

## The ODNR Division of Wildlife's Muskellunge Program

The ODNR Division of Wildlife's muskellunge program is designed to maintain high-quality muskellunge fisheries at a limited number of lakes throughout Ohio. More commonly known as "muskie", these fish are stocked in a relatively even number of lakes throughout the state so that all Ohioans can enjoy these catching them. Water quality, habitat, available prey, and angler access are also important considerations.

Muskie have large teeth and a soft dorsal fin situated far back near the forked tail. They differ from the other members of the pike family (Northern pike and pickerels) in having cheeks that are half-scaled; the others have fully scaled cheeks. The upper body of a muskie is greenish, yellowish, or brownish olive; the sides are light olive-green, yellow, or golden with some dusky spots on the rear third. The belly is white or yellowish.

Female muskie grow faster and live longer than males. By age 3, females are larger than males, and they continue to grow faster in later years (see table). The largest muskie caught in Ohio was a 50 1/2 inch, 55 lb. 2 oz. fish taken from Piedmont Lake by Joe Lykins in 1972.

Male muskie become sexually mature at three years of age, females at four. Spawning occurs in April and May when water temperatures reach the low 50s. The eggs are small, about 45,000 to 50,000 per quart. A single female may produce as many as 200,000. The eggs are dropped on soft shallow bottoms, where they adhere to vegetation and other debris. With water temperatures in the mid-50s, the eggs hatch in a week to ten days. The fry absorb their yolk sac in about one week and then move about in search of food-microscopic animals (zooplankton) and newly hatched fish. In Ohio, muskie rarely reproduce in our man-made lakes; therefore, annual stocking is required to provide fishing opportunities.

Muskie are opportunistic feeders which eat the most abundant prey fishes that are readily available. Suckers are usually their most common food in streams and gizzard shad, carp and suckers are mainstays in lakes. Scientists reported Ohio's native muskie to be abundant as early as 1810 and it was still considered economically important as a commercial fish as late as 1930. After 1930, muskie populations declined significantly - especially in the Lake Erie drainage area - as a result of urbanization, blocking of migration routes to spawning areas by dams, and draining these vast marshlands they spawned in for agriculture. Stream populations were severely limited by pollution, channelization, and siltation of spawning habitat. These fish were hardly known to modern-day fishermen until the Division began its artificial propagation in 1952.

The Division first attempted to propagate muskie in 1948. Native brood fish were live trapped from Ohio streams and placed in hatchery ponds at Kincaid Fish

Farm, in hopes that natural reproduction would occur. Because of poor success with this project, an artificial propagation program was started. Success was achieved in 1953, when 10,000 fry were stocked in Rocky Fork Lake and 2,265 fingerlings were stocked in nine selected lakes and streams, inaugurating a new muskie era for Ohio. Since then, the Division has greatly expanded its propagation and stocking program. In 1982, the Division redirected its efforts to the production of 8- to 10-inch fish, because research demonstrated that large fish survive better than small fish (3- to 6-inch). As a result, opportunities for catching muskie are better in Ohio today than ever before.

Most Ohio muskie are caught from April through October when the water temperature is 55 to 75 degrees. The best lakes to fish for muskie are Leesville, Clear Fork Reservoir, Salt Fork, West Branch, Alum Creek, Piedmont, Caesar Creek, Cowan, Milton and Pymatuning. Berlin Lake has a low density muskie population which is maintained by natural reproduction. Good muskie streams are Paint Creek, Grand River, Sunfish Creek, Little Muskingum River, Rocky Fork Creek, Salt Creek, Wills Creek, and the Mahoning River. Some of these stream fisheries are dependent upon reservoir stocking within the same watershed.

Muskie are often caught in shallow water near weed beds and submerged trees, or in deeper water on underwater humps or bars when water temperatures are below 78degrees. Once the water temperatures warm in mid- to late- June, muskie are often caught suspended offshore as they follow gizzard shad prey fish into the open lake. As fall approaches and temperatures cool, muskie often return to shallow waters where they are again caught along the shoreline.

Heavy tackle is required to handle the traditional large muskie lures, but with a little know-how, medium to heavy bass casting equipment will work well with the smaller 3 to 5-inch shad imitation lures. A wire leader is highly recommended.

Use big crankbaits, spinnerbaits, spoons, jerkbaits, and in-line spinners. The larger size plastic lures commonly used for bass are also becoming popular when muskies are in shallow water. Two of the most important factors in bait casting are accuracy and retrieve. When fishing a likely spot such as submerged brush, logs, tree tops, or opening in vegetation, cast your bait as close as possible to cover and keep your lure moving during the retrieve. The speed of your retrieve will depend on the style of lure and activity level of the fish.

Muskie often strike lures near the end of a retrieve, however, they are famous for following lures without striking. When this happens, try swimming the lure in a figure eight or circle pattern at the side of the boat. Again, never stop the lure while a muskie is following or it will turn away. Muskies require a great deal of wearing down before landing. When you are certain it is played out, place your net in the water and lead the fish into it. The "net-man" should scoop the fish all the way into the back of the net before lifting. Many a trophy has been lost by

improper landing technique. If you plan to release your catch, keep to a minimum the time from hook set to release, keep your net with the fish in the water at the side of the boat as you unhook it. Remember, if a fish's head is out of the water it cannot breathe. Plastic or rubber coated nets are highly recommended because they are safer for the angler (hooks don't become entangled) and reduce stress on the netted fish.

Trolling is a very popular method all yearlong for muskie. The same tackle used for casting can be used for trolling, but many anglers prefer to use line-counter reels to allow them to estimate the depth a lure is running by control length of the line deployed. This gives them a good indication of how deep their lures are running. Line length may be as short as ten-feet when "prop-wash trolling" for muskie feeding at the surface to as much as 100-feet fishing deep. Check your lures from time to time to see if they are running properly and free of weeds.

With the increased catch of muskie from Ohio waters, interest among fishermen grew and the Division of Wildlife needed to obtain information on the muskie harvest. So, in 1961 an organization was formed to officially record the large muskies caught each year. The name Ohio Huskie Muskie Club seemed a natural. The objectives of the club are to foster and promote sport fishing for muskie, release of nontrophy (less than 30inch) muskies and good sportsmanship, in addition to providing the Division with statewide information to manage the fishery. The club has proven to be an excellent way to obtain information to evaluate and manage the muskie stocking program.

You may qualify for membership in this prestigious club by catching a muskie. Catching a 42-inch muskie qualifies for a regular membership and catching a 30-inch muskie qualifies for an honorable mention membership. Since most anglers release their fish, weights are not required. Anglers who catch and release 10 or more muskie measuring at least 30 inches will receive an Honorable Mention Release plaque. Applicants must register catches during the same year the qualifying fish was caught. Application can be made on-line through the Division's Muskie Log or by postcards available at most marinas, tackle stores at lakes having muskie, or by writing the ODNR Division of Wildlife at one of the district offices: 1500 Dublin Road, Columbus 43215; 952 Lima Avenue, Findlay 45840; 912 Portage Lakes Drive, Akron 44319; 360 East State Street, Athens 45701; 1076 Old Springfield Pike, Xenia 45385.

Anglers catching a muskie 36-inches or longer should be sure to submit their first fish of that size each year for a Fish Ohio award through on-line registration of their catch!