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Great Lakes State Muskie Hotspots

From Lake St. Clair in the southeast to Thousand Island Lake in the northwestern Upper Peninsula, Michigan has numerous waters where you can fish for muskies. These nine stand out above the rest.

by Matt Driftman

Muskies are not plentiful anywhere. It's not in their nature. *Esox masquinongy* are top-of-the-line predators. Being at the top of the

pyramid means muskies are few and far between in even the best muskie waters. Whereas a good walleye lake supports one or two legal fish per

acre, there might only be one muskie in 100 acres or more. That's one reason why they are so difficult to catch.

The other reason is that they are moody fish. A big muskie might lie dormant for days biding his time until weather, hunger or sheer orneriness suddenly flips a switch — and then no duck, good-sized walleye or 2-pound sucker is safe. Muskie fanatics learn to recognize the variables that dictate when these potential feeding binges are likely to occur and make the most of their time on the water then.

If variety is the spice of life, Michigan's cadre of muskie anglers must think they've died and gone to heaven. The Great Lakes State boasts just about every kind of muskie water you'd want, from scenic rivers and expansive Great Lakes waters to huge natural lakes and impoundments. The variety gives muskie aficionados plenty of options, and just about every one is capable of producing a trophy muskie that could top 50 inches. And you won't find much competition.

If you're a muskie zealot or your angling goal is just to catch a big muskie to put on the wall, here are some waters you'll want to drag an oversized plug in this year.

CHEBOYGAN RIVER CHAIN

"The Cheboygan River chain has a small but stable population of spotted (Great Lakes) muskies," said





PETE MANIA

Department of Natural Resources Grayling District fisheries biologist Steve Sendek. "There are some very large fish in those bodies of water, too." Top muskie waters in the chain include Mullet, Black and Burt lakes, plus the lower reaches of the Black and Cheboygan rivers.

"It's tough to say which is the best," admitted fisheries technician Harold Miller, who works out of the DNR Gaylord office and regularly samples the fish populations in these bodies of water. "Black and Burt are both good. There's not a lot of fishing pressure on either one for muskies, but there are some really big fish in Burt, up in the 50-inch range."

Miller mentioned two time periods that tend to produce the best muskie fishing on the Cheboygan chain. "The best time is in the fall, in late October

and November, and right after spawning in the spring," he said. He added that the muskies move into the shallows well after the pike spawn when the water temperature reaches 50 degrees.

One thing that these Cheboygan County lakes have in common, besides their muskie populations, are their large sizes. Black Lake is the smallest of the three at just over 10,000 acres, and Mullet and Burt each offer more than 16,000 acres of prime muskie habitat.

With so much water to cover, you'd think that speed-trolling Lake St. Clair-style would be the ultimate way to locate active muskies in these lakes, but few anglers try it. Muskie anglers do troll on the north end of Black Lake where the Black River exits the lake, and in the river itself.

But the truth is that Black Lake muskies can be found just about anywhere suitable forage in the form of perch, walleyes or rough fish can be found, so the best tactic is to cover water. For information on lodging in the area, contact the Black Lake Motel at (231) 625-2625.

Muskies are few and far between on Burt Lake, but the fish that are there are huge. Most are the result of natural reproduction, but the lake does occasionally receive a modest plant of muskies. Like Black Lake, Burt Lake muskies can be widely scattered, but good starting points are off Maple and Bullhead bays between Kings and Colonial points. Another likely muskie hangout is between Cedar and Dagwell points along Wauban Beach. You can soak giant suckers under a float, chuck magnum-sized crankbaits

or troll with jumbo stick baits. Stay with it long enough and you're bound to run into something that can pull your boat around. Concentrate on nasty, rainy days when boating pressure is less, and muskies are more likely to be on the prowl.

One known muskie hotspot on Mullet Lake is on the south end in the marshy area where the Indian and Pigeon rivers enter the lake. Anglers suspend good-sized suckers, chubs and shiners under baseball-sized floats and wait for post-spawn muskies to partake of the free lunch. During the rest of the year the reclusive leviathans can be found patrolling the 20- to 40-foot depths between Needle and Dodge points. Anglers can launch at an improved ramp at Aloha State Park on the lake's east side.

For more information on Mullet, Burt and Black lakes, contact the DNR's Gaylord District office at (517) 732-3541.

BUDD LAKE

"Budd Lake has been a steady producer of muskies for many years," said Bay City District fisheries biologist Jim Baker. This 175-acre Clare County lake outside Harrison has always been a good lake for muskies, according to Baker, because it gets an occasional plant that helps sustain the population. In addition, introduced fish find a good forage base consisting of lake chubs and suckers. "The lake chubs in Budd Lake are the perfect size for muskies and make excellent forage," claimed Baker.

