

Lake St. Clair Instilled A Sense Of Awe...

Muskie experts discuss the incredible Lake St. Clair

Although Lake St. Clair is fed by Lake Huron through the St. Clair River and empties into Lake Erie by way of the Detroit River, it is not a Great Lake. It is an incredible lake and the Great Lakes muskie is categorized as abundant in these waters.

Located

adjacent to the Detroit metropolitan area, 256,000-acre Lake St. Clair takes in a tremendous volume of water, completely flushing itself every four days. For this reason the lake remains remarkably clean and clear.

It is widely recognized as a world-class muskie and multi-species fishery.

So, what makes Lake St. Clair such an incredibly prolific muskie lake? When I asked this very question of Mike Thomas, Michigan DNR fish biologist out of the Harrison County office and a Lake St. Clair expert, he replied, "None of the factors are more important than another, but Lake St. Clair muskies are self-sustaining."

He continued, "The muskies spawn in open water where *caragrows*, a low-lying musk-grass that is considered to be excellent, muskie-spawning habitat.

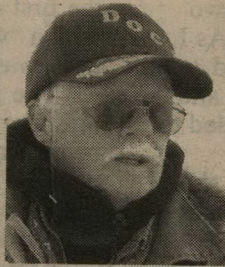
"The juvenile muskies grow and hunt in this healthy environment, feeding on forage such as redhorse, yellow perch, and emerald shiners. The older populations stay healthy because very few fish are harvested."

Finally, Mr. Thomas related to me that the river inlets and outlets provide currents and a temperature range that muskies enjoy, but most of all, Lake St. Clair anglers, guides, and charter captains are very dedicated to Catch & Release, a contributing factor in the growing muskie population.

OK! What detailed and innovative tactics do the experts employ to catch these fish?

Trolling Tactics

I had read about some great muskie-trolling days that a charter captain by the name of Captain Mike



By Robert Dock Stupp

Pittiglio of Muskie Mania Charters was having on Lake St. Clair. We arranged a fishing day. On August 30th we left Michigan Harbor Marina in cold front conditions. High northeast winds persisted as we head-

ed to his favorite areas on the Canadian side of Lake St. Clair. In

eight hours nine muskies hit and four were caught. Among the muskies caught and released were a 48 1/2, a 49 1/4, and a 41-incher.

Lake St. Clair has an average depth of 13.3 feet with large areas of submergent weeds. Therefore, precise depths at certain times of the year are necessary so Pittiglio uses a variety of trolling techniques and sets.

Checking lures for weeds every fifteen minutes or so is important. By either changing lures or changing weights by snapping on round-ball sinkers to the front leader snaps, the desired depth is assured and the lead balls keep most of the floating and submergent weeds off the lures.

Keen observation is always one of the keys to success on the water. Watching his locator screens not so much for hooks or big muskies but for baitfish, he also watches the water. Windy conditions kick up bottom sediment that creates dirty or off-color water. Baitfish hide in dirty water and sooner rather than later, the muskies arrive on the scene.

