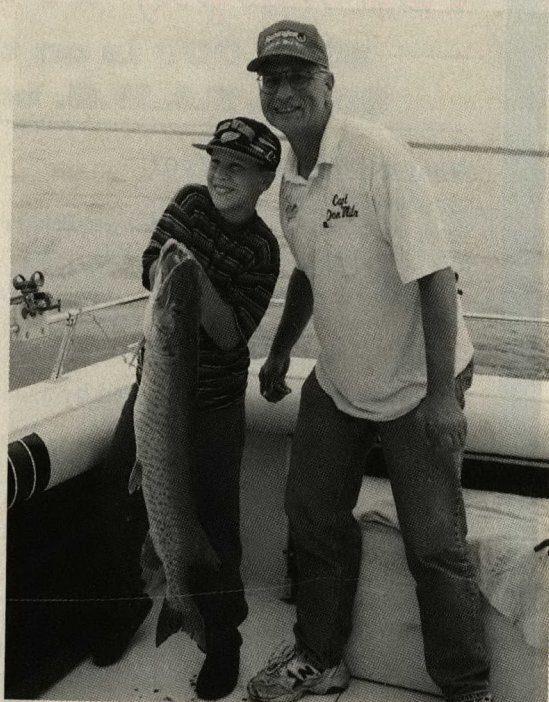
"Fish on! Fish on!" came an excited cry.

Ten-year-old Aaron Paich anxiously raced to the back of the boat. He took a firm, tight grip of the fishing pole and began cranking on the reel as the first brawl of the day ensued. Beads of perspiration formed above the young angler's eyebrows as he bravely fought to bring the reluctant fish to the boat. With his father standing at his side in case the youngster needed a hand, Aaron cranked and cranked and cranked on the baitcasting reel, always keeping a taut line.

Muskie fishing has always been good on Lake St. Clair, but in recent years the fishing has improved to fantastic. Catch rates in the mid-1980s averaged about 29 hours per fish. By 1998 that average had dropped to

approximately 10 hours per fish, although many serious muskie anglers have much better success.

"The population has been improving throughout the '90s," said Don McLennon, a fisheries biologist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources who has done extensive research on the muskies of Lake St. Clair. "The population has at least doubled since the mid-'80s



Ten-year-old Adam Paich and Capt. Don Miller are all smiles with Paich's 45-inch Master Angler muskie. Lake St. Clair could well be the premier muskie factory of North America.

PHOTO BY  
BILL PARKER

PHOTO BY BILL PARKER

and possibly tripled. They were catching between 400 to 800 fish per year in the mid-'80s. Now they're probably catching close to 2,000 fish per year."

At the same time there has been an increase in the muskie population, there has also been a major change in the habitat in Lake St. Clair.

The primary change in habitat has been attributed to the infestation of the zebra mussel, which invaded the lake in the 1980s. Although the zebra mussels have been given a ton of negative press, they have actually had a positive impact on some aspects of the biological balance of the lake.

Zebra mussels filter and clean the water, which allows for better light penetration. This light penetration, in turn, stimulates aquatic weed growth. The added weed growth has been a bonus for predator fish such as muskellunge, pike and bass, which have seen their populations rise sharply in recent years.

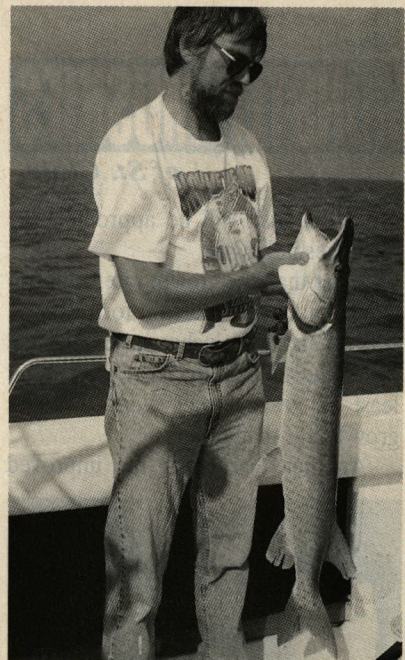
Muskies depend on an aquatic plant called chara. A low-growing vegetation with an unpleasant smell, chara is also referred to as musk grass. Chara is a brittle plant that grows only four to six feet off the bottom of the lake. Muskies lay their eggs over this chara, and the eggs fall down between the shoots, where they lie safely until they hatch. According to McLennon, the amount of chara in Lake St. Clair increased 400 percent from 1986 to 1992.

