

TOP 25 STEELHEAD FLYFISHING STREAMS

NUMBER 2

GREAT LAKES ANGLER

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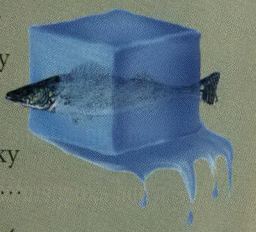
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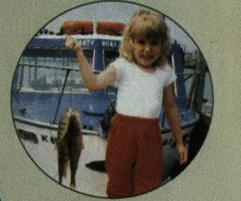
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Cover photo by Forest Johnson.

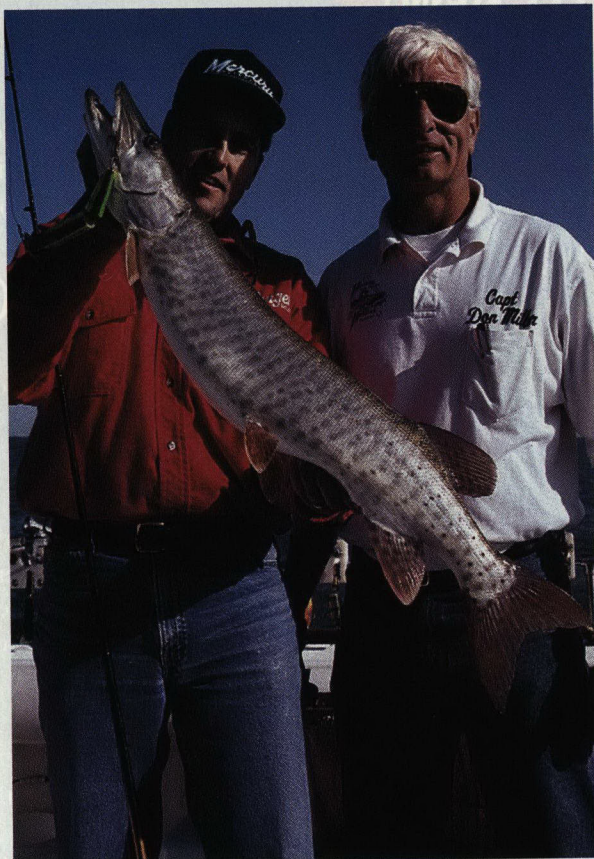
TOOTHISOME!

These tips and the right day on Lake St. Clair will make you a Musky Maniac.

By Capt. Chip Porter

They eat every day, these big toothy critters that occupy the dominant spot on Lake St. Clair's food chain. "They have to turn on at some time during the day in the summer months," swears guide Steve Jones. "Their metabolisms are just cranking." The key is being in the right place while doing the right thing to take advantage of the binge.

Because most of Lake St. Clair is featureless basin, this fish factory behaves in a manner familiar to an open-water salmon fisherman. The major difference is that St. Clair's basin is shallower than typical salmon hunting grounds, and these overly voracious muskies are much higher in the water column. According to Jones, "you can't troll high enough; you've got to keep those baits high if you want to take advantage of the bite when it turns on." These fish move up in the water column when they decide to feed.



Legendary St. Clair Guide Don Miller and Musky Guru Jim Saric admire a typical St. Clair Bullet. As this fishery has come alive, the fish have gotten longer. In the past few years they have started to add a bit of girth also, with anglers catching fish up to 40 pounds.

The majority of these fish are homing in on roaming baitfish. This means that many times you'll come across a school of them gorging on the same school of bait, says Jim Saric, one of the

country's hottest musky sticks. "The key to being consistent on St Clair is being mobile and finding the pods of hot fish each day," he adds. For this reason Lake St. Clair trollers push the speed envelope.

"You can never troll too fast or too close to the boat, either," adds Jones. He is among a corps of Lake St. Clair fishermen who believe these fish don't fear boats and develop total tunnelvision when their minds are on feeding. Speeds begin at about 3.6 mph in early June and top off somewhere in the 6 mph range in the throes of summer.

Specific winds correlate with specific bites, as well. "Big fish love the west winds," says George Unis of Outlaw Charters. "You may not catch a bunch of fish, but most'll be big. Outta the southwest is when you'll catch the most fish, though. It may get rolly out there, 4-footers and maybe 5, but that southwest wind is pretty tough to beat for numbers."

