

The Musky Masters

*Article and Illustration by
Charles Weiss*

The mighty muskellunge has been called the fish of 10,000 casts but you don't have to do that much work to catch one. This is especially true in the fall when muskies go on the feed in preparation for winter. Over the summer I talked to 10 top anglers and guides from several of Ontario's best musky waters to find out how they go about catching these fish. Armed with the knowledge they share in this article, along with a little bit of good luck, the odds of catching a musky this fall will definitely be in your favour.



John Anderson



Gord Bastable



Brian Berriault



Andy Copland



JOHN ANDERSON

www.ottawarivermuskyfactory.com



Profile

John Anderson began guiding on the Winnipeg River in the mid 1970s. Since that time, he has fished from Cave Run Lake in Kentucky to eastern Quebec. He has been musky fishing for 35-years and currently operates the Ottawa River Musky Factory along an 80-mile stretch of river between the dams in Ottawa and Carillon.

Timing

The best times to fish for musky are in early July and then from late August onward. The first cold nights start the muskies roaming. Water temperatures start to lower and musky feeding starts to increase. Your chances of catching a large fish are the best at this time of year.

Location

What I look for in the fall are the classic musky areas. Large structures on the Ottawa River are the key to finding large muskies. Sandbars are good, so are areas that continue to have green weeds. Muskies really like these weeds. Continue fishing until you find the green weeds that are "muskie magnets". A tip to remember when you've snagged a weed is to give it a quick sniff - sour smelling weeds will not have muskies nearby. River mouths are also great spots to try. So are the large openings of bays - these are ambush points for muskies.

Tactics

My favourite method for fall musky fishing is casting. Increase the size of your lures; start with a 12 in-long jerkbait. Spinners should have a large profile with three treble hooks and weigh between 2 and 2 1/2-ounces. When casting isn't productive, start trolling large crankbaits like Leos, Jakes and Hookers. A tip to consider is trolling a double blad-

ed bucktail with large blades behind a 2 to 3-ounce weighted keel sinker. Secondary structure breaks in the 15 to 30-foot depths are the spots for trolling these large lures.

Don't ignore shallow water in depths of 4-feet or less. Try casting jerkbaits like Sledges and Leos. Small bucktail lures, like the largest Mepps Aglia with a willowleaf blade, or shad style crankbaits in the 5 to 6-inch size are good to try in shallow areas of the river.

Baits

Crankbaits like Jakes and Leos are good in the late fall. Tennessee Shad is a great colour pattern on lures at this time of year. White is another good colour choice. Schooling bait fish resemble these lure patterns and will help you "match-the-hatch". My favourite lures also include jerkbaits and bucktails.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

Muskies maintain my interest because they keep me searching. I'm always trying to solve the muskie puzzle and the puzzle is always different. When I'm musky fishing my whole world is reduced to solving musky fishing problems. I've got the greatest job in the world teaching about muskies and delivering musky fishing memories to my clients on the Ottawa River.

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

A funny thing happened with one client I had. A couple, a husband and wife, were casting hard all day and I suggested that she didn't have to end each cast with a figure-eight. She was ending one of her retrieves with a topwater lure and raised the bait out of the water when a 4-foot long musky rose underneath it. The fish had its mouth open but missed the lure and crashed against the boat before slipping back into the water. She screamed and dropped the fishing rod in the boat then ran back to her husband and exclaimed, "I don't want to fish anymore!" Her husband and I laughed for almost five minutes after that.

GORD BASTABLE

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Profile

Gord Bastable has over 30-years of fishing experience on Eagle Lake, Ontario, and for the past 16-years he has been the owner of Vermilion Bay Lodge. He has spent most of his fishing life prowling Eagle Lake and says he has little interest in chasing muskies anywhere else. Some of Gord's early musky fishing mentors where the guides that went out of North Shore Lodge on Eagle Lake, people like Lawrence Campbell, Willy Danielson and the Wilson brothers. Gord also learned from long time musky-chasing guests such as "Doc" Brackett, Bill Balcom, Larry Ramsell and Len Hartman who each had a different approach to musky fishing.

Timing

The best time of year is more of a personal preference for me. Mid-summer seems to be the most predictable fishing in my opinion, but I would probably lean towards the fall. If you can put up with the inconsistencies of conditions you are generally rewarded with windows of opportunity that seem to only occur late in the season.