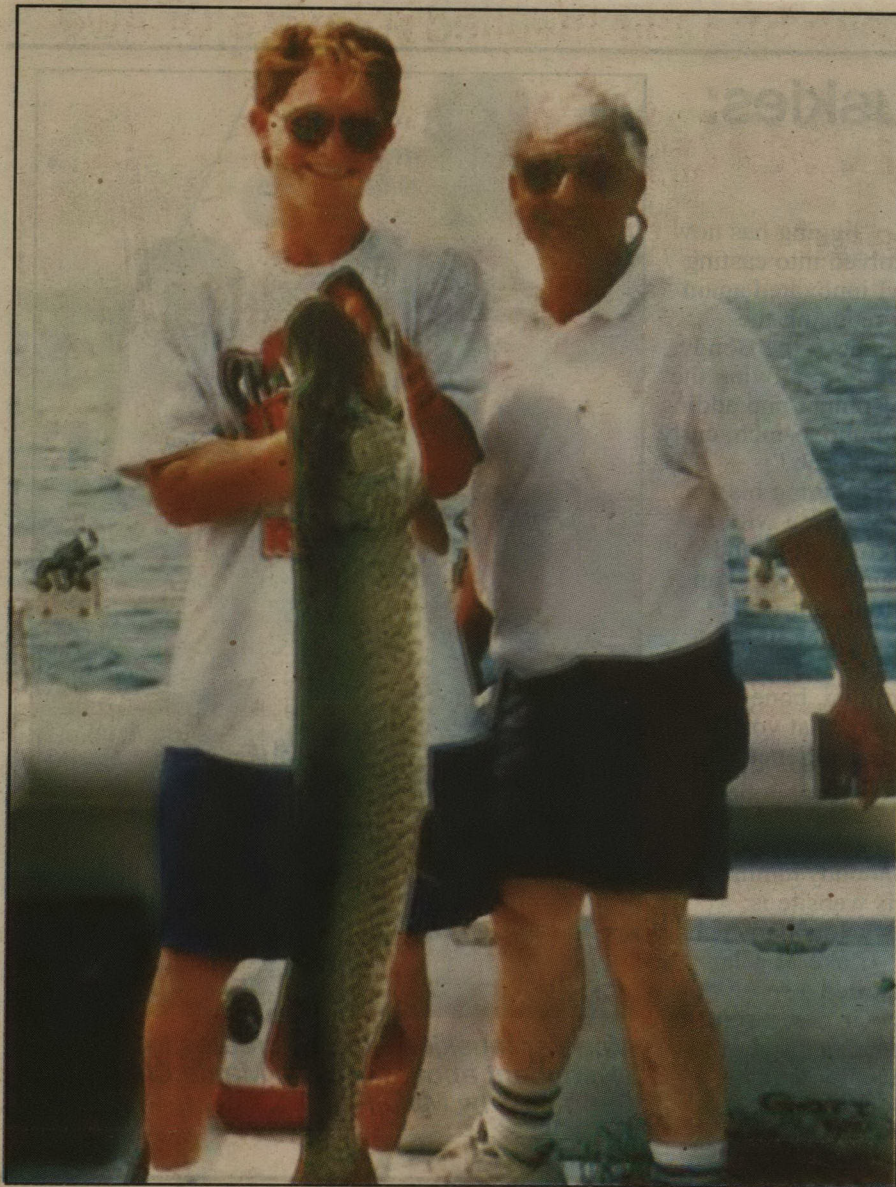
On a typical day on the water, he starts out trolling different colored lures at different depths and then adjusts as the day goes on.

Mike says, "When fishing is good, you get more hits and you change to the hot baits. Then the fire drill starts and it's fun for everybody."

Favorite trolling lures are Grandmas, Jakes, Wileyes, Hi-Fin and Cat Tail bucktails, Nils Masters in the fall, and some locally made baits like Loke and Ziggye.

His favorite trolling speed is 3.7 to 4 miles per hour.

He used down rods and long rods but, while onboard, I observed that most strikes occurred on the



St. Clair muskie Captain Don Miller holds one of the biggest and heaviest catches on Lake St. Clair.

planer board rods that day. I asked the Captain about this and he replied, "Yes, my records show that 70 percent of the muskies we catch come on the board rods." Musky Mania Charters - St. Clair Shores, phone, (586)-250-4068 or website-www.muskiemaniacharters.com

Perspectives On Trolling

"A clean six beats a dirty dozen," says Captain Don Miller, who has been fishing on Lake St. Clair for 30 years. What this statement means is that Miller likes to keep it simple while trolling St. Clair. He puts 6 lines out, making it easier to keep these lines free of weeds and foul-ups as opposed to running 12 lines allowed for 6 people on the U.S. side (1 line per person on the Canadian side).

