

Big Water Muskie

***Finding giant 'skies in
inland seas ... Part 1***

48

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By Matt Straw

Big water can be as intimidating to anglers as it is beautiful to sight-seers. Where to begin? So much water, so little time. A 54-inch musky is a pretty big needle, but the Great Lakes and many surrounding waters are among the largest haystacks on earth.

Unlocking the mystery of big water begins by eliminating the impossible, the unlikely, and the low-percentage areas from the search. Most good anglers conquer big water by dividing it into segments and picking the segments apart. But big-water muskies might wander right out of one segment to the one three doors down, and the way they use each segment changes with conditions.



Even after the structural makeup is dissected, unlocking musky location can be quite different from one body of water to the next. Every lake and river is a unique environment. Excellent habitat for some forage species might be merely adequate for others. Specific forage abundances can drive musky behavior and direct their movements. Conversely, waters like Lake St. Clair produce abundances of every forage species every year, creating a different set of problems. Water clarity can determine depths muskies forage in. Annual temperature profiles, average depths within the waterway, insect hatches - many things affect location. Sometimes you need a professional, so we rounded up the best big-water guides and musky heads in the business to discuss specific keys to location throughout the year on big water.

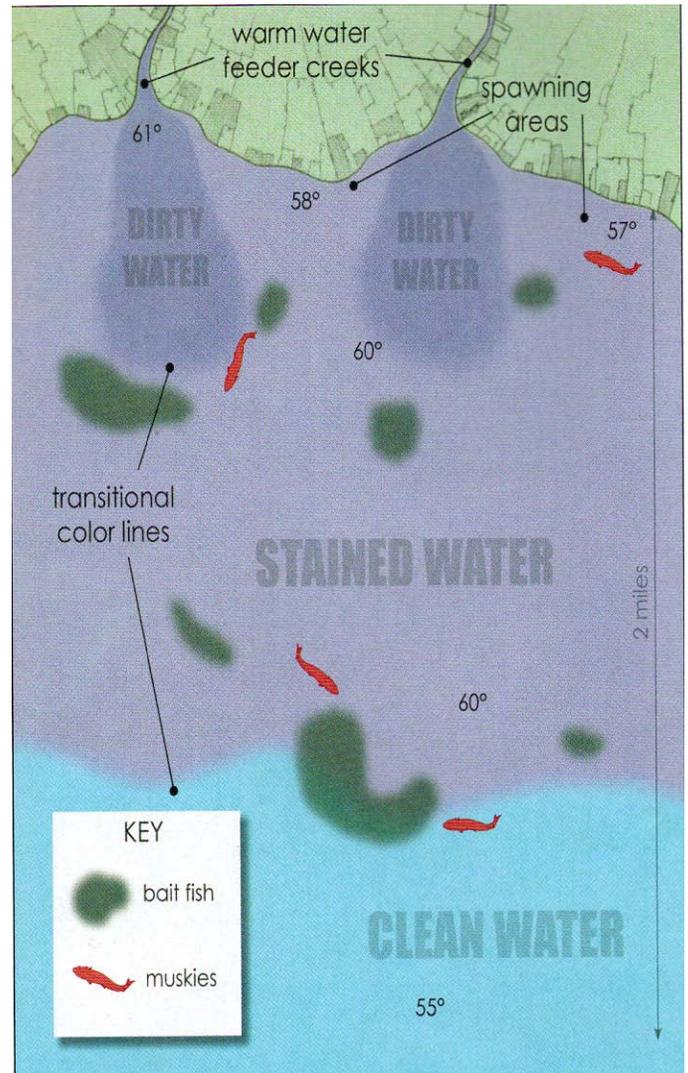
Temperature

When summer begins, big waters may have no thermocline, and rivers never have a thermocline. **Mike Lazarus**, who has been guiding for muskies since 1989, said St. Lawrence River muskies don't want to deal with powerful currents until temperatures reach the mid 60-degree Fahrenheit range. "Concentrate on the slower areas, certainly, but find the warm water. I concentrate on temperature for

three weeks in the early season. Judging by water color, I can see where it's going to be warmer. Sediment helps water warm faster, so brown water will be warmer. I can prolong the early bite by six weeks by avoiding blue, glass-clear water."