Location

What I look for might change over the course of the season but, in the simplest terms, I look for conditions that may attract and hold fish. This can include everything - wind direction, weeds, rock structure, and the adjacent topography. The more factors that come together, the better the spot will be. One thing to always keep in mind is that a musky can be anywhere. There are no "bad" spots.

Tactics

My favourite method would be casting, but I do enjoy breaking up the day with some trolling, especially in the fall. Trolling has produced some of my bigger fish.

Baits

I would rate the success I've had with certain lures in this order: bucktails as number one; jerkbaits at number two and surface baits as number three. As far as preferences for what lure to use under what conditions, my only real preference is to use a jerkbait in the weeds, that's where they really "shine". My favourite method of fishing has to be top-water. Anything from bass to pike to musky can be caught on topwater baits. It is by far the most exciting and unpredictable way to fish.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

My main interest in musky fishing is the challenge of fooling one of nature's top predators. It rarely works, so being stubborn is a good prerequisite for an Eagle Lake muskie angler. I'm motivated to keep musky fishing due to my stubborn streak and because I



believe there is always a much bigger fish in my future. Plus, I just like to be out on the water tossing baits around. You never know what will happen.

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

The strangest, and perhaps funniest, tale about muskie fishing occurred while guiding Bill Balcom and his cousin John Iten. John had an explosive temper and was often set off by small details, such as a backlash or a missed fish. Bill and I would try to ignore these frequent tantrums. It finally culminated when John had a good musky hooked. John played the fish off the bow of the boat as the fish swam from side to side. Not being a gifted angler, he decided that keeping the rod tip low to the water was the way to go. Unfortunately he forgot how to compensate for the frequent runs the fish was making. As the rod met the edge of the boat and the pressure on the rod built, John leaned further towards the rod tip and the lake. The sound of John hitting the water alerted us that all was not well! We knew that John was still on board by the soles of his shoes hooked over the side of the boat, but the swearing from the water was a bad sign. We pulled John back aboard and he was only dry from the waist down. Bill and I retreated to the back of the boat where we busied ourselves with chores, trying to avoid eye contact with the ranting, enraged, wringing wet, defeated musky angler in the bow. Finally we could take it no longer and burst out laughing. I think John finally forgave us, but for years it was always a touchy subject. It sure gave Bill and I some serious laughs as we motored down the lake!

BRAIN BERRIAULT

www.backwatertackle.com



Profile

Brian Berriault has been fishing the waters of Georgian Bay for most of his life and currently operates Backwater Tackle and Line in Midland, Ontario. He caught his first musky when he was just 12 years old and has been fishing for them for 30-years. Brian learned about musky fishing from his father and from his own experiences gained over many years on the water.

Timing

The best times to catch muskies on Georgian Bay are in late June and in the fall, through September and October.

Location

I spend a lot of time casting along ledges and weed edges in 8 to 14-feet of water.

Tactics

I prefer casting a jerkbait or pulling a big plastic bait, all the way. At least you get to see the fish.



Who knows how many muskies I troll by every year and never get to see?

Baits

My favourite lures include the Suick, Swamp Donkey and homemade bucktails. The old Believer in the jail-bird colour rules for trolling.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

I enjoy musky fishing for the thrill of the chase. It's the fish themselves that motivate me to keep targeting them.

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

I once had a guy hook himself in the private parts during a musky charter I was running.

ANDY COPLAND

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Profile

Andy Copland has been musky fishing for 15-years and does all of his musky fishing on Lake St Clair and the Detroit river where he runs Just Fish Guide Service. In Andy's opinion there is no need to travel beyond this system and he is certain that he will "catch the big one" from there someday. Andy caught his first musky when he was 18-years old while fishing with his grandfather. He credits "many very knowledgeable musky men" with teaching him the basics but says that his biggest leaning curve has come from spending time on the water and experimenting with different techniques.

Timing

Spring, summer and fall all give up good numbers of fish but, like most place in Ontario, the fall would have to be the best time of year for numbers of fish and big sizes.

Location

What I look for at most times of the year is water temperature and good numbers of bait fish. Here on Lake St. Clair there is very little bottom structure so for most of the year we troll open water looking for actively feeding fish.

