

Great Lakes Angler

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ST. CLAIR MUSKIES



Anglers fishing with Don Miller caught three muskies in a matter of minutes.

For a while, Don Miller must have thought he was back in the good ol' days, which, frankly, weren't anywhere near as good as now. He'd been fishing the Canadian waters of Lake St. Clair for muskies for a day and half with nothing to show for it. What was most frustrating is he was marking fish the whole time, he said, but they had their bellies on the bottom.

"As a rule, I never fish deeper than 50 percent of the water," said Miller, who's been running a charter boat for muskies on Lake St. Clair for 36 years. "And I'd say 75 percent of my fish are picked up in the top four feet of the water column."

Standard operating procedure for most muskellunge anglers; they fish high in the water column in deep water and try to bring the fish up to strike.

"If a fish is eight feet down and I'm running four feet down, that fish only has to move about one body length to get that bite," Miller said. "And it strikes at 20 to 30 miles an hour so it just takes a second for them to get it."

But by late afternoon, Miller's fortune had changed. Dramatically. First he caught a pike—a relatively rare occurrence for Miller, though the lake harbors plenty of them—and then a smallish 'skie, say 36 inches. And over the course of the next 90 minutes

he caught three more.

And he was still disappointed; boating four muskies in a day's time is slow these days on Lake St. Clair, Miller said, even though it's a far cry better than it was when he started.

"Sometimes if you got a strike in a week's time, you did well, whether you boated the fish or not," said Miller, who's been fishing for muskies since he was a kid. "Back then it was about 40 hours of fishing for a fish. Then you'd go out and catch two in the same day and you'd be on top of the world."

These days, Lake St. Clair is among the most productive muskie fisheries in North America. The catch rates are almost unheard of.

"You can't talk about muskie waters without bringing up Lake St. Clair," Miller said. "Now you've got people coming from all over the world to take their chances on Lake St. Clair."

"In the late '80s, I started to see 60 to 70 fish a year," he continued. "By the mid '90s, I was well over a hundred. Now I catch more than 300 a year, 300 to 400."

"You're going to have a couple times of year when you're going to see 20 to 30 fish in a day. But on an average day with three or four guys on the boat, everyone's going to get a chance at

a fish, often twice around. Only on Lake St. Clair do you apologize when you send people home after catching three or four muskies because it was slow.”

Exactly why Lake St. Clair’s muskie fishing has improved so dramatically over the last couple of decades is a matter of conjecture, though most muskie anglers believe the almost universal catch-and-release ethic has something to do with it. Anglers are not just letting them go, either; they’re handling them with TLC. Most of the charter boat captains now have live wells capable of holding ‘skies and unhooked fish are often placed in the wells until they recover their equilibrium before they’re released. Miller, for instance, installed a large live well on his 30-foot Baha Cruiser and puts all of his fish in it before he releases them. At times, when the fishing is hot, he’ll have two or three fish in the well at once.

“I usually keep them for 10 or 15 minutes, until they start feeling better, before I put them back into the lake,” he said.

Along with the improved muskellunge fishery came more muskie anglers. And not just guys trolling. Now there are a number of guides who specialize in casting, or jigging, often in the rivers that feed (St. Clair River) or drain (Detroit River) the quarter million-acre lake.

“The word is out that there’s a casting option and we catch them almost every day,” said Kevin Long, who’s been guiding for muskies for almost 20 years. “Lake St. Clair has been known as a great trolling lake for muskies for years but now it’s popular for casting, too. It’s a big thing; it’s a good place to catch your first muskie casting but there’s also a good chance of having a multiple-fish day. And it’s your best bet at a trophy-class fish casting. Do you catch a 50-incher every day? No, but there are times that you catch a 50-incher several days in a row.

Long says that even if you don’t catch a giant, you will almost certainly catch—or at least have a shot at—a muskellunge.

“We catch them almost every day,” Long said. “We don’t average 10 fish a day, but we average multiple fish. Multiple-fish days are more common than single-fish days. I only blank a couple of times a year. You’re going to get some action—it’s not like when you go to northern Wisconsin and you can go a week without catching a fish.”

