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Musky Hunter

NORTH AMERICA'S MUSKY AUTHORITY



Jungle Muskies

Root 'Em Out Of The Weeds

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Musky Hunter

North America's Musky Authority

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"Low-Light Predator" by wildlife artist Rodd Umlauf, Umlauf Art Studio, 7881 Rainbow Road, Lake Tomahawk, WI 54539, (715) 277-4474, www.umlauptstudio.com. This painting contains Musky Hunter's 2011 Collectible Lure.

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Big Water Muskiee

Part 2

By Matt Straw

It can get lonely on big water. Winds with unlimited fetch drive drifting food chains across the open expanse. Waves roll over the bow. Thermoclines get pushed around by seiche effect. Surface temperatures can swing 20 degrees or more from one area to the next. Things change — sometimes rapidly.

In big environments, muskies often set up on the last “shallow” structure along the edge of the expanse to access a variety of species in summer. Some baitfish use open water (alewives, herring, etc.). Some prey species associate with rocks and bottom transitions (suckers, perch, etc.). Some alternately suspend and hug bottom (smallmouth bass, walleyes, etc.). The most abundant prey can determine which attitude muskies adopt for the entire summer in big water, but it’s probably more common for muskies to make transitions from one prey species to the next as summer progresses.

In big rivers and lakes, some muskies may not move far all year. Other muskies in the same systems could be making movements of six miles or more on a regular basis, expanding the parameters of anything we might call “home.” Muskies with

wanderlust tend to be huge, but finding them is a challenge. The search can be significantly narrowed on big water, however, by following nature’s cues.

Forage Factors

Jody Mills operates Mills Musky Guide Service on Georgian Bay. In summer, determining which structures forage species are relating to is Job 1. It’s an ongoing process, leading to patterns that can last for days, maybe weeks — but usually hours. “Baitfish presence on good structure is the key,” Mills said. “If I’ve got good bait on good structure, something’s going to pop. I already know what species of bait I’m looking at on sonar, based on shape, depth, how they congregate, how close they are to structure, and time of year. Muskies are ambush feeders and they want to be on the best ambush structures.”

“But I have to fish from three feet to 50 feet down on every structure I fish when I’m in search mode on Georgian Bay,” Mills said. “I’ve taken big fish on plugs running three feet deep

GREGG THOMAS

In Part 1, big water guides talked temperature, thermoclines and seasonal migration. Part 2 explores predator-prey relationships, wind, and other clues that affect musky movements and determine home areas they may, or may not, establish.

on top of a shallow reef on flat, calm, sunny days, and I’ve taken big fish 30 feet down over 50 feet of water around a deep reef during typical ‘musky weather.’ Traditional thinking would have you doing the reverse.”

Mills says smallmouth bass use structure and open water from the surface to 50 feet. Perch are typically near bottom or slightly suspended between the 15- and 80-foot contours. Herring use open water as shallow as 20 feet then dive to “excessive depths” by midsummer. Emerald shiners suspend shallow and scatter until fall. “Alewives were the most important forage species until recently, but are no longer found in Georgian Bay in any abundance,” Mills said.

Don Miller, veteran musky captain for over 30 years (www.motorcitymuskies.com), works water that could be described as the opposite of Georgian Bay. Lake St. Clair is shallow, with a different cross-section of species. “Isolated pockets of baitfish stray outside larger schools,” Miller said. “Muskies like to pick them off. Could be perch, gizzard shad, or even walleyes and smallmouths.”

Smallmouths are highly abundant in St. Clair every year. “Bass are common targets,” Miller said. “If you know where good smallmouth habitat is, you can generally locate a musky. Matching the hatch can be a good thing, so bass-colored baits can score big. But you never know. If I’ve been on a bass pattern and put four or five bass baits behind my boat, they’ll hit

the oddball — the lone ‘crackle frog.’ You can try to match baits to forage, based on the habitat you’re fishing in or around, but I never change all my presentations to match one type of forage.”

Miller is all-trolling-all-the-time, which is not a bad way to go on safari in truly big waters like Georgian Bay and St. Clair. “Muskies are going to get what they want to eat,” Miller said. “Think of a lion working a herd of zebra. He’s not going in there knocking over the grocery shelves. He’s going to get as close to the edge of the herd as he can and knock off the weakest specimens. That’s what a musky does. Perch and walleye patterns dominate in summer, and that goes for lure color, too. Those species tend to make 20-foot flats key areas to target.”

Musky guides in that region often set up near the armadas of perch and walleye boats, using them as a starting point, trolling the fringes of the action where rogue pods of walleyes and perch become vulnerable to muskies. Know what the muskies are after and find people fishing for those species — one of the not-so-secret tricks of the trade for big water muskies. “That doesn’t mean they won’t suddenly switch to white perch or something else,” Miller warned. “Always sprinkle a few oddballs into a spread of baits when trolling and always think about fishing

Big Water Muskies, Part 2

between the bait and shore."

