

HOT BITE ON
OHIO'S CLEARFORK

HUNT DOWN EARLY SEASON MUSKIES

Musky Hunter[®]

www.muskyhunter.com

APRIL/MAY 2002



North America's Musky Authority

■ AN UP-CLOSE LOOK AT THE GLIDER REVOLUTION

U.S.A. \$3.99
Canada \$5.50

■ BOAT CONTROL FOR BIG WATER

■ PRINCIPLES OF TROLLING
AND MUSKY LOCATION



NORTH AMERICA'S
MUSKY AUTHORITY

Musky Hunter[®]

APRIL/MAY 2002

FEATURES

- 16 THE LEGEND OF OLD SCAR FACE**
Joe Bucher recalls his very first 50-inch musky, and the lessons it taught him about early season fish.
By Joe Bucher
- 22 THE GLIDER REVOLUTION**
It's not just muskies that are getting caught up by the glider jerkbait cult. *By Chip Porter*
- 30 BOAT CONTROL ON BIG WATER**
The "Fish Bowl Theory" applies to muskies. Here's how to get there, and get back. *By Jim Murphy*
- 38 THE CREATURE OF THE SOUTHERN RESERVOIR**
Southern muskies are suckers for a well-placed, pulsating plastic lure. *By Crash Mullins*
- 42 SIGHT FISHING**
The ultimate secret for early season muskies is nothing more than a jig fished in the shallows.
By Tom Dietz
- 46 PRINCIPLES OF TROLLING & MUSKY LOCATION**
Understanding the habits of muskies and the movements of their forage will yield consistent success.
By Larry Jones and Don Miller
- 54 TARHEEL MUSKIES**
Great 'lunging opportunities exist in North Carolina waters. *By Tim Mead*
- 60 CLEARFORK!**
This Ohio gem is simply loaded with muskies.
By Geoff Hetrick
- 66 HOW BIG WAS THAT MUSKY?**
An excerpt from the new book, *The Greatest Musky Stories Every Told.* *By Roger Sabota*

DEPARTMENTS

- 5 EDITOR'S LINE**
So ... when does your season begin?
- 6 MUSKY FOLLOWS**
Musky hatrick during a prime moon time.
- 10 MUSKY MATTERS**
Pennsylvania's largest musky in over 50 years; Indiana muskies keep getting bigger.
- 14 JOE BUCHER'S MOON SECRETS**
- 68 MUSKY PRO PANEL**
Favorite lures for early season and why.
- 69 MUSKY GEAR**
The latest in new musky fishing products.
- 70 READERS' PHOTOS**
- 73 MUSKY CLASSIFIED**
- 74 PARTING LINE**
Life after life: The official view of C.C. Bender.



"Kentucky Silver Morning," by wildlife artist Rodd Umlauf, 7881 Rainbow Road, Lake Tomahawk, WI 54539, telephone (715) 277-4474. Contact the artist for print availability.

PRINCIPLES OF TROLLING & MUSKY LOCATION

Musky Hunter SPRING BLITZ



Understanding the habits of muskies as well as the movements of their forage are key elements to consistent trolling success

By CAPTAINS LARRY JONES AND DON MILLER

For years, the trolling brethren of the musky fishing community have been chastised by some diehard casters as being lazy and lacking in knowledge. This assumption couldn't be further from the truth. While trolling can be as simple as throwing a lure behind the boat and putting the motor in gear, to be truly effective and consistently successful there are dozens of things that need to be considered.

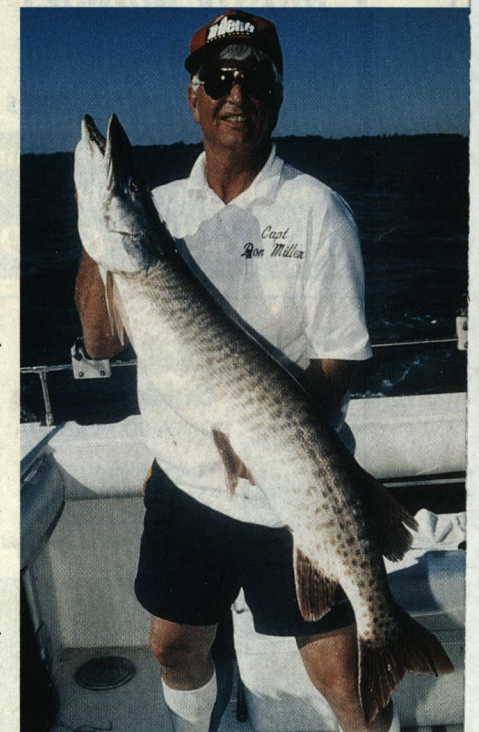
In this article we will discuss a wide range of conditions and challenges presented to the trolling musky angler, and tactics to make the time spent on the water more productive.