Locating Budd Lake muskies isn't difficult because the lake isn't that big. Both the north and south ends produce an inordinate number of muskies for trolling anglers clipping right along with big Believers and Rapala Husky Jerks. The best times seem to be late summer through fall. Spearing is prohibited on Budd Lake, which should ensure that there will be muskies to catch years from now.

The city of Harrison maintains a paved ramp on the lake's southeast corner. For hot baits and lake maps, contact Jay's Sporting Goods in Clare at (517) 386-3475.

SANFORD LAKE

A "sleeper" for muskies that has come on in recent years is Midland

County's Sanford Lake.

"We've been planting several of the impoundments of the Tittabawassee River system for years with northern muskies. We've stocked Smallwood, Secord, Ross, Wixom and Sanford, but Sanford is the only one that has produced a viable fishery," said biologist Jim Baker.

The northern muskies designated for the Tittabawassee system come from the Wolf Lake hatchery and are planted every third year. Because muskies are difficult to raise, there aren't large numbers available for stocking. A typical plant might only consist of 500 to 2,000 fish, but the fall fingerlings average 9 to 11 inches and stand a good chance of survival. Some plants of spring fingerlings that average 4 inches come from rearing marshes seeded from brood stock from Thornapple and Hudson lakes. Their survival rate isn't as good as those raised until the fall, but enough usually make it to jump-start a fishery.

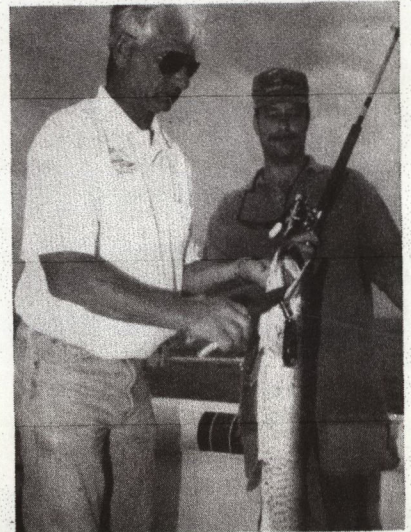
"There's a fair amount of interest in muskies in the Tittabawassee system," claimed Baker. "There's a small group of anglers who target them." Baker said that some of the biggest muskies are taken by ice-anglers who set tip-ups for northern pike. Recently an angler iced a 50-inch 38-pound muskie from Sanford.

Baker said the muskies feed heavily on the populations of white and red suckers, which are abundant throughout the system. Most anglers cast for muskies on Sanford while targeting structure like weedbeds, breaklines and stumps that are common in the impoundment. Muskies usually patrol the deep side of the structure.

Anglers can launch at a Midland County Park on the southwest corner of the lake. For more information on Tittabawassee River system muskies, contact the DNR's Southern Lake Huron Management Unit at (517) 684-9141.

LAKE ST. CLAIR

Lake St. Clair may have the greatest muskie fishery in the world right now. There aren't too many bodies of water that you can visit and count on catching a good-sized muskie. Not only is that a given on Lake St. Clair, but chances are also good that the fish



Speed-trolling works great on Lake St. Clair and should also work well on our state's other large lakes. Photo by Mike Gnatkowski.

will top 20 pounds, and 30-pounders are common. And the ironic part is that this fabulous fishery is at the backdoors of millions of anglers.

"The muskie fishing on Lake St. Clair is as good as anyone can remember right now," said Mt. Clemens Research Station fisheries biologist Mike Thomas. A combination of factors has led to Lake St. Clair's muskie boom. The most important is improved water quality, a result of more restrictive pollution controls.

The cleaner water has also been made clearer by zebra mussels, which has allowed light to penetrate to deeper depths and has caused aquatic plants to flourish. The explosion of vegetation has led to more aquatic insects that provide food for baitfish, perch, smallmouths and walleyes, which are all muskie forage. The clearer water also benefits sight-feeders, like muskies, when they're capturing prey. The cleaner water has also enhanced the growth of chara, a submerged vegetation that muskies use as spawning habitat.

Lake St. Clair anglers are doing their part to perpetuate Lake St. Clair's muskie reputation by practicing catch-and-release. Muskie clubs and avid muskie anglers are releasing muskies to fight another day, and the attitude is spreading. As anglers

MUSKIES... Continued

release more 20- and 30-pounders, the chances of catching really huge fish get better and better.