Miller, a student of the late, great Homer Le Blanc, said, "I fished with Homer and one of the keys to his trolling pattern was to cover as much water as possible. This is done by a combination of speed and lure placement. Speed is critical. I troll from 4 to 6, sometimes 7 miles per hour and I cover lots of water for the maximum amount of muskies to see your bait. But, I let water clarity dictate how fast I will troll."

His philosophy is that muskies

are not easily duped into striking artificial baits. Therefore, he says, "I speed up to 6 miles an hour in clear water but slow down to 4 miles per hour in muddy or cloudy water. This prevents a muskie from getting too good a look at his offering, making her make up her mind instantly, and producing a reaction-strike."

A typical St. Clair trolling spread is used, with two 4 to 6-foot down-rods running very close to the boat, right in the prop wash. Two more 8 to 10-foot out-rods are set parallel to the water at a 45 degree angle to the back of the boat. Finally, two planer boards, one on each side, are utilized.

Miller prefers the 28-inch, double-ski, off-shore, redwood planer boards with a heavy tension, double-spring release.

Patterns

The muskie season on Lake St. Clair runs from the first Saturday in June to December 15th. Early summer finds the U.S. waters of Anchor Bay to be very productive. "It holds a lot of fish early. Then it weeds up fast," says Miller.

As summer progresses Miller fishes the Canadian waters, where he works the 10 to 20 foot depths off of Belle River, Ontario.

Lake St. Clair Muskies next page

Expert Advice On Lake St. Clair Muskies:

from page 83

Another Canadian summer hotspot is an area known as The Dumping Grounds, located in the southeast portion of the lake. Miller runs his lures shallow and uses his lure spread and boat to comb these sporadic depths of 8 to 18 feet.

During the fall the pattern changes again. A good majority of St. Clair's muskies migrate back to the U.S. side or northern end of the lake. Bigger muskies are targeted and bigger lures like a 10-inch, jointed Believer are used to catch the big females that swim as shallow as 6 to 8 feet.

Muskie men like Miller are very aware of changing conditions. "I watch for current edges, weed edges, color edges like mud lines close to creeks and rivers. Muskies hide inside the color lines. There's a contrast I look for."

He uses natural colors on favorite baits like Wileyes, Eppinger Spoons, Believers and Grannies. You can contact Don Miller at: (734)-429-9551
email: dsmiller2@comcast.net,
www.millers-sportfishing.com

Jiggin' Castin' & Driftin'

Another approach to catching muskies in the Lake St. Clair system involves an innovative method of jigging, drifting, and casting baits in the Detroit and St. Clair Rivers.

Jon Bondy, a notable, all species fishing guide from Windsor, Canada and inventor of the Bondy Bait, chooses not to troll on Lake St. Clair.

He usually started his season catching walleyes in April and May. But along with the walleyes, he started catching 3 or 4 muskies a day by jigging. The problem was, on bluebird days, his muskie fishing was over about 9 a.m., due to clear conditions on Lake St. Clair. Jon then decided to fish the deeper river systems, jigging down to 20 and 30 feet. No one had done this before and he has now received national acclaim.

Jon explains, "I needed to get deeper in the water column faster, and because I do not like to troll, the 7-ounce soft, plastic body bait was invented. On many occasions, there is a distinct mud line along the south shore of Lake St. Clair and it extends into deep water and runs down the Canadian side of the Detroit River.

"Jigging has now evolved into casting so I innovated again by reducing the weight of the Bondy Bait by removing the tailspinner and adding a jumbo, 6-inch, curly tailed grub."

Combining his Bondy Bait with no-stretch, 80-pound braided line and an 8-foot, salt water Ugly Stick, this combo produces exciting, bone-jarring strikes that you will not experience while trolling.

You can e-mail Jon at:
jonbondy@mnsi.net.
His website is:
www.jonbondy.net.

Lake St. Clair instilled a sense of awe in me, a spirit of reverence and gratitude. Incredible, indeed! ■