Long sometimes fishes in the Detroit River early in the season and the St. Clair River late in the season, but he spends the bulk of his time on the big lake.

“The peak is main summer, July through September. That’s when you have the most action and it’s also your best chance to catch a 50-incher.”

Long spends most of his time on the Canadian side of the border lake (though I can recall a day I spent with Long some years back on Anchor Bay in the USA when we caught three muskies) where the deepest water is found. The 45-year-old fishing guide says he sometimes fishes around grass beds or drop-offs, but more important than cover is the presence of bait.

“A lot of times there’s nothing on the bottom, but there’s bait there, so you just keep moving and watching your graph. When you see a big concentration of gizzard shad, you’re there.”

Long recommends large soft-plastic baits like Bulldogs or Royal Orbas. He recommends a herky-jerky retrieve.

“Most trollers are moving in a straight line,” he said. “Casting those baits is different. You want to rip it horizontally with your rod so it shoots forward, and then sinks. Or you can lift and drop it.”

Jon Bondy, who revolutionized the muskie fishery in this corner of the world when he created the Bondy Bait for deep-water jigging, says about the same thing that Long does: Multiple-fish days are far more common than donuts. Unlike Long, however, he

Jon Bondy shows off a nice muskie taken on opening day of 2018.



Don Miller nets a muskie for Tim Stewart.



spends a lot of time in the Detroit River, moving to the lake in mid-July, then moving back to the river in October.

Bondy fishes what he says has been “traditionally trolling water,” 13 to 20 feet often in front of river mouths on the Canadian shoreline when on the lake and he looks for subtle changes in the bottom.

“I’m talking just inches,” said Bondy, 45. “I fish a lot of rock piles or rock edges with subtle rises or substrate changes, say, from clay to rock. That creates miniscule changes in the current and that brings in the bait. The edge of the current is no different than the edge of a weed bed as far as fish are concerned.”

Most anglers underestimate the significance of current,” Bondy said.

“There’s 183,000 cubic feet of water per second dumping into Lake St. Clair,” he said. “That creates a lot of current.”

Bondy says he concentrates on the top half of the water column, just like anglers who are trolling. He prefers off-colored water to gin clear as do most.

“Gizzard shad are plankton feeders and plankton depends on nutrients in the

Dr. Bryan Neel shows off a Lake St. Clair muskie.





Author with a Detroit River muskie caught jigging.

water," he said. "Those muddy agricultural creeks that flow into the lake provide the nutrients. St. Clair is heart-shaped and these muddy creeks are the arteries, bringing life to the lake. If the whole lake is muddy, I'll go up into the Thames River because the muskies are used to it up there and you can catch them on shallow-running crankbaits in muddy water. It can get a little crowded in there, but if you're willing to block that out, you can catch them in the top five feet of the water column."

Bondy said he averages three or four fish per day in the lake, maybe a few fewer in the river, though his best days for numbers are often in late fall or early winter jigging in deep water in the river (and I've personally been fishing with him twice when we did double digits in cold weather). But he's had plenty of days in the summer when he's beat them up, too.

"Last year the fall was the best," he said. "The first half of the summer wasn't that good, but I'd still take St. Clair on a bad day over most lakes. Then it was real strong in the fall. Last year December was fantastic, one of the best I've ever seen, but you can only fish in December about two out of every five years. The rest of the time it ices up."

As for big fish, Bondy has generally caught his biggest in the river.

"The biggest muskie I've personally caught—55 inches—was in June," he said. "The biggest my customers have caught

have been 56 inches, twice, were in October. I had one customer who caught a 56 and a year later caught a 55.

"And I've hooked them bigger," I've had several giants that I lost and I've seen 60 inchers swimming on the surface. Those are the fish I'm looking for and someone is going to get a 60-incher out of here."

Miller agrees with him and says the presence of big fish has really changed the way anglers view Lake St. Clair muskie fishing.

"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 weigh 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."

Catching a 40-pounder won't happen to everyone. But there's a good chance that if you do catch a 40-pounder from the Great Lakes, it's going to come from the St. Clair River, the Detroit River, or Lake St. Clair.