Steve Herbeck, owner and operator of Andy Myer's Lodge on Eagle Lake, Ontario, has been fishing Eagle for 30 years. Typical of so many big lakes, "most of Eagle is clear and muskies feed deep," Herbeck said. "They're just hanging out shallow. That's where we catch them because they may feed opportunistically, but they're not there to feed. You can drive all the way around Eagle seeing bottom to 12 feet and never see a musky. They're out feeding in open water. When they feed on whitefish they can be down 50 feet or so. You can target them, but it's like finding a needle in a haystack. Some of the basins in this lake are 20,000 acres across. So most of the fish I catch are near structure. I don't believe they're feeding there. I'm just triggering them to strike."

Also typical of big-water muskies in clear environments with lots of open-water baitfish: "Muskies are never more than a short paddle from anywhere — from huge forage basins, from deep breaks, from whitefish and from suckers,"

Musky Movements & Home Ranges

Muskies often make the same kinds of movements in big lakes and small, but distances vary considerably. Things they have in common: Spawning in shallow, soft-bottom areas, and the tendency to set up (at some point) on "edge structure," where they have relatively quick access to depths, shallows, cover, and open water. In most environments, muskies take advantage of the gathering of species for the mayfly hatch. And, where open-water forage species exist, muskies take advantage.

In small waters, muskies can often access all these things within a mile. On big water, muskies might range the edge of the basin for 10 miles or more to find perfect habitat for all the major forage species in all the varying conditions they face.

One important key to musky location in rivers and lakes both small and large: (A) Prime edge structure closest to spawning habitat can be a critically important element for locating muskies all year long.

— Matt Straw

Herbeck said. "They follow about the same temperature regimes that the walleyes do, ready to go where the food is from a centralized location."

Home?

Home Area, Home Range

"Home" is an observation of musky behavior in so many environments where they often roam, sometimes for miles, only to return to a "base." The famous radio telemetry study on Eagle Lake showed muskies can roam six miles or more before returning to a home area, and Eagle is exponentially smaller than Lake Michigan or Lake Ontario. Some experts say muskies feed at home, and some say they just digest meals there, but both could be possible.

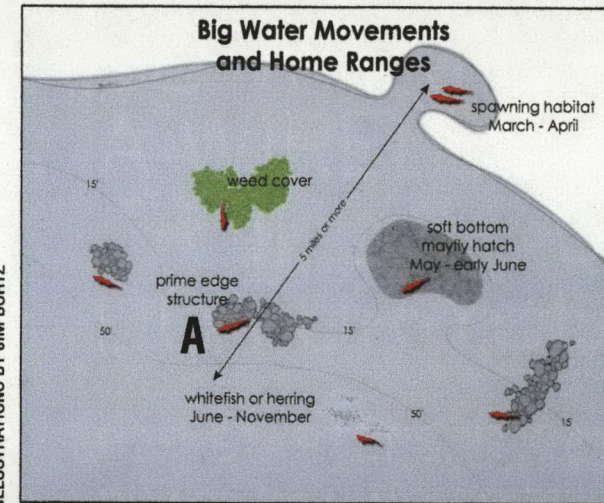
Muskies have big home ranges in truly big lakes, perhaps seldom returning to a particular, definable spot — perhaps returning often. "Sure there's a 'home area' for some fish on Georgian Bay," Mills said. "Some fish grow up and live in safe havens. These fish aren't the ones I'm shooting for on Georgian Bay. The bloated giants I'm looking for in fall are big, open-water, bait-following monsters migrating back toward their 'home' spawning areas. The fish I hunt camp out at good ambush points on structures that have a good supply of high protein bait near that 'home' spawning zone. For these fish, traditional spawning areas are as close to home as it gets.

"Georgian Bay is a funny duck," he said. "Once you get a bite, stick with it. It

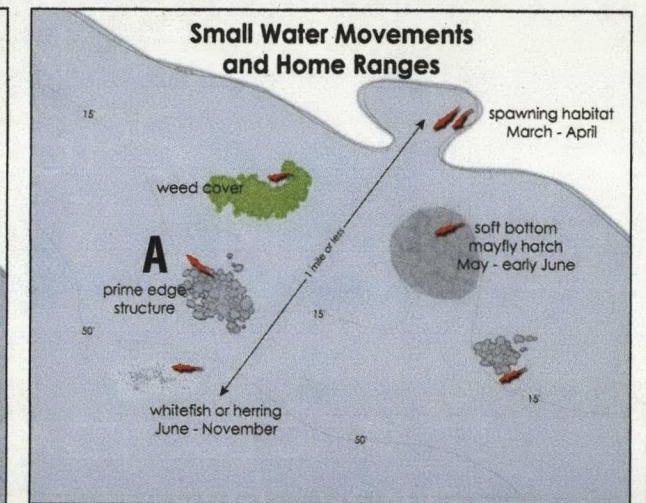
might last a couple of hours or a couple of days. Once it's over (most people refuse to accept that it's over and continue to flog the dead horse) you have to start shopping around. Structure and baitfish go hand-in-hand. If home areas exist at all for these fish, they are vast, incorporating numerous structures over an area measured in square miles."

