



Muskies for Dummies

Try your hand at muskie fishing

by Rob Olson

MANITOBA AND NORTH-western Ontario are chock full of fantastic muskie fishermen, but my buddy Duncan and I are not among them! It's not that we're bad at fishing, but our journey in becoming better at muskie fishing has been slow and our failures almost comical. Yes, we've read the books and magazines and listened hard to experts like Stapon, Pyzer and Gustafson...and still, muskies were slow to fear us. But not anymore. We've learned the hard way, but you don't have to.

If you've ever fancied taking up the muskie challenge, but you just haven't acted on it, I'd like to encourage you to make this the summer you give it a whirl. There's nothing else quite like a muskie. They are quite simply, the biggest, baddest bullies of the lake.

So why are they so darned hard to catch? You'd think they'd smash any lure you throw at them. The great and very cool thing about muskies is that they are very discerning and picky eating machines. This makes them a challenge and if you are looking to take your fishing experience and repertoire to another level, muskies are for you.

TACKLING HUSKY MUSKIES

I think one of the big reasons many fishermen don't try musky fishing is the high cost of muskie lures, coupled with the intimidation factor of the broad choices of lures, all costing an arm and a leg.

I'm quite sure musky experts will howl at my next statement: you only need a few hooks to have some real success with muskies. If you and a friend each plan on spending \$100, you can be more than dangerous as a musky hunter. At the end of the day, if you clipped on one, large silver-bladed bucktail and never took it off your leader, you'd not go too far wrong. Bucktails are your best friend for finding and catching these monsters. Yes, they are expensive, but just plan on buying a couple to start. If you and your buddy



each buy different colors you'll have things pretty well covered and you'll learn which ones the fish want that day.

Muskies love soft plastic baits, especially bulldawg types of baits. Where bucktails get a lot of muskies to follow, bulldawgs seem to get bites. Again, get one or two of these lures. We have found brown and grey to draw in the most fish.

There are millions of plugs and jerkbaits out there for muskies, all of them costing as much as many of my rods! I bought a bunch of them and have casted them all a ton. As a newbie to the game, I'd say they are not as key as bucktails or plastics, not even close. But there are two exceptions: trolling in the fall and casting Swim Whizzes around weeds (or Believers as they are also called).

The Swim Whizz is an incredible musky lure. You can fish it slow and shallow, right over the tops of weeds. It is neutrally buoyant, so you can stop

Musky fishing doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg. Get a \$5 pail, drill holes in the bottom to let the water out and start hanging lures as you collect them.

and start it to trigger unaggressive fish, or you can rip it when they are "on". If you can only buy one plug, buy a big, orange or yellow Swim Whizz (Believer). Oops, you actually need one more plug: a top water lure such as a top raider. In low light, you will get action on these and they are too much fun to cast and watch come in as the sun is setting. When a big wake comes behind the lure, your knees will start knocking!

On all these lures, we have found size matters. Go for lures in the "middle of the pack" size wise. Those massive, huge contraptions are just too hard and tiring to throw and the smaller stuff doesn't seem to ring the musky's dinner bell most of the time. As for color, we have found silver, orange and yellow to be key. If you really get into it, you can add colors, but these are enough to start.

Buy great leaders. Ever heard of the saying "don't buy a \$10 rope for a \$25,000 boat?" Same goes here.

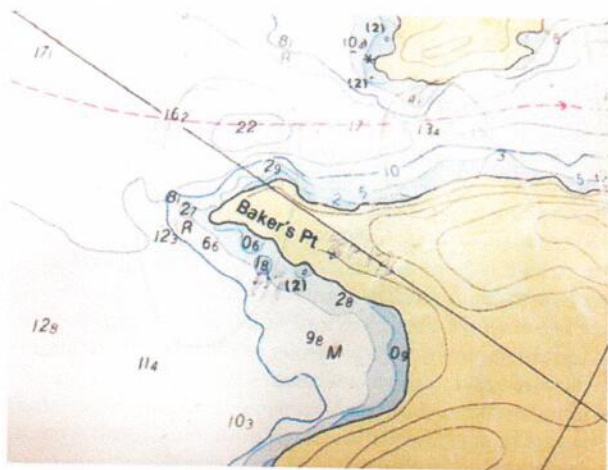
You have a lot of money invested in these lures, protect them with a good, musky leader. Just ask the folks at Cabelas or your local tackle store, they'll get you the right stuff. Most importantly, when you finally do hook up a giant, and you will, don't lose that precious fish to a poor leader or crappy line.