Tactics

My favourite methods are casting and jigging, but if you want to catch good numbers and cover lots of water, trolling with planer boards is the key. My trolling spread starts with my outside board rod set high in the water column. I usually start with 1-ounce of weight ahead of my lure, which is set 30 to 35-feet back of the board. I like to run my inside line a little deeper so I use 3 to 4-ounces of weight and set the lure 50 to 60-feet behind the board. My favourite set up for a boat rod with no planer board is to use 6-ounces of weight with the lure set 30 to 40-feet back, under the prop wash. I'll drop that back to 50 or 60-feet back on some days. For trolling bucktails, 2-ounces of weight and 75-feet behind the planer board seems to hook up the best for me. The key is to keep playing with line length and weight and let the fish dictate what they want.

Fall fishing lets me fish favourite style and that is casting or jigging in the Detroit river. When the fish are feeding up high in the water I cast a heavy bulldog jig in motor oil, black, white, or silver flake patterns. On most days in the fall there are a lot of big fish roaming the deep areas of the river too, so fishing near the bottom with 3 to 4-ounce jigheads tipped with big plastics or jigging Fuzzy Duzzits can really pay off.

Baits

My specific lure choices for open water trolling are all locally made body baits like Woodie's, Harvo's, Loke's and Artifacts in both jointed and straight models. I use a number of natural colour patterns I never overlook putting a walleye, skunk or fire tiger pattern "buck-tail" in my trolling spread. My bucktails of choice are the St. Clair Hound and the Lil Instigator. These are both locally made and are proven to catch fish. For deep jigging I like the Fuzzy Duzzit or heavy jig/plastic combinations.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

I enjoy fishing for muskies because they're elusive and you never know how big they are going to be. I'm motivated to teach others what I have learned. There is no better feeling for me then when a first timer lands their first musky.

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

My strangest musky fishing story would have to be the time I was cleaning weeds off of a bait that I

was casting. I was just shaking it about a foot above the surface and out of nowhere, "bang," a 51-inch long musky came out of the water, grabbed the lure and the fight was on. I landed that big muskie, what a surprise!

BILL CRAIG

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Profile

Bill Craig has been musky fishing for 37-years and has over 32-years experience on the Ottawa River. He has operated Mister Muskie Charters for 27-years and has been the head instructor at the Ontario Musky Fishing Academy for 11-years. Bill caught his first musky when he was 15. He is a self-taught expert whose only mentoring came from the local bait shop who told him to, "get a boat, get comfortable and fish eight hours a day."

Timing

The best time to catch a musky on the Ottawa River is based on the mooneye run. This usually starts in July and continues until September. Water temperatures are critical to good musky fishing. I believe that water in the high 60°F range is the best.

Location

Deep water is always good. I look for areas with water depths in the 30-foot range that are located near a 10 to 12-foot deep flat area. These areas are especially good if they are near a bay or on the edge of a channel.

Tactics

I like casting large wooden jerkbaits or trolling along the edge of channel flats with spinner baits. When I'm trolling I weave the boat in a zigzag pattern, driving the lure into the channel edge.

Baits

I really like heavy, 2-ounce spinnerbaits with two blades, black hair and red blades. At twilight I'll go to brown hair and brass blades. In calm water I like black hair and silver blades. I also use short lipped crankbaits like the Woodie Thumper in walleye colours and 10-inch long Reef Hawgs.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

I watch the water and keep notes in a book about my observations through the seasons. I record any areas where I see big musky splashes or rising fish. I'm still motivated to pursue muskies because I'm after the heaviest World record musky.

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

I was fishing with Dave Weatherall when he suddenly had a fish bite near a rock shoal. I told him to lower his rod, because it looked like the fish might jump. I

said, "Put the rod down," and suddenly he drops the rod into the bottom of the boat! We got a quick look at the musky and it was nearly 40-pounds! Needless to say, he lost the fish.

PETE MAINA

www.petemaina.com



Profile

Pete Maina is internationally renowned for his prowess at catching muskies. He caught his first when he was 10-years old and has specialized in musky fishing for 36-years. He founded Musky Mania Tackle, which eventually became the largest muskie/pike lure company in the world, prior to selling it in 2004. When he's not catching muskies, Pete Maina spends his time as a magazine owner, entrepreneur, author, photographer, professional speaker and as a co-host on The Next Bite television show.

