

A Bright Future for

MICHIGAN MUSKIES

by Bob Twizdy



Jon Bondy with a nice muskie

They're known as freshwater barracudas, the fish of ten thousand casts, and a handful of other monikers which indicate both how vicious they are and how tough they can be to catch: muskellunge.

It's a safe bet that fewer than one in a hundred – perhaps one in a thousand – Michigan anglers have ever caught a muskie. Because of their physical attributes, which include their ginormous size and razor-sharp teeth, muskies are rarely caught by anglers who are not targeting them specifically and using appropriate tackle. And in a state with more than 11,000 lakes and 36,000 miles of river, they are found in relatively few places.

Still, those who seek them love them. The Department of Natural Resources has changed the focus of its muskie program in a number of ways so in the future, they will likely be more widespread and more numerous across the state.

Over the course of the last decade or so, state fisheries officials have reduced the creel limit – from one a day to one a year – and begun a policy of setting size limits along the same lines as trout regulations; waters with high growth potential will have longer length limits than those where fish are slow-growing, though the DNR has been slow to adopt larger minimum length regulations.

But the biggest change is in stocking policy. There are two strains of muskellunge in Michigan: northern and Great Lakes (aka spotted). Historically, the DNR has stocked lakes and rivers statewide with northern-strain muskellunge, a fish that is native to only the west end of the Upper Peninsula. More recently, the DNR has switched to stocking Great Lakes muskies into the lakes and streams of the Lower Peninsula. Biologically, it's the right thing to do: stock the fish that belong there.

The biggest problem with the shift has been coming up with brood stock. The DNR long stocked northern muskies statewide simply because they were available. Really, only Lake St. Clair and the adjoining rivers have the kind of Great Lakes muskie population that will allow fisheries personnel to collect brood stock for the eggs and milt needed by the hatchery. Further complicating the process is the fact that the water in the Lake St. Clair system is dramatically colder than it is inland. That means the females aren't ready to drop eggs until later in the spring; the fingerlings raised in DNR ponds are smaller, when fall stocking season arrives, than they would be had hatchery personnel gotten a faster jump on the process in the spring.

So the DNR is in the process of creating new brood-stock lakes for Great Lakes strain muskies. The first will be Thornapple Lake in Barry County, which has boasted a stocked northern muskie population for decades.

"We were genetically mismanaging by stocking the northern strain," said Nick Popoff, a DNR fisheries biologist who oversees aquatic species and regulations. "As far as we're aware, there has never been any natural reproduction in the lakes we stocked with northern strain."

Great Lakes muskies are showing up in surveys at Thornapple after just a couple of years of stocking: a very positive sign.