Because of Lake St. Clair's size, most anglers speed-troll to cover water. The accepted practice is to rip right along at 5 to 6 mph pulling speed-forgiving plugs like T-3 Terminators, Believers and Wileys in frog and perch colors. You use down-roads run in the prop wash and down-rigger-type rods off planer boards. The fishing usually starts in U.S. waters near Anchor Bay when the season opens in June, and the muskies follow a counterclockwise migration that creates a concentration of fish off the Puce and Belle rivers in Canadian waters during late summer. The migration reverses itself during the fall.

For more information on Lake St. Clair muskies, contact the DNR Lake Erie Management Unit at (734) 953-0241. A good source for Lake St. Clair muskie lures and gear is Lakeside Sporting Goods at (810) 777-7003.

ELK RIVER CHAIN

Year in and year out, the Elk River watershed produces some of the biggest muskies in our state.

"The entire chain is fabulous for big fish," exclaimed muskie guide Dave Rose. "Fifty-inch fish are fairly common. I think one reason they get so big is because they have a high-protein diet of herring and whitefish to grow big on."

Rose said that muskies can be found throughout the chain, but certain lakes require different tactics.

"Torch, Elk and Bellaire are deep-water fisheries," said Rose. "The best muskie fishing is during the summer when muskies suspend near schools of herring and whitefish." Rose advises anglers to use their electronics to locate schools of baitfish and then troll around them using downriggers and magnum-sized spoons and body baits. Without riggers you can use deep-diving crankbaits like Mann's Plus 30 and Plus 40.

On Skegemog, Clam and Intermediate lakes, more traditional shallow-water tactics excel on muskellunge.

"On the shallower lakes, casting in-line spinners, big spinnerbaits and jerkbaits works well," offered Rose.

Floating body baits can be trolled or fished over the weeds, too. The clearer the water, the less bright the lure has to be, said Rose. In most instances, silhouette is more important than color.

Prime time on the Elk River Chain is from mid-May through June, just after the muskies have spawned and are hungry, and before weed growth becomes too thick. Water temperatures then are usually in the 50s and 60s. Another peak occurs during the fall when many anglers trade fishing rods for guns and bows.

To book a guided trip for muskies, contact Dave Rose at (231) 276-9874.

ST. MARYS RIVER

"The St. Marys System, including Munuscong Lake, Raber Bay and Lake George, has scattered muskies and some very large fish in the 30-pound-plus range," said biologist Steve Sendek. Most years the Master Angler Awards features several fish from the St. Marys, most of which are taken by anglers fishing for something other than muskies.

"The muskies move around quite a bit in the St. Marys," claimed local muskie expert Bert Rimer. "Some are residents, but others are very migratory." Rimer believes muskie movements in the St. Marys are closely tied to migrations of schooling herring and whitefish. Usually, the herring show up from early July through August, but Rimer said that some of his biggest fish have come early in the season and then again in late September, October and November.

"Some of the bigger fish seem to stay in very specific areas," said Rimer. Rimer's biggest Munuscong muskie was a 48 1/2-inch 34 1/2-pound giant. Graduate student Pat Creary caught a St. Marys muskie that stretched 54 inches and weighed 44 pounds in the fall of 2000. "I've seen muskies that would come close to the world record in the St. Marys," declared Rimer.

Because the St. Marys is such a huge, expansive area and offers thousands of acres of prime muskie habitat, Rimer's best advice is to cover water. He normally trolls with rods off the side and back of the boat. Planer boards and other devices pick up too many weeds, according to

Rimer. His favorite bait is a Muskie Special, a Believer-like plug that trolls true at high speed. Rimer also mixes in Spike's Spoons in herring, whitefish and other natural colors that imitate muskie forage.

"Munuscong is a big area," offered Rimer, and his best advice is to keep moving. "If someone wants to try and catch a muskie casting, I usually send them to the north end of Munuscong." But Munuscong muskies are few and far between, and a better plan is to cover water, enjoy the spectacular scenery and hold on tight.

For information on lodging and St. Marys muskies, contact Bert Rimer at Little Munuscong River Resort at (906) 647-2024.

THOUSAND ISLAND LAKE

"Probably one of the better muskie waters in our neck of the woods is Thousand Island Lake," said Baraga fisheries biologist Vern Nurenberg. "Thousand Island Lake is part of the Cisco Lake Chain that includes 11 different lakes." As the name implies, Gogebic County's 1,078-acre Thousand Island and other lakes in the chain are a myriad of islands, points and humps that offer perfect muskie habitat.

Several of the lakes in the chain share their boundaries with Wisconsin, but Michigan fishing regulations apply on Thousand Island Lake. "A lot of the guys from Wisconsin don't like our 42-inch muskie size limit, but the lake still gets a lot of fishing pressure from out of state," said Nurenberg.