Timing

The best time to go musky fishing is anytime during the season. The fall is the best time for big fish because the large females are following forage and this makes them vulnerable to anglers.

Location

In the fall I concentrate on structure. I look for deeper breaks near the main lake. Shallow flats that follow along next to lower breaks are always worth a look too. I like to know what the muskies are eating so I use my electronics and try to follow forage.

Tactics

My favourite method for catching muskies is casting. During the early fall I prefer the shallow locations where I'll search for muskies near the top. I use search pattern lures like soft plastics, crankbaits, jerkbaits or even jigs. Later in the fall I troll with big crankbaits and crash them into structure or I'll fish sharp breaks with a vertical presentation like a jig. I look for inside turns to be prime areas.

Baits

I will use a wide variety of lures depending on the type of area I'm fishing. I recommend you choose lures that cover the water column from top to bottom. This includes all the ones I've previously mentioned as well as very large tube jigs and deep diving crankbaits.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

I enjoy musky fishing because of the challenge - the personal challenge of trying to figure them out on a complex lake. The challenge is there each day you're fishing. When a muskie suddenly bites it still gets me. It scares me and it surprises me!

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

One day I was guiding a father and son for musky. I repeatedly showed them the way to make a successful figure-eight motion at the side of the boat when a muskie is following their lure. I showed them this method many times over a five-hour period. Suddenly, the father says in a dramatic, radio-announcer-like voice, "There's a muskie!" I look over and see that he has reeled his lure completely in, and is pointing towards the water at a muskie that is slowly fading from sight! Some people are overwhelmed when they finally see a musky. I guess he was one of them!

RODEL MISA

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Profile

A relative newcomer to the world of musky fishing, Rodel Misa has spent the past 7-years fishing and guiding in Ontario's Kawartha Lakes region. He was introduced to musky fishing by his brother, Rommel, and caught his first musky while casting a jerkbait on Buckhorn Lake.

Timing

You have to consider the weather. In a normal year the first three weeks of June are good. As the season progresses into September the musky fishing





gets even better. Boat activity in the Kawartha slows down in the fall and the water temperatures start to go down. That seems to trigger the fish to feed. The fishing gets better and the fish get bigger.

Location

I look for deep water near tall weeds. I look for flats in open water that are near islands that have a good weed around them. The breaklines are the key to finding muskies, especially areas that offer a gradual depth change. I like to concentrate on the leeward side of islands throughout the fall season.

Tactics

In my opinion, casting is the best technique because when you see a follow you can read the muskies mood. Is the fish following from far back or is it chasing and hitting at your lure? You tune into their location, find out where they are and what depth they are in. You can start to pattern the fish this way. Slow paced retrieves are good in the fall. Keep the lure in a slow roll - it has to resemble a struggling or a wounded fish. A lot of variables can negatively influence fishing for muskies, things such as boat traffic and cold fronts for example. You've got to learn how these affect the fish and you have to adapt.

Baits

Jerkbaits, such as the 8-inch Reef Hawg, are great. Also consider large jigs and soft plastics. I call these my touch-down baits. Tiger Tubes and Bull Dawgs get attention of following muskies.

Spinnerbaits are good casting baits. I like 1-ounce models with double blades, twin single hooks and bucktail hair. Chartreuse blades and black hair catch fish all season long.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

Musky fishing is the neatest thing in the world! When you're fishing in calm water, the quiet can disappear in an instant if a good sized muskie decides to follow your bait. You never know if they'll bite. My interest in muskie fishing will never end. There are always moments when you can learn more about muskies.

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

I was fishing alone in October, casting a jerkbait close to shore. I finished a retrieve and the bottom of the lure was trailing in the water as I considered my next cast. Suddenly, a good sized musky bites the lure with a splash. It was a surprising moment! I dropped the rod and it bounced off the gunnel of the boat and into the lake. I quickly grabbed the end of the floating handle and begin fighting the fish. When I landed the muskie it measured 52-1/2-inches in length and had a 25-inch girth. Quick reflexes help in muskie fishing!