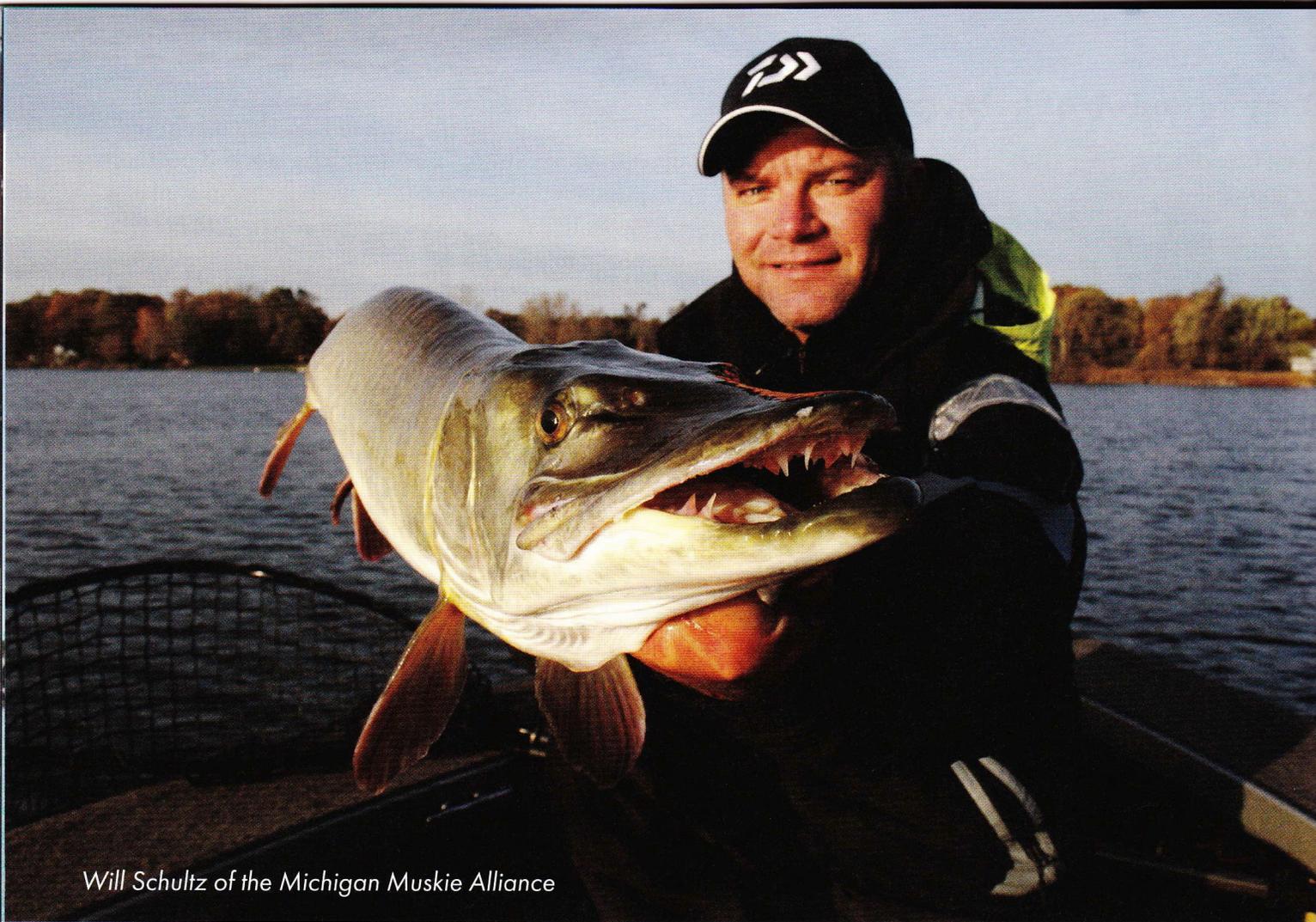
"We're seeing fish at Thornapple and we're seeing fish in the Muskegon and Grand River, too," Popoff said.

The organized muskellunge angling community is in agreement with the stocking strategy.

"We're 1,000 percent on board with it," said Will Schultz, one of the founders of the Michigan Muskie Alliance. "The Northern strain was not the right strain down here. This has been a long, long time coming, but we're headed in the right direction."

Schultz, who sits on the DNR's warm-water citizens' advisory committee, says the DNR hatchery/nursery at

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Will Schultz of the Michigan Muskie Alliance

Wolf Lake has stepped up its game dramatically and is raising more and healthier fingerlings with fewer eggs than in the past.

"They used to take two 2 million eggs and some years they'd only get 1,000 fish," he said. "Now they're growing a ton of fish with a half million eggs."

Schultz, who has been a muskie fisherman for more than 20 years – and a guide for the last 10 – is convinced muskies have a bright future in Michigan and more anglers will target them once there are more places to fish for them.

"It's an unbelievable thing when a lake pops up and starts producing fish," he said. "It creates fishermen."

Muskie season opens the last Saturday of April in Lower Peninsula inland waters and runs through March 15. It's open year-round in the Lower Peninsula waters of the Great Lakes, though the St. Clair River-Lake St. Clair- Detroit River complex doesn't open until the first Saturday in June and runs through Dec. 15. In the

Upper Peninsula, the season is May 15 – March 15.

Schultz, who will fish 85 to 100 days a year on 10 to 20 different bodies of water, says he starts on opening day and doesn't quit until the lakes freeze. He'd fish right through winter if it didn't freeze, he said, and is optimistic that as muskies become established in more Lower Peninsula rivers, there will be more winter fishing opportunity in the future. "Ice is the only thing that stops me," he said.

Schultz says muskie fishing starts off fast around then opener, when he's fishing in the shallows looking for spawning or immediately post-spawn fish.