"The increased weed growth on Lake St. Clair has also helped the survival rate of the juvenile fish," explained

and '80s, anglers who caught a legal muskie would usually keep the fish for food or a mount. Today, biologists estimate that only about 1 percent of the fish that are caught in the lake are kept by the angler. There is now a growing understanding and respect for these long-living, majestic fish, and catch-and-release fishing is now the norm rather than the exception.

"The big thing about muskie fishing is that we have to educate people on how long it takes for a fish to get that big," said Miller, who takes pride in releasing nearly every fish he boats. If an angler catches a real trophy and is adamant about keeping the fish for a mount, Miller will sometimes reluctantly give in, but not without a fight.

"A 40-inch muskie is probably eight to 10 years old, and they can live much longer than that. It takes a long



**Jerry Kustra takes one final look at a typical St. Clair muskie before putting it back into the lake. A fish this size is probably more than 8 years old.**

PHOTO BY BILL PARKER

*A 40-inch muskie is probably eight to 10 years old, and they can live much longer than that. It takes a long time to get that big, and there's no sense keeping a fish that's 10 to 20 years old.*

Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Mike Herman of the Lake St. Clair research station. "There are a lot more weeds out there now, so the younger fish have plenty of favorable habitat and cover.

"Muskies are sight feeders, and with the cleaner water they can also see bait from farther away, which makes feeding a little easier," Herman said.

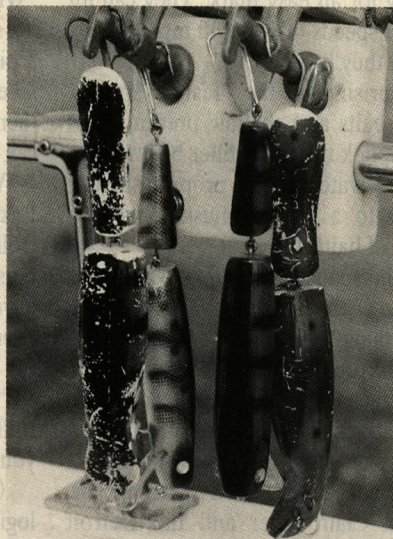
With the determination of a prize fighter, young Aaron continued to gain ground on the reluctant muskie. After a grueling 20-minute war, the fish finally surrendered to the nylon mesh of a landing net. A huge smile spread across the youngster's face as he posed for a few quick pictures before releasing the 43-inch Master Angler muskie back into the choppy green water of Lake St. Clair.

The growing ethic of catch-and-release muskie fishing is another reason for the abundant fishery in Lake St. Clair. Back in the 1970s

time to get that big, and there's no sense keeping a fish that's 10 to 20 years old, especially with today's graphite reproductions," Miller said. "It costs about \$12 an inch for graphite and about \$10 an inch for a live mount, but

then you have to bring it (the mounted fish) back to a taxidermist in a few years to get it touched up when it starts to turn yellow. Graphite reproductions are great and look real nice with a picture of the fish and a Master Angler patch hanging on the wall. Then you can tell people the fish lived to see another day."

According to McLennon, muskies grow faster in the early years of life. The growth rate slows after the fish reaches the 40-inch class. Ministry of Natural Resources studies indicate that at age four a Lake St. Clair muskie will reach the length of approximately 33 inches. At age six, a muskie will measure approximately 37 inches, and an



**Believers and Terminators are top trolling baits on this lake. They are big and rugged baits; they have to be—they get beat up in a muskie's sharp teeth.**

PHOTO BY BILL PARKER

# The **MONSTER MUSKIES** of St. Clair

8-year-old fish will be approximately 40 inches in length.

After that, the growth rate begins to slow. An 11-year-old fish, for instance, will be about 43 inches in length, and fish in the 46- to 48-inch category are at least 12 years old or older. Females grow larger than males.

Another reason for the improved



PHOTO BY BILL PARKER

*Don Miller prepares to release a huge muskie. Miller releases virtually all fish caught on his boat; he recommends they be kept out of the water for no longer than you can hold your breath.*

fishery is an increase in the minimum size limit for the fish to be legal for those who wish to keep their catch.