GORD PYZER

Profile

Known in fishing circles as "Doctor Pyzer", Gord Pyzer has a Master's degree in Natural Resource Management and worked for thirty years as a senior manager with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. He has been musky fishing for over 50-years and has called Lake of the Woods his home lake for 32 of those. Gord caught his first musky on Lake Scugog when he was 6 or 7-years old. In 2003, Gord he was recognized as one of 30 Canadians ... "who have had the biggest impact on hunting, fishing and conservation in Canada since 1972," and in 2009 he was inducted into the Canadian Angler Hall of Fame. An internationally sought out speaker and seminar presenter, Gord is the Fishing Editor of Outdoor Canada Magazine; Field Editor of In-Fisherman Magazine and Television; Co-Host of the In-Fisherman Ice Guide Television series and Co-Host of the Real Fishing Radio Show. Gord is also the President of Canadian Angling Adventures Ltd.

Timing

I think the biggest reason big muskies are caught in the fall is because once the water temperature drops below 15°C their summer home ranges break down. They're not locked into small home ranges. In the fall muskies become wanderers, constantly moving around. Since most fall muskie anglers troll, it is



much more likely two moving targets are going to collide. Too, fish like herring, tullibees and whitefish spawn in the fall and muskies take advantage of the feeding opportunity. Finally, muskies enter a state of torpor in the winter when they barely feed so they have to gain as much nourishment as possible in the fall to carry them over the tough winter months. All of these factors contribute to the fall being the best time to catch the animal.

Location

I like to key in on deep water/shallow water transitions, especially areas with moving water and/or current. Areas where I know herring and whitefish gather to spawn are also high on my list.

Tactics

I prefer to cast because it is a much more exciting visual and interactive game. But, as mentioned above, trolling is often a higher percentage game so when the temperature gets frigid and casting becomes even more work than normal, I'll troll. In fact, I caught my two biggest muskies, including the biggest muskie released in Ontario in the last year of the Molson Big Fish Awards - which I won, and my personal best that based on length/girth measurements was 57.5 pounds, were both caught trolling. As a general rule, I've found between 8 and 18-feet to be the best depth in the fall.

Baits

I have an old (20-years plus) Grandma bait that I've probably caught in excess of 100 nice fish with. It is always tied on a rod for casting. The new Storm Kicking Minnow has been good to me for the past few years casting as well. And the new, 10 to 12-inch wood and plastic swimbaits coming out of California have been excellent. For trolling I like the old Swim Whiz and Jakes.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

Musky fishing is often an exercise in frustration. One of my friends likes to call it, "brute strength and ignorance," and I sometimes think he is right! It is the challenge, though, fishing for a top predator. I like predators - great white sharks, grizzly bears, polar bears, Bengal tigers - and muskies. There are never many of them, and being able to do battle with such magnificent animals is both an honour and a privilege.



Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

One time, Bob Izumi's Marketing Director was up fishing with me and he mentioned he really wanted to catch a muskie. By pure coincidence I had raised a nice fish a few days earlier and knew where she was likely lurking. So I rigged him up, showed him how to do a figure 8, in case she followed, and took him to the spot. He cast out and lo and behold he raised her. She was a giant! As she started to follow his lure I went berserk and started yelling to him to "figure 8, figure 8!" But instead of figure 8-ing, he sped up his retrieve and pulled the lure out of the water as quickly as he could. I looked at him totally stunned! That is when I saw his face, which told me everything I needed to know. He didn't need to say a word - his face said it all - "Are you crazy. I don't want to be hooked to that thing!"

MARK THORPE

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Profile

Mark Thorpe has been fishing for muskies since he was 16 and he has been guiding since the age of 19. He caught his first musky on the St. Lawrence River when he was 16. He got his start fishing with John Viau and Peer Regis. Mark credits a long time guide named "Muskies Ace" Roy Brunner with developing the trolling system that Mark uses to this day and he says that Roy was his biggest influence on how to troll for muskies.



Timing

There are no times during the season that are better than others. Each season has monthly peaks and valleys which are influenced by the weather.

Location

Fish movements vary from season to season and from year to year. Generally speaking, structure fishing is productive, but not all fish relate to structure. Some wander breaklines and deeper holes along the river. I'd say that, overall, structure and weed lines are generally good starting points.

Tactics

Whichever presentation that makes fish respond is my preferred method of musky fishing. I would say that catching a big fish while tossing tubes or jerkbaits is a heck of an experience.