"Usually it starts quickly with good fishing, then starts tapering off through June when they go into their summer patterns," he said. "In spring there are a lot of shallow fish and you catch males more readily, so you're generally using smaller baits. It usually takes the females several weeks after spawn to get back in the game. And by the end of June, their guard is up a little bit, the water gets warmer, you're fishing with the

biggest lures, and the weeds are at full growth, so they get a little tougher to catch.

“Summer is a matter of changing tactics,” said Schultz, who says he’ll average a little bit more than one muskie a day throughout the season. “You fish the outside edge of weed lines at whatever depth that is and there are daily migrations. They’ll spend 90 percent of their time wherever they’re comfortable in deep water, then under low-light conditions, they make those movements shallower to feed.

“Their main food source is suckers; on every inland lake study that’s ever been done, suckers are a very large percentage of their diet,” he continued. “The next highest will be whatever is dominant in the lake. If there are perch, it’ll be perch. In Lake St. Clair most of what they eat out there is white bass.”

Muskie fishing is always hit-or-miss and summertime fishing is even more so, but that doesn’t mean you can’t catch them. “I’ve had as many five- or 10- fish days on lakes in the summer as I have in spring or fall,” Schultz said.

Schultz continues with his summer pattern right into fall, though as the weather gets cold and the weeds begin to die out, he’ll move shallower to fish the best weeds. He uses his biggest baits of the years and adds another wrinkle: large, live suckers.

“They’re hard to come by and hard to keep alive in warm water,” Schultz said. “When the water temperature gets below 55 degrees, in October, I use suckers.”

Michigan’s best muskie lake is, beyond a doubt, Lake St. Clair, the giant Great Lakes connecting water that we share with Canada. St. Clair has always been a good muskie lake, but over the last couple of decades, it’s gotten nothing but better. The increasingly clear water (because of zebra mussels) favors sight feeders like muskellunge and allows weed growth at greater depth, creating additional habitat. There are more muskies – and more big muskies – in Lake St. Clair and the adjoining rivers than anywhere else in the state.

“Only on Lake St Clair do you apologize when you send people home after catching three or four muskies because it was slow,” said Don Miller, a veteran charter boat skipper on the big lake who has seen the fishing continue to improve, something he attributes, in part, to the catch-and-release ethic that dominates muskie fishing these days.

Miller installed a large live well on his 30-foot Baha Cruiser so he can let the fish regain its equilibrium before he releases it. At times, when the fishing is hot, he’ll have two or three fish in the well at once.

“Most of the bigger boats have live wells now,” said Miller, 61, who’s been running a charter boat for 33 years. “It gives the fish a chance to calm down and recover before you let it go. I usually keep them for 10 or 15 minutes, until they start feeling better, before I put them back into the lake.”

"MICHIGAN'S BEST MUSKIE LAKE IS, BEYOND A DOUBT, LAKE ST. CLAIR..."