Understanding the habits of muskies as well as the movements of their forage is a key element to consistent trolling success. This is not simply a game of covering as much open water as possible, though increased water coverage is certainly one of the more appealing benefits of trolling.

Knowing where to troll at a given time and under given conditions will increase your catch rates significantly. Eliminating "dead" water is the name of the game, so let's get started.

WIND

On big water it's important to understand near-shore and far-shore weather forecasts. For example, fishing the south shore of



Captain Don Miller is one of St. Clair's best known charter captains.

At left, another expert troller, Musky Hunter Editor Jim Saric, works a breakline.

STEVE HEITING

Lake St. Clair with winds out of the south may produce significant catches of muskies for trollers one day. But, if the wind shifts overnight to the north at 30 knots and the marine forecast is calling for two- to four-foot seas, the fours are going to be on the south shore and the twos will be on the north. Four-foot waves pounding a shoreline can significantly affect water clarity, as well as creating maximum wind flush — not to mention four-footers don't exactly make it easy to control your boat. This is a time for the smart troller to check out the north shore. Water clarity will be better and the water more calm, making it much easier to present a bait in an efficient manner. Simple boat control issues make the north shore a good trolling choice.

Most big musky waters, such as Lake of the Woods, Lake St. Clair, the Niagara River, Leech Lake, etc., also have a current-induced temperature change, either from a river or wind-driven current. This causes a displacement of water that will directly affect the movement of fish. To understand these phenomena, you first need to understand how muskies in open water relate to schools of baitfish and their movements. A change in wind direction will create a change in current direction, as well as water temperature. Schools of baitfish will travel great distances in relation to these changes and the muskies follow.

In summer, several cool nights coupled with consistent wind direction will stack cooling surface water at one end of the lake. Cooler waters draw baitfish in heavy concentrations, and it doesn't take long for the muskies to find them and take advantage of this short-term situation. Once the wind direction changes and the cooler water blows out, the concentrations of baitfish and muskies will follow.

Strong winds and lots of wave action will actually roll surface water under and create areas of deeper, cool water. Muskies and baitfish hold in these deeper temperature breaks, using them much the same way they would some sort of structure; thus making them

high percentage trolling areas. As a rule of thumb, a consistent, moderate wind will keep the cooler water on the surface and the muskies and baitfish will be found very high in the water column; but if high winds are driving cooler water deep, the fish will be found much deeper as well. Paying close attention to weather patterns and wind direction prior to your day on the water can help eliminate a lot of potentially unproductive water before you ever launch your boat.

In summer, when thermoclines affect fish depth in the water column, muskies generally have different comfort levels than the fish on which they feed. This is why we quite often see big fish suspended just below a school of baitfish on our sonar units. Feeding muskies will move up and out of their comfort zone in order to feed but drop back to these levels to digest food or follow the schools of bait. Muskies hanging a good distance below a school of bait are generally neutral in attitude, but muskies close to, or at the same level as a school of baitfish, tend to be much more active.

In cold water situations (below 45 degrees), just the opposite can happen. Baitfish will actually be looking for warmer water under these conditions. A warming trend will increase surface temperatures, and wind will stack warmer surface water against the wind-blown shoreline. Just as cooler water draws baitfish and muskies in the summer, warmer water draws them in spring and late fall. The biggest fish in the system will consistently take advantage of these conditions, though feeding windows are generally small. This is a great opportunity for a smart troller to capitalize on a true trophy.

