

By Randy Arndt

Pike and muskie fishing can vary greatly throughout the state following the season opener. Like so many other species of fish in spring, these two predators become increasingly active in southern regions before they do to the north. That's why we have different season openers on Upper and Lower Peninsula lakes, and other dates still for Great Lakes waters.

Water temperature plays a key role in spawning and consequently dictates when and where you'll find actively feeding pike and muskies in a given body of water. Although the two fish have similarities, they also have notable differences. Here's what you need to know to catch big fish in spring.

**Post-spawn muskies and pike**

It's important to know the spawning characteristics of pike and muskies in order to understand how to catch them around the opener. Often, their less-aggressive state in spring has to do with the fact that they're in a resting mode after the spawn, and with the water still cold their metabolism and digestive rates are slow — they simply don't need to eat as often. In a nutshell, both species feed heavily before reproduction and very little during and immediately after. They may take a week or two before they actively begin to feed following the rigors of the spawn, but that's where the similarities begin to fade.

Pike spawn in colder temperatures than their bigger cousins, generally in early to mid-April when the water warms to about 40 to 45 degrees. Muskies, on the other hand, typically spawn in 50- to 60-degree water, which is often two or three weeks later on some lakes, especially in the U.P. What you often end up with on opening day inland waters are pike that have already recuperated from the rigors of spawning, and muskies that may still be in the spawn or post-spawn mode.

When fishing either species during the opener, you'll want to use baits that have good action at slow speeds. Jointed body baits work well for this as do slow, wobbling lures.

Capt. Don Miller of Motor City Muskies charter service, ([www.millers-sportfishing.com](http://www.millers-sportfishing.com)) also favors slow-running lures in spring.

"I like the smaller baits in early season, either jointed or straight," he said. "They seem to be the most effective."

Miller, who has been fishing for muskies for decades, but charts exclusively on Lake St. Clair, suggests also trying spinners or spoons if you're not equipped for trolling.

Miller says muskies usually are through spawning in St. Clair by end of April or first of May, but that they remain fairly tight-lipped until the water gets to around 60 degrees. Although the season doesn't open on Lake St. Clair until the first Saturday in June, it's food for thought when fishing smaller inland lakes in the U.P.

"When the water temperature gets around 62 to 63 degrees on the surface, they'll start loosening up," Miller said, adding that their peak metabolism kicks in when the water reaches 67 to 69 degrees.

# STRATEGIES FOR BIG muskies & northerns

"This is a good time to tie into a big muskie," Miller said. "They're pretty loose and pretty dumb because they've been so tight up until that time."

Miller, like most avid muskie anglers, said he shies away from using live bait on known muskie lakes.

"Unless you hook it in the

mouth, the odds for survival of that fish are none — you'll kill it," he says. "Then, the sad part about it is, you have to put it back because it's a short fish."

Photo by Tim Spielman

Today's methods that I use out on the lake are all catch-and-release anyway."

In the U.P. try Lake Michigamme, Brevoort Lake and North Manistique Lake for muskies and pike. The Tahquamenon River is a good muskie bet, and of course it's hard to ignore the monster pike and muskies which are caught from Munuscong Bay and the St. Marys River system each year.

Little Bay de Noc is best known for walleyes, but it consistently produces good catches of northern pike too. Indian Lake in Schoolcraft County is a good pike spot, as is Portage Lake in Houghton County. Milakokia and Millecoquins lakes in Mackinac County also are good bets.

Keep an eye on water temperatures, fish your baits slowly and hang on. There's nothing like the might of a large muskie or pike at the end of your line.

Remember that the daily pike possession limit is two fish, down from five, on most lakes in the state. Check the 2002 Michigan Fishing Guide for specific regulations on different lakes.

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