To keep up you'll need to learn

to speak St. Clair Masquinongy (the local musky language). You should sprinkle your speech with terms like "meat rod" and "wash rod," and colors such as Dark Frog, Around the World, and Nine Dollar Bass if you want to sound like a St. Clair musky master. Meat rods refer to those coming off the side of the boat. Wash rods are the ones set off the stern that have the baits running right in the prop wash. For the uninitiated, there is something truly awe-inspiring about a big musky coming up and sucking a big crankbait right off the back of the prop while the boat's clipping along at 5 mph. As for the colors, well, you'll need to stop at one of the local tackle stores and ask to see them for yourself. Few local captains run anything fluorescent,

Big Minnow Crankbaits like these Jakes from Musky Mania Tackle are just what the St. Clair Musky Doctor ordered. Make sure that your crankbaits run true at the excessive speeds that trigger St. Clair Muskies into munching.



however. Most of the popular colors are natural hues.

Catching a musky on St. Clair

is nothing special. Catching multiple fish per day, sometimes a dozen or more, is a matter of systematic progression. "You've got to be aware and tenacious to stay on the fish and keep them going," Saric says. "If you catch a fish, stay active and note what he bit. Snap a quick photo or two if you like, but get back on those fish without losing much time. By

FINDING THEIR DINNER TABLE

According to musky fishing guide Capt. Don Miller, the best muskellunge haunts in early June are in shallow water in front of rivers. Try the Clinton River, the Salt River behind the Selfridge airfield, the North Channel of the St. Clair River and Marsaks Creek at New Baltimore. This area of Anchor Bay averages 10 to 12 feet deep, and weeds are not yet emergent.



11 lbs., 2 oz. and was 55 1/2 inches long. He successfully released all but two of the fish he caught. Miller believes in running big lures for big fish: 8-inch jointed Believers and T-3 Terminator Lures in perch or frog finishes. Hot spoons are Eppinger Husky Juniors in frog finish or jack of diamonds, Ivanhoe Spoons, Swim Zags and Spike's Spoons also rate.

Using a modified version of the late Homer LeBlanc's power-trolling program, Miller uses dot-bike-ski boards, which increase his chances of contacting fish. A typical setup is a planer board 35 to 40 feet away from each side of the boat. Leads are 40 feet. Then he staggers two trolling rods to each side and adds a pair of propwash rods with one-pound lead balls. These he runs 5 or 6 feet behind the boat.

Great Lakes muskies become sexually active at about age 10 when they are 40 inches long. In order to give the larger females an opportunity to spawn, the Michigan fishing season in Lake St. Clair opens on June 5, and the possession limit is one fish that must be at least 42 inches long. If fishing in Canada, be sure to check a current copy of Ontario Sport Fishing Regulations for rules and regulations.

Excerpted from Fish Michigan — 100 Great Lakes Hotspots by Tom Huggler. Copies available from Outdoor Images, Box 250, Sunfield MI 48890 (800-735-3176) for \$21.95 postpaid.

Although normally a solitary fish, muskies begin to pack together as the water warms. On calm days, it is not uncommon to see them sunning at the surface. Weed growth eventually pushes the big predators to the southeast where Miller seeks them between the Belle and Rusten rivers. An area he calls the Belle River Hump is about a quarter-mile wide and extends into Lake St. Clair for seven miles. His technique is to troll along each side of the hump or crisscross it. Fishing remains good here until the end of October when he pulls lines.

Weather changes may force the muskies to go elsewhere. Although able to withstand water temperatures up to 80°, they don't like it that warm. Excessively hot weather sometimes heats shallow Lake St. Clair beyond a musky's tolerance, especially when the water is four days old and oxygen-depleted by the time it reaches the southeast part of the lake. When this occurs, Miller moves closer to the river mouths. Southeasterly winds will send him to the Thames River and Fromley Creek, where he fishes into the lee shore where the water is cleaner (muskies are sight feeders). Good fishing often occurs in this east-end area, which includes St. Lukes Bay, from mid-September until season's end.

In 1998, Miller's clients boated 313 muskies, 36 of which were at least 45 inches long and weighed 20 pounds. His best fish weighed

By the end of the third week of June, it's time to move down the lake to battfish in the vicinity of 15 and 16 Mile roads. Fish the Spillway area of the Clinton River and Metropolitan Beach. The first two weeks of July finds Miller and his clients targeting the Dumping Grounds, which attract schools of perch, walleye, bluegills, silver bass, sheepshead and carp. Pikes Creek, the Puce River and the Belle River all enter the lake from Ontario in this area and create a mix of warm water that is often muddy. Muskies come here to hunt, and their timing is perfect because when water temperatures hit 67 to 69°, they begin to feed more heavily. The area is productive through the first week of August.