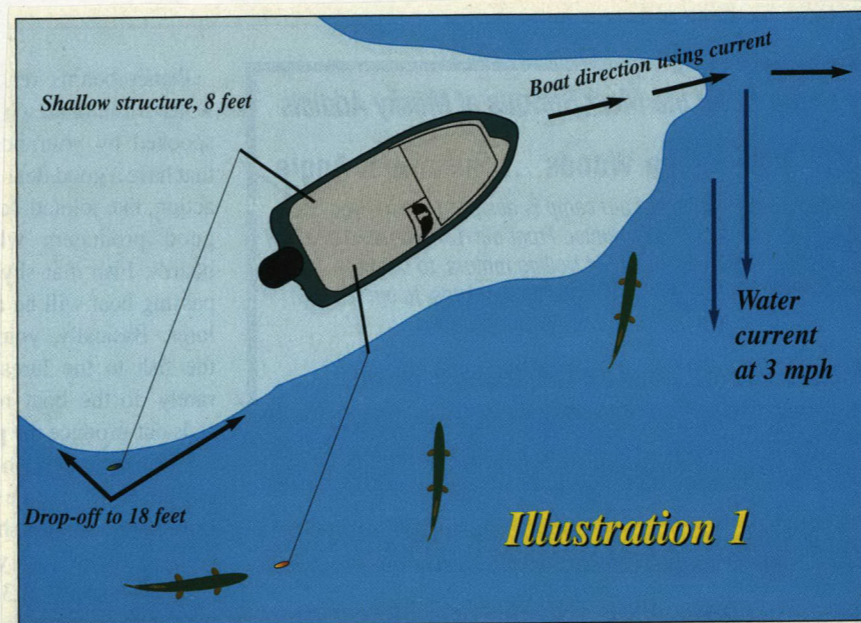
Something to keep in mind is that small areas of warmer water may be man-made. Warm water discharges from factories and power plants can hold muskies in cold water situations. Concrete bridge abutments, riprap shorelines, and beaches where the sand extends well into the lake will warm the surrounding water a degree or two on bright, sunny days. These areas are

always worth investigating.

SPEED AND WATER CLARITY

Understanding that muskies have highly developed lateral lines to detect vibration — but are mostly sight feeders — is key to understanding depth relationships when the fish are feeding. Fish in clear water generally hold and feed much deeper than fish in stained or murky water. That's not to say muskies in clear water won't feed shallow. They do. But they also have the option of finding forage in deeper water due to increased light penetration. Muskies in darker waters don't have that luxury and tend to feed higher in the water column. It's just plain easier for them to find their prey.

This also holds true for bright, sunny days versus dark and cloudy ones, or windy days versus dead, flat calm water. The darker the day or the more wind-induced wave action you have, the less light penetrates the water and



You can use structure to "hide" your boat from muskies in clear water current situations. Drive the boat over structure while allowing current to place your crankbaits to muskies holding down-current from the structure.

muskies have to feed higher. It's in these low-light penetration situations that propwash rods really clean up. Conversely, the more light penetration you have, the better options like lures trolled on planer boards with long (30- to 40-foot) leads will produce.

Water clarity and color also can

from a considerable distance.

If the water is clear, muskies get a much better look at the bait we're offering; and let's face it, we are trying to get them to eat something made of wood, plastic and steel, rather than the flesh and scales they're used to — we don't want them to get that good a look. Downsizing your lures a bit can help; but once again, speed becomes the trigger. Not only will speed induce a fair amount of reactionary strikes from neutral fish, but a feeding musky has to be decisive about whether to strike because the potential meal will quickly be out of range.

affect the speed of your presentation. Slower speeds in darker water allow a musky more time to home in on your offering before it moves out of range. Conversely, in clear water situations, muskies visually track lures as they move by, and speed can trigger a strike from an active musky

Planer boards really shine in clear water situations where fish may be spooked by your boat. Smaller lures that have a good deal of wander to their action, like jointed Terminator T3s, are good producers when run behind boards. Fish that shy away from your passing boat will be attracted by these lures. Basically, your boat is driving the fish to the lures. In clear water, rarely do the boat rods or propwash rods out-produce the planer board rods.

Clear water and heavy current can present some unique challenges when trolling. Boat-shy fish will move deeper on structure as your boat passes over, but currents of 3 mph or more can work to your advantage. It then becomes possible to "hide" your boat on the up-current side of structure and, while moving at an angle cross-current, letting the flowing water do the work of making the lure run. With some practice, it then becomes possible to present a lure to a musky holding tight on the down-current side of a bar or point without the boat ever revealing itself to the fish (*See Illustration 1, Page 49*). This little known, yet highly effective tactic is used by many top guides on rivers throughout the musky's range.

BAITFISH

Open water muskies tend to be caught more between the times of 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. than any other. This is due to the visibility of zooplankton in the water and the movements of baitfish that feed on these organisms. During the brightest part of the day, zooplankton are just plain easier to see for the baitfish and they feed accordingly. This feeding activity triggers musky movements, and they take advantage of these active schools of baitfish.

Trolling lures through large schools of baitfish is rarely as productive as working the edges of the school or concentrating on isolated pockets of bait relating to deep structure. Schooling is a survival instinct utilized by many fish. The last thing you want as a troller is to have your lure get lost in the

school. Feeding muskies work the outside edges of these big schools, picking off individuals that stray from the main body of the school — of course, that's where your bait should be to be the most productive. Trolling beneath these baitfish schools can also be productive. Many big fish have been caught on leadcore line by the inside rod on a turn. As the lure slows from the turn, the leadcore will cause the lure to drop out of the bait school and will often trigger a strike from a feeding musky.

