

DETROIT

Lake St. Clair muskie worth the hard work

by Mike Zielinski
F&H News columnist

One thing about muskie fishing on Lake St. Clair, says Capt. Don Miller one of this legendary lake's top muskie guides, when the season opens, you're only one strike away from a new world's record. "Thinking about that kind of keeps me going sometimes when things are a little slow."

Through plain old hard work, lots of hours on the water, and a mentor like the late muskie fishing legend, Homer LeBlanc, Miller is fast gaining a reputation as the top muskie guide in this corner of muskiedom. Combining many of LeBlanc's famous trolling techniques and theories with modern technology and equipment plus a few special twists of his own, Capt. Don Miller continues to build a storehouse of knowledge about these freshwater tigers.

Miller adheres to the method of

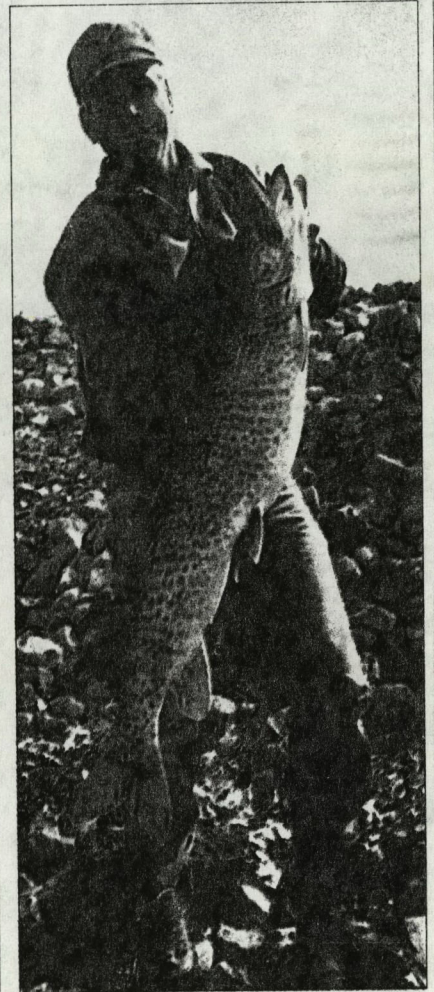
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running two 5-foot rods right down into the prop wash with the lures only 4 feet astern, and only inches below the surface. Don has also added planer boards to his muskie hunting arsenal. They take the place of the outriggers and the heavy, 12-foot long rods once utilized to keep the lures spread out and away from the boat. Most of his reels are spooled with 50-pound test braided Dacron line with 100-pound mono leaders; however, Miller uses one of the new Kevlar lines off his planer boards.

Capt. Miller depends a lot on Believer lures as well as Spike's Spoons in various patterns to catch the majority of his muskies. Not only do these lures have the size and color patterns necessary to catch big muskie, but they are also durable and equipped with the proper hardware to stay together under the stress of landing a large, hard fighting fish like a Great Lakes muskie.

LOTS OF LEGALS: There are lots of legal-sized muskie in Lake St. Clair, due to the prudent practice of catch and release by savvy skippers like Capt. Don Miller and other sport fishermen on Lake St. Clair. Capt. Don Miller prides himself on releasing a muskie in good condition. Here are a few of his tips on muskie catch and release.

"The key is to reduce the stress and physical injury when the fish is landed, preventing the fish from going into shock. Their best chance of survival is releasing the fish within 6 minutes of hooking it. Don't play the fish until it is exhausted, get it up to the boat, in the net and released, like we did with your fish. Never, never, never use a gaff and then try to release a fish. Don't drop the fish to the bottom of the boat, leave it in the net until you have a good grip on it and don't put your fingers in the eye sockets or the touch the gills, grasp the fish behind the head. If the fish is deeply hooked, do not cut the hook off and leave it in the fish, a muskie will likely



PAYDAY! They don't come like this every day, but when they do, man is it worth it. Mike Z. gives the lowdown on where to find beasts like this in Lake St. Clair. (F&H News photo by Mike Zielinski)

continue to experience stress, so carefully remove the hook. Most fish will survive, despite some bleeding. A little blood does not mean the fish is going to die."

OTHER KEYS: Lake St. Clair muskie angling has seen other positive changes in the last 10 years and not all of them deal with catch-and-release. Water clarity has increased markedly, due mainly to heavy infestation by zebra mussels. With the exception of walleyes, Lake St. Clair's predatory fish seem to be experiencing increases across the board.

AT A GLANCE

St. Clair muskies: These toothy critters are king of their realm, and through proper sportfishing management, appear to be making a comeback.

Location: Lake St. Clair covers approximately 490 square miles; however, less than 20 percent of that is prime muskie habitat. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, these waters sustain the heaviest recreational boating activity in Michigan. Over the years, guides and sport anglers alike have guarded their secret spots.

Tackle: Lake St. Clair is relatively shallow and is primarily a trolling fishery. As a result, stout rods, 50-pound test line and 100-pound test leaders are common. Planer boards, outriggers and heavy lead weights are all used to cover large areas of water 8 to 17 feet deep.

Season: On Lake St. Clair it opens first Saturday in June to Dec. 15, with a daily limit of one fish over 42 inches.

LAKE ST. CLAIR MUSKIES

DNR fisheries biologist Mike Thomas of the Lake St. Clair station explains it this way.

"With the improvement of water clarity, Lake St. Clair appears to be returning to some of the conditions it was in before man and the industrial revolution swept through," says Thomas. "With clearer water, sunlight penetrates deeper, stimulating underwater plant growth. This gives more cover to forage such as minnows and crustaceans, thus increasing their numbers. Sight feeders like bass, pike and muskie feed more efficiently in clear water, which means their populations should rise and with the practice of catch and release, also their average size."

Capt. Miller feels that muskies migrate around Lake St. Clair in loose schools, and that being in the right place when the fish are there is the one of the keys to catching them.

"I look for movement trends," says Miller. "There are no secrets on Lake St. Clair, and if other knowledgeable anglers are abandoning one area for another, it is because the fish have migrated away."

MILLER'S PICKS: Following are some of Captain Miller's top picks.

- **No. 1:** In June, the fish seem to congregate near Anchor Bay, off the Clinton River and near the Spillway just south of Metro Beach.

- **No. 2:** During July, fish move up on the dumping grounds, and also southeast over to the Canadian side of Lake St. Clair off Pike Creek, Puce River and Belle River.

- **No. 3:** August sees another eastward movement up to the Ruscom River and Stoney Point.

- **No. 4:** When September rolls around and depending a lot on the weather, the

fish continue a slow eastward movement past the Black Forest to just off the Thames River.

- **No. 5:** In October, the muskies head west again, and set up near the Spillway or off the South Channel out in front of Grosse Pointe."

ACCESS: For a potential muskie trip of a lifetime, Capt. Don Miller can be reached at (313) 429-9551. For fishing information and lake conditions call Lakeside Fishing Shop at (810) 777-7003; or Outdoor Adventures at (810) 765-4430.

There are a number of excellent boat launches along the U.S. side of Lake St. Clair. Here are two of the better ones open to the public. The Metropolitan Metropark has an excellent facility just

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south of the Clinton River. To get there from I-94 head east on the Metro-Parkway to the park. A daily park sticker plus launch fee is required.

Harley Ensign Memorial Access is at the mouth of the Clinton River and reached by heading east off I-94 on North River Road 1.6 miles to Bridgeview Road. Proceed a 1/2-mile south to South River Road and turn left for 3 miles.

