

Lake St. Clair MUSKIES

By Bob Gwizdz

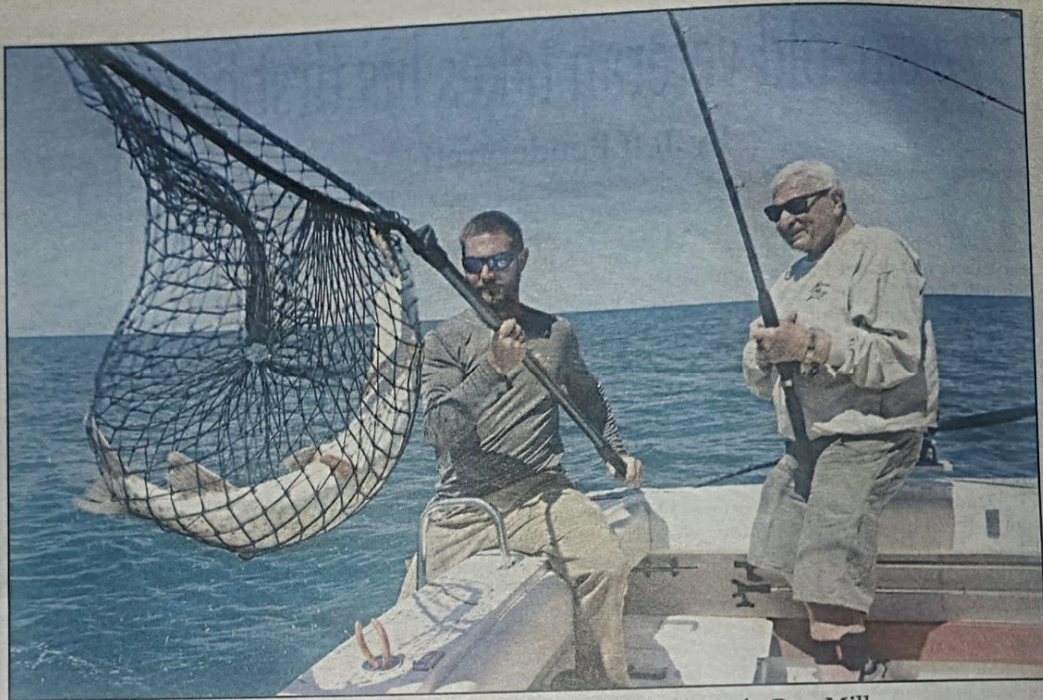
When's the best time to fish for muskies? Most guys I know think it's the heat of the summer, though I've always done best after the heat has broken when we start getting those cool nights, and the water temperature starts going south. A lot depends on how you're fishing—casting, jigging or trolling—but if I had to pick a single month, based on my results, I'd take November. That's when I remember doing double digits most often.

But I was on a recent trip on Lake St. Clair, which I've got to believe is one of the best muskellunge fisheries in the world, when we caught them really well in September. I was with Kurt Nowicki, who is a lifelong muskie angler but has decided to become a charter captain, aboard Reel Therapy, a 31-foot Tiara, powered by twin 454-horse in-board engines. I was invited by Don Miller, a long-time muskie guide, with whom I've fished for probably 30 years, who was on the boat with Kurt, his father Mark (who is a licensed captain) and Kurt's wife. Miller was sharing his experience with the Nowickis and invited me along.

We left out of the Nautical Mile at 8:30 a.m. and headed for Ontario water, where the bulk of muskie fishing occurs on St. Clair during the warm-weather months. It took us nearly an hour to get to where the Nowickis had last fished in 16 to 17 feet of water—a depth they prefer to fish in warm water—and started setting lines. Within a couple of minutes, we had a fish on.

It was a nice one, which had taken a frog-colored Helin trolled at 3.7 miles an hour, a speed that we maintained for the bulk of the day, with a three-ounce in-line weight. The fish measured 46 inches. It was a good start.

It took more than an hour to hook up again, and the second fish, which took a twin-bladed (orange and chartreuse bucktail, was almost



Kurt Nowicki nets a muskie for legendary muskie captain Don Miller.

a twin. It measured 45 inches.

It was a perfect day for muskie fishing, warm (but it had been quite cool overnight) with an eight to 10 mile an hour wind that produced a nice chop, just what the fish gods would order up.

Forty-five minutes later we hit our third fish, this one on a yellow perch-colored Baker body bait with a four-ounce weight. This one was slightly shorter than the last, but still a nice fish.

While Mark ran the boat, Kurt was working non-stop on the rear deck, consistently reeling in lines to check for weeds—there were a lot of them floating around on or near the surface—and we chatted about Kurt's decision to concentrate on muskies.

"I like the thrill of muskies," said Kurt, 39. "The biggest thing is muskies are the top predator in the lake. They're the biggest thing out there and the hardest thing to catch. It's a challenge."

It took another hour to hit another fish, this time a somewhat smaller 'ski, 37 inches, that took a different double-bladed bucktail spinner. Of the eight rods we were running—six on big planer boards, two off the stern—only two were spinners. But they'd produced half of our fish.

"We run a few blades, but mostly wood," Kurt said. "The hand-made wood cranks are consistent fish catchers."

Ten minutes later, we had another hit, but failed to connect. Ten minutes after that we connected on a small fish, measuring 30 inches, that took a five-inch TDL. And 10 minutes after that. We caught another, a 37-inch that took a brown bass-colored Ziggy, which is made in Marine City.

Suddenly, we were on a bunch of fish, which is why we were where we were.

"I'd say 90 percent of our fishing is in Canadian water," Kurt said. "There's a lot less boating traffic, and the water's a little bit dirtier," Kurt said. "It's a little bit easier to fool them in dirtier water. And in the summer there are a lot of weeds on the surface on the Michigan side and so much boat traffic you can't hardly fish. But the Michigan side is really good in the fall."

As the water cools down, Kurt said they'll spend more time on the American side of the lake. "We'll fish up by the spillway on the Clinton River," Kurt said. "In the middle of summer, you can fish along the channel on the U.S. side and catch fish, but it gets a little bit crowded with boat traffic. The Delphine Channel is a good spot and Grosse Pointe is not a bad place to fish in late fall and into December. And in December, up in Anchor Bay is really good. As the water cools down, we fish shallower, around nine to 11 feet."

At 1:45 we caught another, a small fish, 19 inches. It was on a gold-bladed bucktail spinner that was being run on a downrigger ball—not on a 'rigger, but on a ball that was attached to a line and dropped over the side, the first time I'd ever seen that particular presentation. That rig produced a smallmouth bass a few minutes later.

At 2:20, we hooked another, this one on the brown bass Ziggy—the only bait that produced two muskies for us—that measured 41 inches.

At that point, Mark pointed the boat toward Michigan and began trolling our way home. We caught one more fish—another smallmouth—over the last hour when we pulled lines and headed for home.

Not a bad day, eh? Seven for eight (with a couple of bass thrown in). Better than average.

"Our average is four to six bites per trip and depending on the day we boat most of those," Kurt said. "But on other days we only boat one or two. On our last trip, he boated four of five."

The Nowickis have pulled the Tiara for the season, but they have a 21-foot Ranger that they'll fish out of until it's too cold to fish.

"We run three to four trips a week," Kurt said. "I don't want to be too busy. I need some downtime to fix gear. Fishing back to back to back can get a little stressful." ■