Muskie become sexually mature and reproduce when they reach the age of four or five years. At that stage in life, muskies are approximately 31 to 34 inches in length.

In 1987 the legal size limit on Lake St. Clair was increased from 30 inches to 40 inches to allow some of these smaller, younger fish an opportunity to spawn a couple of times before being caught. In 1996 that size limit was raised to 42 inches, which is where it stands today.

Not long after our first fish was released back into the lake, another muskie took our offering from just a few feet behind the boat. After a long initial run, fish and man went head-to-head for a good 15 minutes before another 40-inch-plus monster was in the boat.

Miller, who has been fishing for muskies on Lake St. Clair as both an amateur and a professional since 1970, employs a technique he learned from legendary Freshwater Fishing Hall-of-Fame angler Homer LeBlanc.

"If I can learn half of what Homer forgot, I'll be fortunate," Miller said. "This was his lake. For 86 years he fished for muskies right here on Lake St. Clair. Nobody knew the lake, and how to catch fish, better than Homer."

One of the things Miller did pick up from LeBlanc was a fishing technique called prop-wash trolling.

Lines are set five feet behind the boat, and lures are trolled in the middle of the prop wash. The day we were on the lake, we hooked nine fish and boated seven, including two Master Angler fish. Five of them came from lures presented in the prop wash.

Because of the placement of the eyes in the head of a muskie, they feed in an upward direction. Our baits, which consisted of large (8- to 10-inch) jointed body baits such as Believers and Terminator T-3s, were trolled well off the bottom of the lake and over the top of the fish, which lurk in weed patches and along drops. Because the baits are so large, fast trolling speeds of up to 5 mph are recommended.

"When you're fishing with bigger baits and bigger hardware, you don't want to slow the boat to a fish as old and wise as a muskie," Miller said. "Muskies are typically lazy fish. They're like a hoodlum hanging out on the corner waiting for an easy mark. They can hit baits at speeds of 20 to 40 mph. If they want it they'll take it."

Surprisingly, the faster speeds, bigger baits and shallow presentations don't spook the fish. Miller believes the gurgling water in the prop wash may appear to a hungry muskie to be a school of baitfish.

"When you're 'King of the Lake,' you have no enemies. Muskies are not afraid of anything," Miller said. "Maybe they think the prop wash is a school of baitfish. Sometimes they'll swim right along with the boat and wait for something to stray outside, and then they'll eat it."

The muskie season on Lake St. Clair, the St. Clair River and the Detroit River runs from the first Saturday in June to Dec. 15. Anglers tend to catch more fish from mid-June to mid-

August, but more of the bigger fish are caught near the end of the season.

"Fish start sensing a change in the season before we do and start feeding for winter," Miller said. "You'll start getting the bigger fish in September and October."

Anglers seem to catch a lot of fish immediately after a storm passes over the lake. Not the next day or the second day after a storm, but immediately after the storm passes.

"When a big wind storm kicks up the lake, they lose sight of the grocery store [schools of fish]," explained Miller. "Once the lake settles down, they really start feeding because they have empty bellies."

Another tactic Miller employs is to circle around the outside of a group of boats that are catching what he calls "baitfish"—perch and walleyes. "If the 'baitfish' are there, the muskies won't be far behind," Miller said. "Sometimes you can pick them up around the outside of a school of baitfish."

Miller has boated close to 2,500 muskies in his days on Lake St. Clair. In 1996 he caught 326 muskies, including 29 that qualified for catch-and-release Master Angler recognition (42-inch minimum). By September 1997, Miller had boated 280 fish for the season, including another 29 Master Angler fish. The largest one was 56 inches long and weighed close to 41 pounds. All were returned to the lake.

"So far this year, no fish I've taken has been intentionally killed," Miller said. "With graphite like they have nowadays, it's stupid to kill them. Catch them, take a picture, then turn them back into the lake. I really don't recommend keeping them out of the water longer than you can hold your breath."

With 256,000 acres of surface water, Lake St. Clair has an abundance of trolling area. Although Miller catches most of his fish over select weedbeds, he always trolls to and from his locations, even if his journey takes him through the middle of the shipping channel.

"They're everywhere in this lake," Miller said. "You can't catch them if you don't have your lines in the water."

Changes in fishing ethics and the biological structure of Lake St. Clair have been a boon for the muskies and muskie anglers, and the fantastic fishing should continue well into the future.