The Dumping Grounds are about 2 miles wide by about 3 1/2 miles long. Dredgings from the Shipping Channel were dumped here years ago on the theory they would be flushed down through the Detroit River. But the waste material built up too quickly, and so engineers ceased operations. The result is a veritable musky hunting ground. Depths range from 6 to 18 feet, thanks to cliffs, crevices and sunken islands throughout. The key to avoiding snags is to troll lures high and hard.

PINPOINT THE FEED.

July: Lat 42°21.506, Lon 82°51.380
August: 42°30.301, 82°40.972
September: 42°20.357, 82°45.459
October: 42°20.502, 82°20.204

noticing which rod, which crankbait and what color the fish bit, you can start to change up some rods and replicate the fish catching pattern." Jones agrees, but also adds a simple warning: "The number one thing I see fisherman do wrong on St. Clair is fish too deep and too slow. You've got to cover water quickly and it's got to be in the top 6 feet of the water column."

The rule of thumb is that in conditions of limited sunlight penetration, whether overcast, windy or turbid, the fish will be more active and bite better closer to the boat. In situations of flat glass calm and high skies, the emphasis turns towards the planer board rods. "Keep the baits high, just get them a bit farther away from the boat on those tougher days," says Steve.

Because Lake St. Clair falls on the Ontario/Michigan boundary, different rules apply to different sections of the lake. The number one rule that affects everyone is

THIS GAME IS RIGGED, MAN!

These two diagrams show the different riggings that St. Clair veterans use when trolling up some toothy critters. Diagram A shows the three-way setup with a spoon on the trailing line and a deep diving crankbait on the dropper line. This type of rig is usually run on the meat rods off the side of the boat.

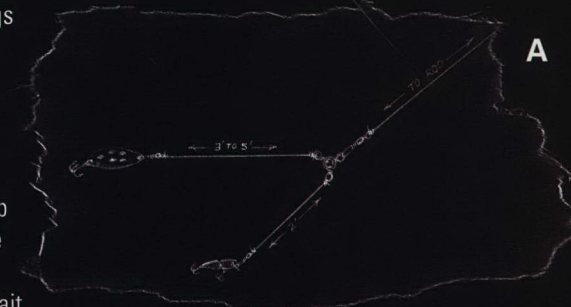
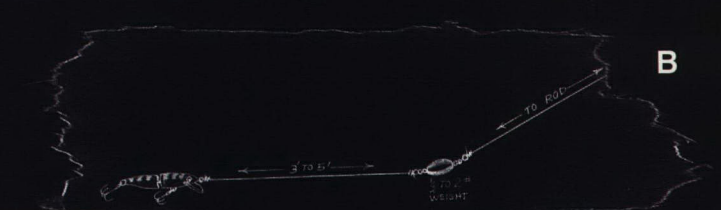


Diagram B shows the standard rig with a weight in front of the crankbait. The rule of thumb is that the farther back you run the crankbait, the less weight it will require. Diagram B is usually run on the wash rods. If you run the heavy weight, run the bait on a shorter line to maintain it within the magical top 6 feet of the water column. Some Captains, like George Unis of Outlaw Charters, elect to run longer wash rods with lighter weights, 40 feet and 4 oz. Musky Hunter Jim Saric cautions that either long or short can be right, "I let the fish tell me what they want. If something is dead, I'm changing it up. It can be either color or bait style or lead length, but I'm not going to just wash a dead bait unless it's just been one that's been scorching hot for days."



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ED SUTTON



FATHER OF THE POWER TROLL

couple of decades ago, he recounted a fish so huge his grandfather and others had to remove their shanty and enlarge a hole in the ice to bring the monstrous