The St. Lawrence is a huge river, and guide Mike Lazarus sees muskies using home ranges during summer there. "From June to September, no musky is moving big for baitfish," Lazarus said. "They set up on areas that tend to hold lots of bait every year. As summer sets in, smallmouths, perch, suckers, and other baitfish need similar things in terms of current breaks and food production. The majority of the fish will be on structure in complex areas. And the closer to a musky spawning area this structure is, the more likely it will hold muskies all summer long." In other words, the more reefs, points, and humps, the likelier it is to be part of a musky's home range, so searching the map for areas with a lot of ups and downs becomes key on big rivers.

Perhaps the only real "home" in many big waters is the spawning area itself. Mills says that muskies begin moving back toward spawning areas in late summer. "If they can stage outside a spawning area and have food there, they're going to be there all fall long," Lazarus said. "Same thing with Georgian Bay. In rivers they don't move far from spawning areas all summer if they don't have to."



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JIM BORTZ



Herbeck says the later it gets on Eagle, the closer muskies get to spawning habitat. By October, they can be relatively concentrated, compared to the rest of the year. Look for structurally-diverse areas near spawning habitat and study them well. If they have baitfish in fall, big heavies won't be far away.

"If they can hide happily and feed happily near a spawning area, they won't leave," Lazarus said. "Most fish have real home areas, a real home range. In a perfect world, muskies will be near a spawning area all year. The more complex predator-prey relationship comes later in the season when migrating forage species begin to dictate where muskies will be. From June to September we don't change fishing practices much. They won't move far. We look for minor changes in how and where the strongest current hits structure and cover. That's where the most active muskies will be."

By choosing areas used by a melting pot of other species, muskies can transfer from one forage to the next without moving too far as abundances, size profiles, or preferences change. On big water, these areas can be huge. Finding out what those preferences are and locating muskies again when they switch programs is a big job. Big water guides punch in at that job every morning. One factor that often helps narrow the search is wind.

Wind Patterns

"Some autumns, all you have to do is fish the wind-pounded structures and reel

'em in," Mills said. "Next fall you could pound the winded structures until you're blue in the face and nothing happens. So you start hunting again. You start with wind. It should anoint the structures where wind is blowing in, but it doesn't always happen that way."

Wind-driven food chains need something to corral them before they can concentrate fish — bluffs, shorelines, islands, points — something above water. Herbeck experiences a more classic relationship with wind on Eagle. "Where the wind is blowing in against a shoreline with good structure in front, the water has higher oxygen levels and more food," he said. "That's what creates high activity levels. You should be able to walk outside in the morning, get a grip on wind direction, and have a pretty good idea where to go. Think about all the best spots on the lake and head for the ones where that morning's wind is pushing plankton and high oxygen levels onto good structure."

Islands, necks, and points become key features when the wind is blowing from the same direction for several days. "When wind is coming from a basin into a neck-down area, creating currents set up by two to three days of steady wind, muskies concentrate there," Miller said. "In all water clarities and all conditions, wind will concentrate muskies in necks. Any island clusters between basins become supreme current areas. The bigger the basin, the more important it is to pay attention to wind-driven patterns and look for places where these patterns can

establish. The bigger the basin, the bigger the set up, with more bait and more predators concentrated in a much smaller area than anywhere else."

Late in fall, Lazarus says, "everything wants to move back to where it spawns." Faced with big, new water, study the structures near spawning areas that border the main basin. Even in Georgian Bay, which is over 150 miles long, spawning habitat becomes a key locational feature from late summer on — if you can find baitfish on structure nearby.

Forage is the foundation. Having an elemental grasp of the forage available, and knowing which species are most abundant, provides a jump start. Look for complex structure (aggregations of reefs, archipelagos of islands, steep drops, a series of points, etc.) at the juncture between shallows, depths, cover, and open water. Watch temperature regimes, follow the wind, note the position of the thermocline, and know where muskies spawn. Do all that, learn a little something about how forage species respond to changing conditions, and the massive tapestry that is big water begins to unfold.

Matt Straw has been an outdoor author, speaker, photographer and editor for over 30 years, having published over 600 articles and books on fishing, hunting or outdoor skills.