It's also important to understand what types of fish muskies feed on. Schools of shad, ciscoes, and perch will attract muskies and hold their attention all year. Large schools of emerald shiners, on the other hand, will rarely attract muskies unless a secondary predator is feeding on them. In other words, muskies don't often feed on emerald shiners, but they'll gladly chomp on the perch, crappies and walleyes that do. This is where understanding how to operate your depthfinder is most important. If you don't know how to operate your sonar unit in the "manual" mode, get out the instructions and learn. Even most of the low-end models are capable of presenting much more information than most anglers realize. Many times emerald shiners will school so tightly that they can block out the signal from anything below them. Knowing how and when to adjust the gain and sensitivity will enable you to detect the presence of other fish (musky food) as they relate to and feed on the school.

You can determine the activity of nearby predators by the structure of a school of baitfish. As predators become active, tightly schooled baitfish begin to diverge. This is caused by frantic escape maneuvers to avoid being eaten. This is easy to detect on your sonar if it is adjusted properly. A large school of baitfish may break up into several smaller schools as muskies single out less-fortunate individuals.

BAROMETERS

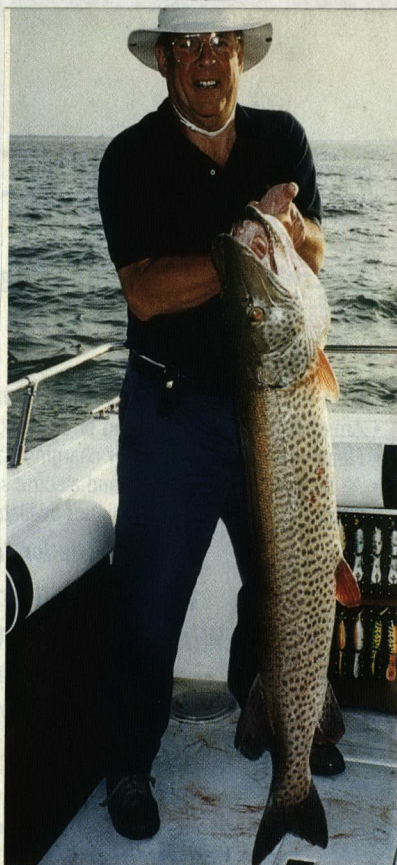
There is little doubt that barometric

MUSKY HUNTER

pressure affects feeding activity. The first drop in pressure following an extended high-pressure period triggers a sharp increase in feeding activity. It's also interesting to note that a study done on Chautauqua Lake in New York found when the barometer went above 30.25, many of the muskies in that system moved to the very deepest water adjacent to their feeding areas and stayed there until pressure stabilized or began to fall. Your trolling presentation needs to be adjusted accordingly. A slower presentation with long lines and deep running lures may be needed to contact fish.

LINE AND LEADERS

When trolling at speeds of 4 mph or more, it's important to realize that your equipment has to be able to handle the punishment. Monofilament lines such as Berkley's 40-pound test Trilene Big Game will absorb some of the shock when a big fish slams into a fast moving bait on a short line. At slower



You don't catch fish like this without knowing a thing or two about muskies. Another giant musky in Don Miller's boat, and another happy client.

speeds, switching to 30-pound Excalibur will eliminate some of the stretch and allow for more solid hook-ups.

Leaders made with 100-pound test Trilene Big Game will work for most trolling applications. In extremely clear water, however, 60- to 80-pound test fluorocarbon works best.

Crosslock snaps testing 175 pounds and ball bearing swivels with welded rings will handle just about anything. Choose snaps with rounded ends rather than those that come to more of a point. This small detail will actually allow a bait to have a more erratic action as it works the entire bend of the snap. This isn't the time or place to cut corners and buy cheap stuff. Make sure your hardware is top quality.

Efficient trolling for muskies requires much more than just going for a boat ride with a lure in the water. As conditions change, so do the fish. Your trolling presentation needs to change as well. Understanding how wind, water temperature, and baitfish movement affect muskies will eventually make your time on the water more productive. Paying close attention to detail allows you to take advantage of, and adapt to, changes in conditions that leave a lot of anglers scratching their heads at the end of the day.

Captain Larry Jones operates Mostly Muskies Charters in Buffalo, New York, and can be reached at (716) 833-6739. Captain Don Miller operates Motor City Muskies Charters on Lake St. Clair and can be reached at (734) 429-9551, via e-mail at dsmiller@provide.net, or his website at www.millers-sportfishing.com.