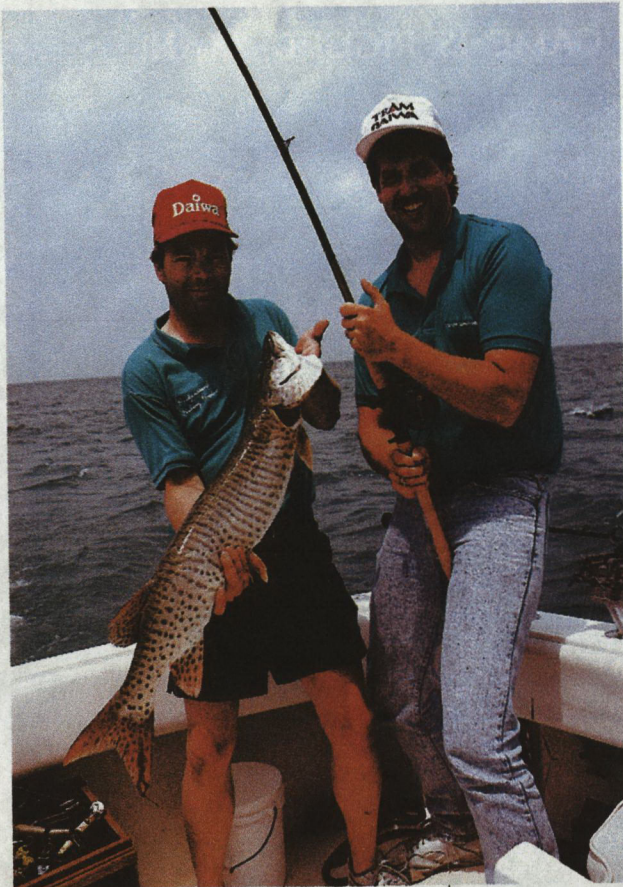
Zag and Swim-Whiz are used yet today, many years after his death.

Homer believed a calm lake and hot day was the right combination for catching a big musky. An advocate of solunar tables, this veteran musky man pinpointed minor and major daily fishing periods. Many of his best catches occurred between 1:30 and 2:30 in the afternoon. In fact, he often bet fellow anglers as to the precise quarter-hour that a musky would hit. The last time I fished with Homer LeBlanc, I lost a few bucks trying to outwit him.

Tom Huggler

I consider myself lucky to have known and fished with one of Lake St. Clair's legendary musky fishermen. The late Homer LeBlanc was born at Stony Point on the Canadian side of the lake in 1902 and began fishing for these toothy monsters at age 6 with his grandfather. When I fished with Homer a

Over a fishing career that spanned 60 years, LeBlanc personally caught hundreds of St. Clair muskies and tutored others, including me, who would catch thousands more. Homer's specialized power trolling tactics and patented lures such as the Swim-



Yet another musky falls prey to power trolling on Lake St. Clair. The trick is to take advantage of the voracious fish's frequent feeding frenzies.

the number of rods you can run. Because Ontario only allows one rod per fisherman, you'd better pick the right rods for success. Jones believes that when your number of rods is limited, you'll almost always be better off closer to the boat than farther away on the boards. Again, the one mitigating factor is sunlight and calm. Muskies aren't

the fish of 10,000 casts that people once believed. Top captains on St. Clair routinely boat 250 to 300 muskies per year all the way up to 40 pounds. The key is to cover water, keep the baits high, and wait out the fish. These fish have to eat because in the summer their metabolisms are racing like a Maserati. By keeping the baits high, you are essentially playing to the hungry fish, waiting them out and making them come to you. Eventually you'll run into a ravenous wolfpack of your own, eating first and asking questions later!

For information on booking a Lake St. Clair Musky Trip, call Steve Jones at 810-463-FISH, George Unis at Outlaw Charters at 519-944-4138, or Don Miller at 313-429-9551.

MINING FOR MUSKIES

Capt. Steve Jones' motto, "You can't go too fast, fish too high, or fish too close," is all about waiting for the aggressive feeding nature of the musky to start and then targeting those fish when they are insanely focused on feeding. His adage pertains to the "meat rods" run off the gunnel and the "wash rods" run off the transom. "There will be days when the planer rods perform better, but usually those days are bright and clear and dead flat calm," cautions Jones. On the Ontario side of the lake, where one rod per fisherman is the rule, he says to concentrate on the close rods.

"In most scenarios where trolling this style in mid-summer, you'll encounter floating debris and weeds," says Saric. "Because of this, I troll with the rod tips in the water for two reasons. First is to stop the weeds, as they'll gather on the rod tip and not slide down to the bait and foul it. The second reason is that it helps me to get depth out of the bait without adding distance to the line," he adds.

One secret that Saric shared with us is that once he hooks a fish, he doesn't immediately slow the boat. He gets to the rod, removes it from the rod holder and gets the rod position he wants to be able to fight the fish and then slows down. By doing this, he feels he loses fewer fish during the wild portion of the strike and first run. It also reduces the possibility of introducing slack into the line while picking up the rod or if the fish rushes.