Nurenberg said that even though it's legal to troll on Thousand Island (not so in Wisconsin), most anglers cast for muskies. "Most of the guys I know throw huge body baits," said Nurenberg. Big lures tempt fish like the current 45-pound record northern muskie that was taken from the lake. A good tactic is to chuck big Suicks, perch-colored Don Lapp plugs and bucktail spinners along dropoffs and weedlines adjacent to the islands. In the summer, look for muskies to shadow schools of ciscoes near bottom in 40 to 50 feet of water.

Anglers can gain access to Thousand Island Lake via an improved launch site on the southeast shore off County Road 525. □

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Mayflies determine early-season muskie patterns

By Mike Norris



Mike Norris
Outdoors

The natives of St. Clair Shores, Mich., call it the "Nautical Mile." It is a mile long stretch of marinas along Jefferson Avenue between 9 and 10 Mile Road with six marinas.

Locals say the Nautical Mile holds the largest concentration of boats in one area. The six marinas moor over 10,000 boats from 16-foot runabouts to 42-foot liners. It is also home to Lake St. Clair, a 256,000-acre fish bowl north of Detroit, which may very well boast a million muskies or more.

"Despite the numbers of muskies present here, anglers need to understand the predator-prey relationship to successfully catch them," says Don Miller, a charter boat captain specializing in muskies. Miller has chased St. Clair's muskies for over 30 years.

"We are showing a couple muskies up high," says Miller, as he studies his Eagle Z-9500 liquid crystal graph.

And that is the key to early-season muskie patterns on Lake St. Clair.

With a mayfly hatch in full bloom, most of Lake St. Clair's prey is near the surface feeding off surfacing mayflies recently hatched from St. Clair's soft bottom.

"It is a pretty simple proposition," says Miller. "The perch and walleyes chow down on the mayflies and the muskies chow down on the perch and walleye."

Miller runs a 33-foot Baha Cruiser equipped to handle up to six anglers per outing. In addition to his liquid crystal graph, his boat is equipped with the latest in global positioning navigation equipment, all to help him return to areas he suspects muskies will be on the prowl.

Aurora attorney Kim Presbrey and I joined Miller for a day of muskie fishing on a hot, steamy June afternoon last week. Billowing white clouds rose clouds rose sharply over St. Clair Shores, but blue skies prevailed out on the water. The roofed cabin of Miller's Baha provided the shade we needed to avert the blistering sun.

Miller's arsenal of muskie lures includes Believer's, Wiley, Stalkers, and Terminator lures. He carries up to 500 different lures on board. Each lure hangs from a homemade lure rack Miller crafted to fit along the bulkheads of his boat.

A few of his hanging lures look like they just came out of the package. Most though, look battle scarred from numerous encounters with St. Clair's muskies.

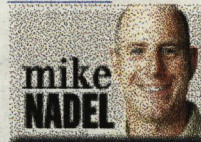
"Let's try a crackled belly perch on the down rod," says Miller. Minutes later he slides the lure into the water, let's out 30-feet of line, and locks his rod into a Down Easter rod holder. "I like to run a couple lures close to the prop wash,"

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Miller added. "Muskie are curious by nature and always come up to check out the commotion."

Miller prefers running his lures shallow, reasoning it would be no problem for a muskie to rise 10-feet to chow down on his offerings, which he trolls along at a brisk 5 miles per hour. With Lake St Clair boasting a maximum depth of 19-feet, and most of Miller's trolling confined to water 10-16 feet deep, Miller often runs his lures no more than 3-feet below the surface. "The biggest mistake an angler can make is to run their lures below feeding muskies," says Miller. "Muskies do not see lures run deep."

A day earlier, Presbrey and I trolled St. Clair's muskies out of my Ranger 620. I watched as muskies, walleyes and smallmouth bass scurried out of harms way as I stood on my boat deck. It was a testament to Miller's theory on shallow muskies.

Presbrey and I caught our share of muskies that day with the largest going 42-inches. Later that evening we caught up with Miller, who was putting on a spectacular display of muskie prowess, catching four muskies up to 45-inches within an hour.

"The season's been late this year, and the muskie fishing is just starting to heat up," says Miller, who records up to 350 muskie catches each season. "These fish ought to break lose big time with the hot weather coming."

I laughed at Miller's comments. From this writer's viewpoint, it looks as if Miller's muskie season has heated up already.

For information on Don Miller's Motor City Muskie Charters, contact him at 734-429-9551, or e-mail him at [\[WEB SITE\]](#) Norris can be reached at wallimike@aol.com

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