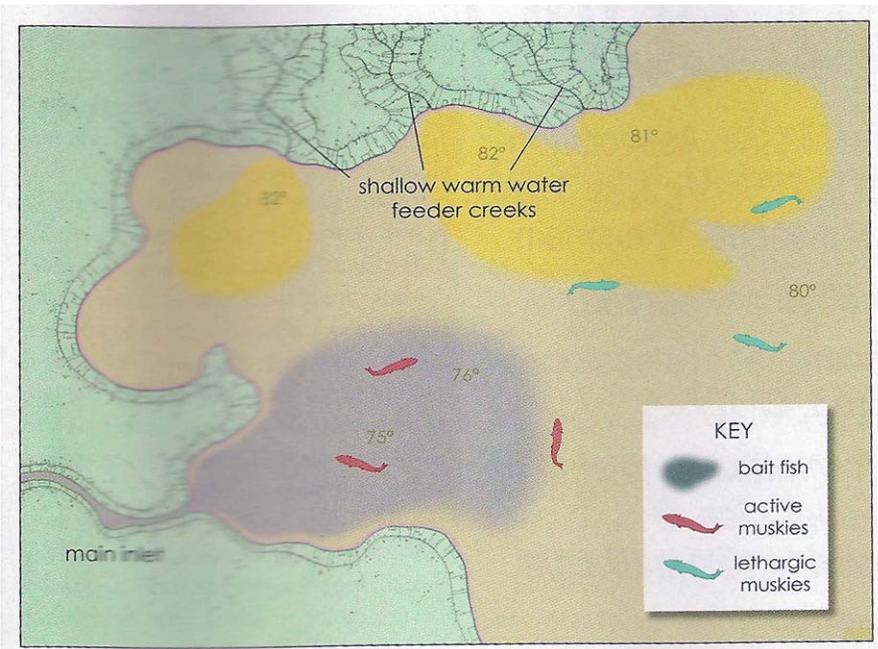
Don Miller, a veteran musky captain for over 30 years on Lake St. Clair (www.MotorCityMuskies.com), works huge Lake St. Clair. Being shallow, it warms quickly and by midsummer, muskies hunt for cooler water. "The water might read 80 degrees in one section and you go upstream and find 75 degrees," he said. "That's your ticket. They move there for comfort. You won't mark many at one time-- muskies don't school much."

Richard Dawidiuk, a musky head from Illinois who chases muskies on big water from Crow Lake to Green Bay to Erie, says he starts searching with water temperature. "I find myself watching the temperature gauge all the time, now;" he said. "It makes it easy for me, fishing big water and new water all the time. Just search for the warmest water and start there, especially early and late in the season," he said. "Then, when the water gets really warm, temperature becomes a good indicator again. At about 68 degrees, muskies seem to be most active. At 80 degrees, they get stressed. Many respond by dropping down to the thermocline and that's when the search simplifies again. When the surface temp on Crow Lake reaches 80 degrees, boy, they go deep. You can catch them on wire line or heavy braid with Bucher *Depth Raiders* and similar lures 25 to 30 feet down. Muskies will be in the main basins. Just go out and find baitfish on the thermocline and troll above both."



Famous musky guide **Steve Herbeck** of Andy Myers Lodge on Eagle Lake, Ontario, concurs: "Big water warms slowly, so it can be an important point," he said. "Even if muskies aren't temperature sensitive, many of the things they hunt are. When you hit those big Canadian Lakes and the water temperatures are still in the 50-degree range, hunt for warm water. People say zooplankton blows up on the windward side, but it's the warmest water, That's the key, everywhere I fish." The muskie season opens the third Saturday in June up on Eagle Lake, Ontario, where Herbeck guides. "You have to locate baitfish, no matter what," he said. "Often that means finding the warmest water. In spring or fall, water 3 to 5 degrees warmer than the rest of the lake is always prime territory."