Buy these three lures and start catching musky.



Remember, these fish are massive and violent, especially at boat side, so your tackle needs to match them.

If you don't have a big net, get one. You need it for big catfish on the Red and for pike, so get it. And watch your-



Blue is gold: find shoreline weed beds adjacent to deep water, cast bucktails at sunset and hold on tight!

here. A great starting point is to focus on the summer period when most of us mortals get a chance to chase a musky.

Muskie season from Minaki throughout the LOTW opens on the third weekend in June and gener-

ally speaking, this is a catch and release fishery. You can keep a huge specimen (check the regulations for Zone 5 in the online Ontario fishing regs), but why would you? Replica mounts these days are awesome. No, this is a catch and release game where you are matching wits with the smartest, meanest dude in the lake, the other fish are for shore lunch.

And while there are certainly deep muskies in the summer, an easy peasey pattern is to focus on casting to shallow shoreline weed beds. There are some muskies in weed flats all summer. We have found the best weed beds are not those big shallow weedy areas in the far back ends of the bays. Come July and August, shallow weed shelves adjacent to the main lake basin are dynamite. A great advantage of Minaki and LOTW is that it is all mapped. Look for wide blue bands (shallow zones) on your map adjacent to the main lake, and start casting there, with a tight grip on your rod because something special and crazy-fun is fixin' to happen to you.

PROVOCATION

But how do you provoke these finicky rascals to bite? Time of day really matters for these fish. Low light seems to be your best bet to get one to bite so if you are with the kids at the Lake, or you only have a short time, focus on the

sunset period. Yes, you can get them to show themselves and catch them in the morning, but sunset time is catching time in our brief experience.

This is the one fish that will make your heart pound just by following your bait to the boat. Seeing a 30 or 40lb leviathan come right to the boat is just indescribable. And finding the muskies is half the battle since they are often right at that same spot again, so come back later and try to get it to bite.

If you are with a buddy, cast different lures to see what they want that day. And practice to make perfect your figure 8 skills. Check out videos on YouTube to see how it's done. Always watch your bait to the boat because it is amazing how often you can get a following musky to "do it" on a figure 8.

A total no-brainer way to start musky fishing is to go and stay where I fish at Bayview Lodge at Minaki and pick the brain of owner Bryan Rheault. Bryan is the prototypical cantankerous

old musky guide, like something out of a movie. He isn't famous, probably only because he doesn't care to be. One look at the tooth marks on his favorite musky lures tells you he's forgotten more than many know about these great fish.

Booking a day of guiding with a guy like Bryan, or one of the many guides on LOTW, is the best investment you'll ever make to learn how to catch these fish. Or you can do what my cheapskate buddy and I do, and just get advice from Bryan. He shares it freely. Bryan put us on good spots and

gave us great advice. But half the fun is learning some of it on your own too.

There is just something magical about these fish. For me it is to do with the mystery of what lies under the lake surface. The notion that there are giant, vicious fish living down there that can rip the rod out of your hands. Casting into dark waters, sun setting, loons calling and then the biggest strike of your life comes and you feel totally and completely alive. Give it a try.

self with these fish because they are violent. Although it's legal to have barbs in Ontario, consider pinching them to reduce injuries to you and the fish while handling these brutes. As for rods, you can likely use your big catfish spinning rod or your heaviest rod that you use for pike to start with. If you decide this is for you, you can invest in a heavy action rod and baitcasting reel which you can also use for cats on the Red.

LOCATION, LOCATION...

WHILE ON VACATION

I often envy the guys that fish all the time. I for one can't pull that off. I work too much, my wife expects me to do lotsa stuff and my kid likes sports too much. I bet most of you are more like me than the folks we see on TV or read about in magazines. So an extra trip just for muskies? Forget it.

But here we are in Manitoba, sitting right next to what is one of the best musky fisheries in the world in the twin waterbodies of the Winnipeg River system by Minaki and the mighty Lake of the Woods. There is a musky statue in Kenora for a very good reason.

Duncan and I have incorporated muskies into our annual summer fishing vacation getaway to Minaki. We do muskies at sunrise and sunset and chase everything else throughout the day. You can also mix in some muskies when you get to Lake of the Woods to your cabin here and there, or when you visit your friend's cabins.

But these waterbodies are so bloody huge, with so many places to fish, where in the heck do you start? There are literally hundreds of musky patterns, tied to the changing habits of these fish as the seasons change, but let's keep it simple



All muskies are trophies.