Baits

I use a multitude of lures such as Chubbies, Stalkers and Perch Baits. I have been using tubes and Bull Dawgs for some years with good success. Spinnerbaits are always in my arsenal because their vibration and flash seems to trigger fish.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

Musky fishing can be the experience of a lifetime within the excitement of the moment. It takes a predator to hunt a predator down. I'm obsessed by the moments of peace and tranquility that fishing has to offer - just before all hell breaks loose!

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

The most unique musky fishing story I have had to be about "the day of the giants." I was fishing with Steve Bedarf when he captured a 57-inch monster. After releasing the fish we got back to fishing and 20-minutes later Steve hooked into an even bigger one. When we landed the fish it measured in at 58-inches!

GREG VIDEKI

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Profile

Greg Videki runs Premier Musky Guide Service out of Callander, on Lake Nipissing. He got the musky bug when he caught his first musky 30-years ago on Chemong Lake. Over the last 9-years he has dedicated himself to fishing exclusively for muskies. Greg learned the basics of musky fishing from his grandfather.



Timing

Any time you're on the water after opening day is a good time for musky fishing. Post-spawn and pre-fall turnover are my favourite times. Muskies are actively searching and they're really aggressive. They can be structure related or they can be roaming in big water, suspended and feeding.

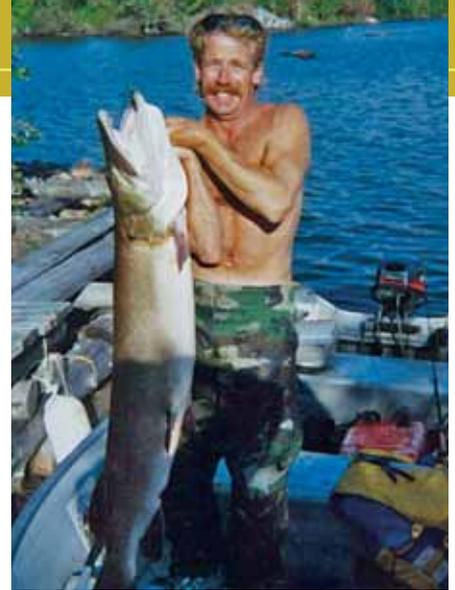
Location

Structure, structure & structure! I look for heavy weeds or rock following along a break in depth or large boulders in weedy areas. Also, man-made structure such as docks, boat houses, cribbing and sunken ice fishing shacks.

Tactics

I like casting in the early summer and trolling in the fall. My favourite method is casting because you see the strike and immediately set the hook. There's a real intimacy involved.

Post-spawn fish aren't accustomed to seeing baits so they are aggressive and territorial. Early in the year I'll cover a lot of water with bucktails or fast moving topwater baits. I start shallow, in 1 to 3-feet of water, and as the season progresses I move deeper; to weed beds close to deep water or to points off the



mainland and islands just off of spawning bays. The fall is the time to search for deep, secluded weed beds and rock structure. Look for quick breaks in contour, especially near current from rivers or wind between islands (saddles).

When trolling in the fall, the most important thing is knowing where and what your bait is doing. You have to be observant and understand the water depth and baitfish habits. These are all pieces of the puzzle. Always take the opportunity to change the speed or action of your baits, either by dropping back the bait to slow it down or by raising the rod tip to follow the bottom contours. A quick, sweeping action causes the bait to dart and dramatically hit the bottom or structure. This sudden change in speed or action can trigger fish to bite. Keep this in your fishing game plan!

Baits

In the spring and early summer I like topwaters and spinnerbaits for shallow water and crankbaits like Shallow Raiders and Depth Raiders for deeper areas. In the early fall I use larger spinnerbaits along with large, wide wobbling body baits like Jakes or Grandmas. Later in the fall use jointed Believers and Legends because they have lots of built in vibration.

Thoughts on Musky Fishing

The anticipation between bites is what keeps me chasing muskies. You never know when one will hit or how big it will be.

Memorable Musky Fishing Moment

While handling a 45-inch long musky I accidentally got caught on a large Jake crankbait. I got the treble hook stuck in my right hand index finger! Ouch! I was a bit bloody, but the fish was successfully released.

So there you have it, over 270 years of combined musky fishing know-how from some of the best anglers in the game. Use it wisely and remember the CPR rule of musky fishing – catch, photograph and release them. Muskies are far too valuable to be caught just once. 🐟