Jody Mills operates Mills Musky Guide Service on Georgian Bay, where he uses temperature to search for the "big heavy" from midsummer on. "The big fat ones I prefer are looking for surface



temperatures that remain consistently in the mid 70-degree range," he said. "That indicates the presence of baitfish on off-shore structures, making their way out to the main basin. Once I see this happening, I start hitting muskies following baitfish on their migrational routes."

Seasonal Temperatures

Some anglers get tangled up by "preferred temperature," while the crucial consideration might concern what temperature does to

the baitfish. Annual and seasonal temperature changes are used as a compass by many guides - as an indicator of changing cycles that are founded in baitfish movements. When overall seasonal temperature ranges are higher or lower than average, observable changes occur in musky behavior and location.

"In a cold water year (like the past couple years) you see major suspending behavior," Herbeck says. "In flat calm, warming weather, muskies come in. Bigger females might be out suspending no matter what, but in warm-water years, a lot of big fish are suspended for three weeks or so after spawning. The longer the water stays cold, the longer they stay out and suspend. In those colder conditions, with surface temperatures in the low 60s, the wind-is-your-friend rule doesn't always apply. The lee side is where weed growth is best, where more bait fish hang out, on the south and west sides of islands, points, and shorelines. That's where you find shallow fish. Wind patterns are less effective in cold water."

In cold years, most winds are out of the north, northwest, and northeast, so Herbeck hunts the south, southwest, southeast sides of anything blocking those winds. "It will be a degree or two warmer there," he said. "Cold air is blowing over the top, blocking those winds." "It will be a degree or two warmer there," he said. "Cold air is blowing over the top, cooling the waves. But in normal seasons, those regular wind-driven patterns apply. But if a front comes in and affects water temperatures for five or six days in a row, the 'same thing applies: Fish break off structure. When it's not nice, stable weather, fish don't slide shallow as often and hold for two to three days like they do in stable weather. They go down 16 to 20 feet and move on. It's a scattered fish scenario."

In stable weather, Herbeck says, muskies come up and stay on shallow structure, where they can find a wider variety of forage. "In cold-water times, stability is found deep," he said. "That's what they're looking for - stability - a place where the water temperature isn't jumping up and down."

During July through August, Miller says, St. Clair muskies move farther out into the lake as temperatures warm. "Summer surface temps range from 78 to 85 degrees," he said. "At that point,

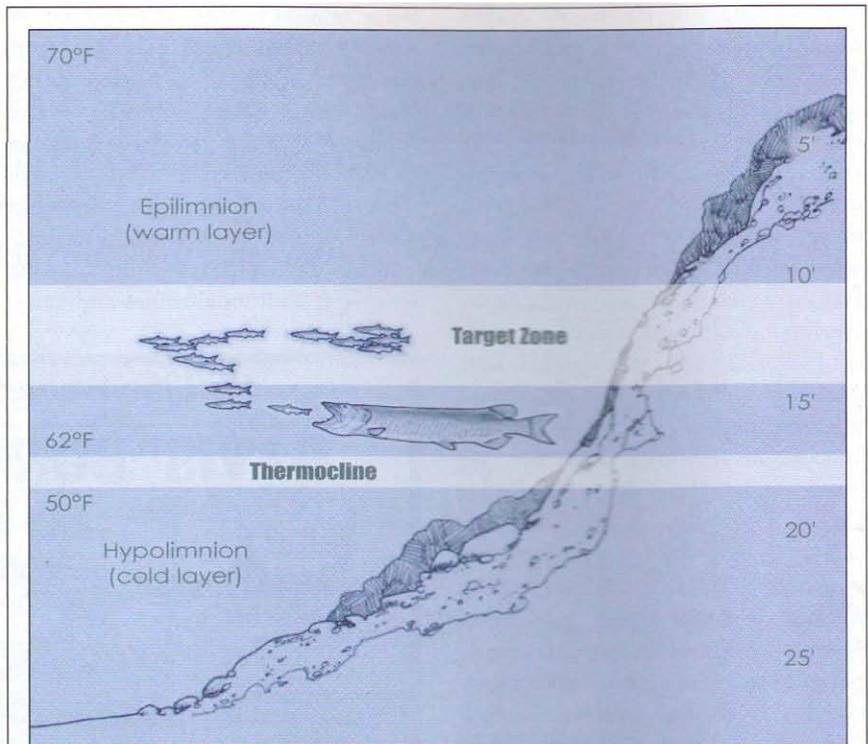
good hunting moves from one to two miles out in front of a feeder river or creek to six or eight miles or farther into the lake, with depths ranging from 16 to 19 feet."

