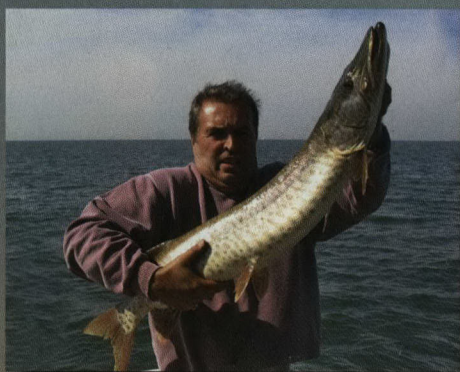


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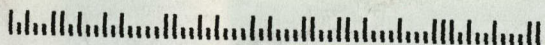
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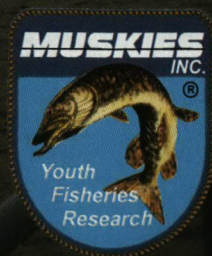
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Lake St. Clair Muskie Fever: Muskie Count on Us

by Don Miller

I don't suppose there are too many of us in the muskie fishing community that didn't hear about the "muskie die-off" which occurred in the Lake St. Clair area. Those of us who have been around for a while, covering roughly three decades of experience on the lake, have encountered a few things causing questions regarding the stability of the fishery. Some of the Great Lakes plagues have been the mercury scare, zebra mussels, gobie infestation, and now a "muskie die-off!" All of these things have caused doubts, instilled fears, and, for the most part, discouraged many muskie anglers from even wanting to venture out with any pro with a history of catching the fish. Nor would any novice go out alone to try his luck.

There is no question the muskie fishery flourished to new heights over the last five years to where you didn't need to be a rocket scientist to catch a muskie on Lake St. Clair. This was primarily the result of strong catch-and-release ethics over a prolonged period of time.

What is disturbing about the "muskie die-off," more than the actual fatalities themselves, is the ignorance and irresponsibility of the media in the way this was reported. Many articles appeared last spring about this topic. I saw pictures of dead muskies being held up for a Kodak moment in several newspapers and magazines, painting a picture of a helpless muskie population that was either doomed to a mysterious death, or already practically extinct. Furthermore, what is most disconcerting about such news is that absolutely NONE of the authors of these articles fished for muskies professionally themselves. I would, in short, sum it up as the kind of unresearched sensationalism that columnists thought would make a naïve public want to buy their paper or magazine.

The same magazines were thoughtless enough about the pros who earned their living helping people catch muskies to print these articles before our season began here—traditionally the first Saturday in June—thus effectively scaring away potential clients right from the start. Not one of us was given a chance to start the season to see what the fishing would be like; nor were any of us who are intimately acquainted with muskie nature and behavior asked to contribute our thoughts or findings to an article of this nature before it was printed. Yet these same magazines WERE thoughtful enough to ask the charter captains if they would like to buy advertising with them in July after all this negative press.

Few of these articles noted that muskies were not the only fish

that were floating belly-up through the Detroit River. There were also countless numbers of carp, freshwater drum, smallmouth bass, as well as a few other species of fish native

to the Great Lakes. Muskies caught most of the attention—we never heard about a "carp die-off" or a "drum die-off" because no one cares about fish which are considered trash. Nonetheless, they do exist and are part of the ecosystem, and were also part of this die off.

In order to understand what happened last year, you have to understand what these fish go through during their lives, and what the cycle of life means to a muskie, as well as nature's law of "Survival of the Fittest."

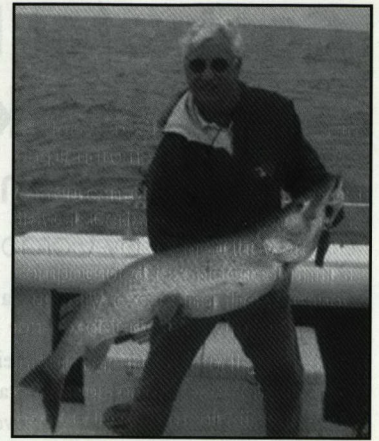
It is my understanding and knowledge of the muskie life cycle that form my opinions about what happened to the fishery last spring. When these great predators go to stage for the cycle of life, they are in water depths of two to four feet, and they do this roughly

two weeks after their cousin, the northern pike, spawns in the same area. Muskies need temperatures between 52 and 55 degrees to have success in the completion of their life processes. What nature did last spring was a dirty trick to muskies—April weather was inverted with May weather, bringing on an extreme heatwave of 80 – 90 degree temperatures in the last two weeks of April. While we humans may have enjoyed it tremendously, I can assure you that the muskies did not. It is felt by many that this unseasonably warmer weather induced an

extra stress on these fresh-water giants that caused an abnormal number of fatalities to occur.

No one can say for sure what caused the fish to die. I've heard many theories—such as a foreign freighter dumped a chemical in the lake, a disease called muskie herpes, a new virus, and that someone who hated muskies because they eat perch dumped batteries in the lake to kill them—all with no thought about whether nature was simply tricking its own kind. It is one way for Mother Nature to manage itself, with its own law of the wild, which is "Survival of the Fittest." Although the consequences up front are unsightly, it may have been simply a blessing in disguise.

The numbers I posted each day last year were consistent with any other normal day of operation, and the size of the fish ran much bigger than preceding years. What I'd like to take this time for is to



Captain Don Miller



Mark from a recent Lamprey encounter.

point out that many people have been misinformed, and need to know about the St. Clair muskie population before they go fishing for them, and have the proper knowledge and insight on what they see, and how to deal with it if they go out on their own.