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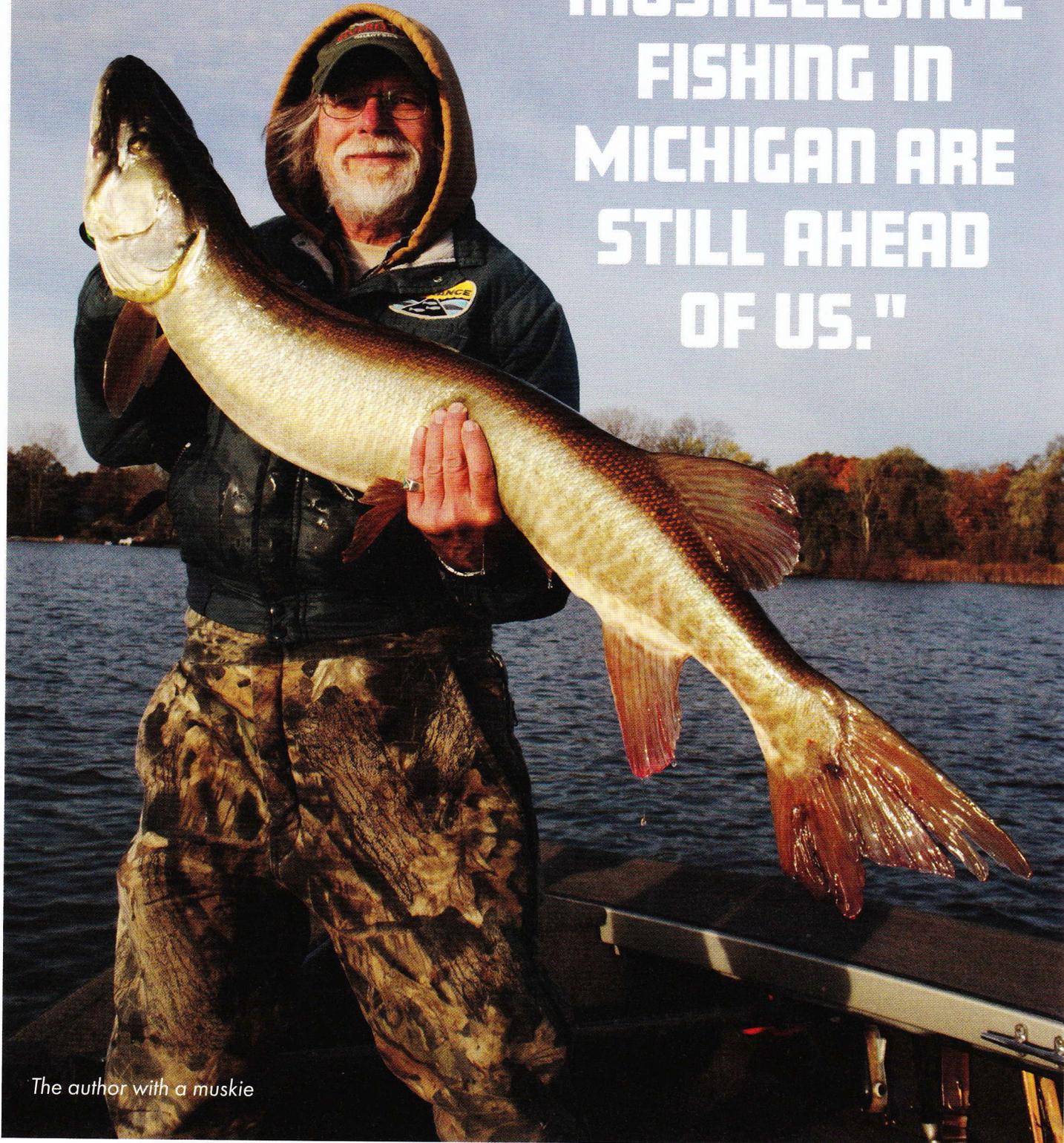
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The author with a muskie

And that gives them a chance to live long and grow large.

““People come to St. Clair because they know they have a chance to catch a big fish now,” Miller said. “I couldn’t count the number of states people have come from to fish for muskies with me and they’ve come from probably 15 different countries. I get Europeans – often from England or Germany – every year.

“About one in every eight or nine fish is a 48-incher or better,” he continued. “I’ve had a lot of fish in the 50-inch class. When you start getting into 52- to 54-inch fish, they’ll weight around 40 pounds. There are a lot of 38- to 40-pound fish around, but a 38-pound fish is a 40-pounder that hasn’t eaten its dinner yet. It eats one smallmouth bass and it’s up over 40.”

Miller said he typically catches 300 to 400 muskies a year these days.

“When I first started out, if I saw 60 a year I was doing well,” he said. “A hundred was the goal and we never seemed to make it. Now, with the catch-and-release ethic and the live wells, there are a lot more muskies to be caught in Lake St. Clair.”

As well as in the Detroit River. Veteran Windsor fishing guide Jon Bondy has developed a deep-water jigging technique that may not be foolproof, but is the next best thing. I’ve fished with him a number of times over the years, typically within the first month of the season and again in October or November, and only once in all of those trips did we fail to catch a fish. Often we caught multiple fish. Twice we did double digits.

Those kinds of days are unusual, but Michigan fisheries managers think they’ll be less rare in the future as more fisheries develop and more fish become available to anglers.



Mark Martin with a lunker

“The state is invested in muskellunge management,” Popoff said. “We’re continuing to develop a native-strain of brood stock from Lake St. Clair, Thompson hatchery is going to add a warm-water facility and some ponds, and we’re going to update some of our facilities at Wolf Lake. There’s a big investment on muskellunge rearing facilities.”

With all the changes in muskie management, it appears as though the good ol’ days of muskellunge fishing in Michigan are still ahead of us. **BG**