

Countdown Techniques For Fall Fatties

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Musky Hunter

NORTH AMERICAN MUSKY AUTHORITY

1-2
Punch For Fall

4 Key Fall Transition Zones

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"Incoming" by artist Steve Miljat, 3705 South Third Street, Milwaukee, WI 53207, telephone (414) 769-9496, www.miljat.com. Contact the artist for print availability.

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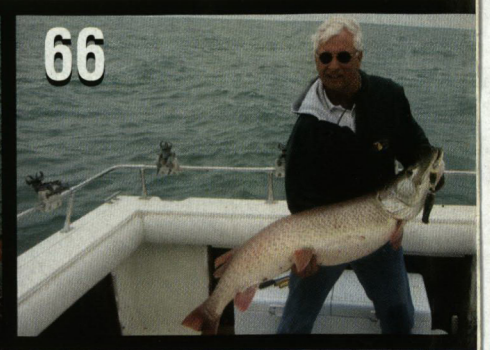
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Three keys to targeting the monsters of fall

By Don Miller

To the novice from abroad, Lake Saint Clair is known to many as "only a summertime fishery," with fast numbers and little in size. To those of us who work there, we beg to differ about the lake not having size potential. Having boated over 4,500 muskies in my lifetime over a 25-year professional career on the lake, and over 300 50-inch or bigger fish, I'm going to tell you that the fishing doesn't quit at the end of August as most would like to believe. Many fall opportunities still exist.

No one will ever tell me that there is no water that can produce more 50-inch fish in one day, than any other four or five bodies of water will produce in a year! It is true there are a lot of peanuts in the lake. But that should tell you something, like the lake is healthy and reproduction is taking place. Where are the big ones, you ask? You should be thinking about trying just a little later when late summer and early fall starts, all the way to the end of November. One other thing you need to remember is that the little muskies aren't stupid! When you catch a little one, it should tell you that the big girls are in the mood also.

The three keys to being successful on St. Clair include fishing adjacent to spawning areas, slowing your trolling speed, and using big baits.

We all know that it's fun to hear a line squeal and get a draw from a hen house, but having that constant sure thing and going hunting is what separates a lot of us from the fair weather fisherman.

One has to understand that peak metabolism for muskies takes place at a water temperature of 67 to 69 degrees, and that also is when the fair weather power trolling speed is 5 to 7 miles per hour. When the water cools into the 50s

and below and the muskies' metabolism slows down, adjust your trolling speed by slowing down to 2.5 to 3 miles per hour (a summertime walleye speed), with crankbaits. The formula is simple, fast in the summer and slow in the fall. About one-half the summer speed is a good guide.

There is no question the lake is huge, but the fish begin to stage near their spawning areas in late fall. Some of those early post-spawning areas where you caught them in the spring are the spots you would want to try in the fall. And, nope, I'm not going to give you the GPS numbers, but you have to know the fish are there and haven't gone home! Some of the key areas to fish in the fall include New Baltimore in Anchor Bay, the Spillway area around mile marker 14 and 15, Grosse Point, and the Delphine Channel. Those of you fishing Canadian waters you have to check the Thames River area. Key depths in all of these areas are generally 8 to 10 feet. However, there are often times you'll catch them in 12 feet or shallower into 6 feet. Much depends on the weather conditions and water temperatures.

It is true that smaller baits in clean water will work best. Normal thinking would suggest pulling a bigger bait measuring eight to 13 inches just as quick as in summertime to trigger a reactionary strike by the fish. However, size isn't the only consideration. A musky relies on sight and lateral line perception to feed, and in fall the water isn't as clear as in summer. Big north winds can make the water rough and darken the water color considerably. Therefore, the lateral line comes into play more so than sight. Add slower metabolism to less-clear water and you have a recipe that requires slower trolling with large baits. Let the fish "feel the bait," I say. I rely heavily on 10- to 13-inch Believers, monster Nils in the 10-inch size, along with Legends and Wileys, usually up to 10 to 13 inches, trolled at half the speed of summer, so usually 2.5 to 3 miles per hour.

Rigging doesn't change from summer to fall. The standard is double-ski planer boards attached to a mast with weed-

The author smiles over a cool weather beauty that fell to a jointed Believer.

Fall Trolling Lake St. Clair

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whacker line, with Offshore downrigger-type releases for your boards, and the positioning of your boat rods is status quo. Rods with the heaviest weights ahead of the crankbait are placed in the boat's propwash, and those with lighter weights are always farther back. Yes, the fish still hit close to the boat in fall ... this is still Lake St. Clair!

A 5- to 10-foot long fiberglass or graphite rod should be more than sufficient. I rig my rods with Trilene Big Game line in 40- or 50-pound test for the main and a 100-pound test leader of six to eight feet, tipped with a Sampo snap testing 150- to 170-pound test. You might ask why such heavy line and why such heavy pound test, and my standard reply will be that when musky fishing, getting the fish's attention is 90 percent of the battle. Do you really think the fish was looking at my line or at my bait when he bit? It really wouldn't matter if I was to pull that bait around with a piece of telephone cord.

As usual, all the necessary catch-and-release equipment must be on board the vessel and within reach when the fish is netted. Necessary tools are a Kevlar glove, a knife, a couple of pairs of pliers, and one small pair of boltcutters. Of course, be sure to dress warm and be aware of the weather by monitoring the marine forecast. With fewer anglers on the water and more fronts moving through during fall, extra caution is an absolute must.

Catching big muskies from Lake St. Clair in the fall isn't that hard. Fish with the same rigs in the same places, but slow down and upsize your lures, and it won't take long to prove that Lake St. Clair contains plenty of giant muskies, too.

Captain Don Miller is owner and operator of Motor City Muskies located on Lake Saint Clair. He can be reached at www.millers-sportfishing.com.