Every pro and guide testifies that surface temperature clues them in to the next cycle of seasonal movements. Lazarus says St. Lawrence River muskies definitely change location when the water cools. "The true complexity of river systems comes into play when water temperatures drop to low 60s in fall and muskies don't want to exert unnecessary energy hanging around in heavy current," he said. "I begin hunting spots where current evens out - back eddies and dead stretches behind major current breaks. In this case, you're fishing spots or areas and not the fish, hunting for reduced flow. Baitfish seek the same relief from current, so the predator-prey relationship balances out into a whole new cycle."

Running Laps

Remember running laps in practice or gym? Muskies in big water run laps 24/7. "Following typical summer patterns on Lac Seul, Wabigoon, or Eagle Lake in Canada, muskies set up for two or three days on a piece of structure, then they come back," Herbeck said. "If you haven't caught her it's because she's not there. They've got laps they make. Best spots are in travel corridors. I know that the same corridors have been in effect for 40 or 50 years in some instances, regardless of whether they're community holes or not. They move in 3 to 4 day laps. If you don't find her, look at nearby structure - 'nearby' being relative. In big water it could be 50 yards to a quarter mile away."

The bigger the water, the bigger the laps might be. Mills says the "big heavies" of Georgian Bay are definitely nomadic. "When casting, I've never raised the same fish twice on the same structure," he said. When trolling my best of the best spots, quite often I won't see muskies on structure, period. And I'm very visually motivated when trolling. Most of the time I see fish on my electronics before the strike occurs. There has been no radio telemetry work on Georgian Bay that I'm aware of, but I



Thermocline Dictates Depth

The thermocline is a border between a highly-oxygenated surface layer (epilimnion) and a (sometimes) sparsely-oxygenated lower layer (hypolimnion). It may not set up until midsummer. In big water, some years it barely sets up at all. Big winds and cold weather may keep the water mixing. Look for it when surface temperatures settle down somewhere over 68 degrees Fahrenheit. With the gain set high, sonar can pick it up. Thermoclines also represent a steep temperature gradient that can be found with down-temp units on downriggers or other devices. It's a key location factor for muskies in lakes (rivers don't establish a thermocline).

Guide Steve Herbeck uses thermocline to determine how to approach a piece of structure. "Thermoclines set up by the second week of July on Canadian lakes," he said. "In cold water years it may never set up. In most of Eagle Lake, except the extreme southern part of the lake, fishing below the thermocline is never worth the time. Thermoclines can move up and down, so keep an eye on it. If it hits structure at, say, 18 feet, you're better off with lures and presentations that target the 12- to 16-foot zone. If you're fishing below 18 feet, you won't see any action at all."

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have been involved in a number of tagging studies on the Bay where muskies have been caught miles from where they were tagged.

"Do they feed in open water?" Mills asks rhetorically. "Most certainly. I've caught 'lunge incidentally while salmon fishing over 230 feet of water with the closest fishable musky structure being four to five miles away. The problem with open-water fishing is that the fish-per-acre density makes it impractical to sift through a bay 150 miles long by 50 miles wide. Where do you stop? The other side?"

Big water muskies follow cycles involving traditional routes and hangouts. Becoming familiar with those cycles eliminates miles of water. In summer, forage abundance can be key. Whatever is most abundant in sizes muskies can utilize will be hunted most heavily. The nature of those bait-fish - temperature regimes they follow, spawning and other habitat requirements, etc. - can determine where muskies are. The primary forage might be whitefish, ciscoes, shad, or some other pelagic species that take muskies out over open water. Or it could be suckers, perch, or some other bottom-oriented species, keeping muskies pinned to structure.

Part 2 of this article, in *Musky Hunter's* August/ September issue, will investigate how predator-prey relationships, water clarity, and other clues not only affect musky movements and the depths they choose, but determine "home" areas they may, or may not establish.