I'm not discounting the sickness that the muskies had, and say that it and muskie pox, another type of sickness, didn't have an effect on the muskie population. But I personally feel that a misinformed and uneducated public that wants to catch muskies without proper knowledge beforehand can be more detrimental to the stability of the fishery than the disease itself.

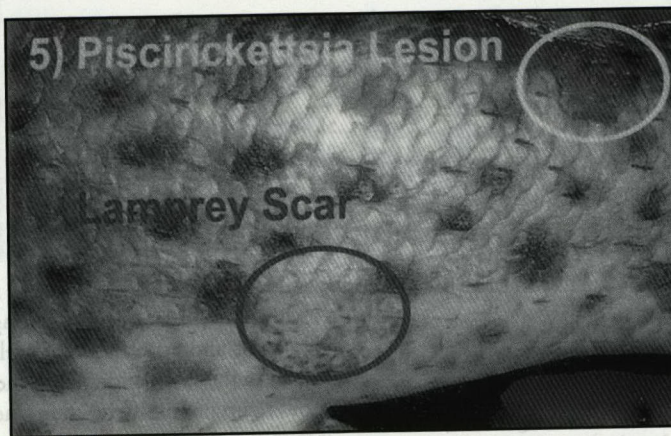
I have spoken with DNR fish biologists about the two types of diseases that have affected muskies. There is no question that Piscirickettsia—Muskie Pox—and Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia—also known as VHS—had a role in adding to the fatality rate of muskies, but I find it difficult to believe that it was the sole cause.

One should know the differences between Piscirickettsia, lamprey marks, and VHS, and how to deal with each of these when you come across them. Piscirickettsia is usually located on or near the tail section of the fish, with lesions that are long or semicircular in shape. The lesions are convex, and appear as red, raised, open sores. This parasite is a bacterial infection, and does not usually kill a healthy fish.

Lamprey marks can be located anywhere on the fish where the parasite can grab hold. The lesions left by a lamprey are concave or sunken, red, and circular in shape. A lamprey is a worm-like parasite that will attach itself to a fish, live off it, and eventually kill it. Any muskie caught with a lamprey attached to it when I boat the fish is promptly relieved of this nuisance. Lamprey should NOT be released back into the lake to find another host. They should be killed so their tentacles can never again afflict another muskie.

Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia, better known as VHS, was discovered in Lake St. Clair around the 2002-2003 time window. Infected fish basically bleed to death internally. Some fish show no external symptoms, but others show signs that include bulging eyes, bloated abdomens, and bruised-looking reddish tints in the eyes, skin, gills and fins. The ultimate cause of death of the carriers of VHS is related to internal hemorrhaging, giving the internal organs of the fish congestion with multiple hemorrhages in the liver, spleen, kidneys, and intestines. Fish become hyperactive, sometimes displaying nervous symptoms such as twisting of the body or swimming erratically. During the last stages of this viral infection, fish lose their ability to balance, may swim aimlessly in circles with no seeming direction just below the surface of the water. Death is eventually caused by organ failure.

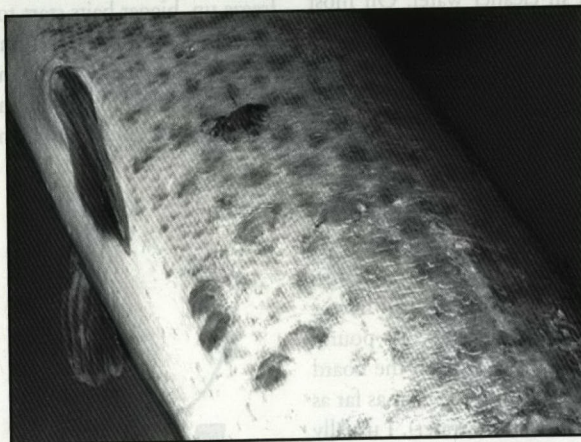
VHS is by far the most serious of these three parasites. It is



Old Lamprey scar and Piscirickettsia lesion on the same Muskie.

to prevent the spread of this disease. If you catch an infected muskie, the DNR fish biology department has recommended the use of a mild bleaching solution, like one cup of bleach to ten gallons of water, to be used to wash down the back of the boat to disinfect and clean decks, bilges, and all gear and tackle. They also suggest items not cleaned with bleach, be dried in the sunlight for 4-6 hours. An infected muskie should still be released, because many fish do survive and pass their immunity on to their offspring, which is nature's way of overcoming adversity. Live fish of any species should NOT be transported from one body of water to another—in particular, small fish with any lake water for the purpose of stocking an inland lake or using as bait—which will spread the disease to your favorite pond there as well.

To sum it up, everyone that fishes, not just for muskies but for any fish in the Great Lakes region, should be made aware of the types of things that are out there. Don't be so one-dimensional that



A muskie showing signs of VHS

all you think about is catching your fish, and not know what to do, or how to deal with what you have there in front of you, once activity takes place on your boat. The people that will make the fishery become more stable today are people like yourselves who are knowledgeable about the resource and who know what to do to preserve it. It is a pretty safe bet the DNR will not have adequate funding for proper research to be done for determining the cause and the treatment of VHS. We also know that once our fish have contracted these diseases, we will at best only be

able to control them and not eradicate them. The destiny and the stability of our fishery is in our control, more so than ever before. Don't be nearsighted—be informed. ♦

Captain Don Miller's career on Lake St. Clair has spanned thirty years, from when he was the only charter docked at Homer Leblanc's residence for over ten years until Homer passed away. Don has chartered for people from 23 different states nationally and ten countries globally, from as far east as Singapore and from as far west as Germany. Some things are universal, and one of them is fishing. For more information on charter dates, Don may be reached on the web at <http://www.millers-sportfishing.com> or by calling 734-429-9551.