

Feeding Or Negative?

Determine the muskies' mood, and from there you'll know where to fish

By Spencer Berman, Contributing Writer

As musky fishermen, we analyze every aspect of our fishing situations in the hope of catching fish every time we are on the water. We look at the baitfish, cover, and lure selection. But there is one very important factor that is seldom addressed — the attitude of the fish.

By factoring in this key detail we can quickly determine if the muskies are going to be in a feeding mood or if they are going to be simply sitting around digesting food, in what could be termed a negative or non-aggressive mood. By being able to answer this question quickly and correctly, you can maximize your musky fishing by tailoring your presentation for the fishes' attitude.

Most musky fishermen are familiar with shallow rock reefs, and many have caught their biggest fish while targeting one of these classic musky structures. Very few of us, however, have ever asked why a trophy musky would use a shallow rock reef. You could make the argument that the shallow crevasses in the rocks, as well as the presence of large boulders, make for great ambush points,

but that statement begs the question: what are the muskies looking to ambush? What musky forage fish chooses to live in less than 10 feet water in these rock areas? Well, short of crayfish, smaller minnows and smallmouth bass, there really are not too many baitfish in such an area that a large musky would find appealing.

Having said that, we then need to ask why so many muskies use these structures. The answer is that muskies using the top of rock reefs are negative, non-feeding muskies. Many believe they are using the warmer water of the shallow rock reefs to raise their body temperature to help digestion of meals they grabbed earlier. In other words, these fish are not feeding fish, but rather negative fish simply sitting on the rocks.

Musky fishermen also commonly target weed edges. They, in contrast, are a bit trickier in terms of determining why fish would locate there. However, once you take into account the type and/or presence of baitfish, you will be able to tell if you are targeting feeding muskies or negative muskies. If you are fishing an area where the forage is mostly open water fish such as shad, ciscoes, whitefish, etc., then the large majority of the muskies will be doing their feeding in open water. In this case, when you locate muskies on weed edges, it will normally be near open water basin areas where baitfish are located. These muskies will normally feed in the open water and then come up to the weed edges for the warmer water and the cover that the weeds provide. Again, in this scenario, you will be dealing with negative muskies, not feeding muskies.



The author releases a St. Clair giant.

On the other hand, if you are fishing a lake where the primary forage is panfish, smaller perch, northern pike, and small walleyes (all fish that live around weeds), you are going to see a much different attitude in the muskies. When the primary location for the muskies' forage is in the weeds, then the muskies you encounter in the weeds will be feeding rather than negative.

Inside weed edges and sandbars are two other areas where we commonly fish for muskies. As was the case with weed edges, these areas can attract both negative muskies as well as feeding muskies during different times of the year and in different systems. In order to determine the muskies' attitudes we need to once again look at their primary forage and the movements that they make. If you are fishing a very weedy lake with lots of panfish and largemouth bass, then the shallow weed lines and sandbars will load up with both baitfish and muskies early in the year. This is due to the shallow water spawning rituals of these forage fish. Once this happens you will see feeding muskies hunting shallow sand and inside weedlines for spawning panfish, bass and other key forage fish. Another key time when baitfish move shallow is during the beginning of fall. As soon as the first couple cold snaps of fall push in, baitfish move into shallow water in anticipation of turnover. Obviously, when this happens, feeding muskies will be following their food into these areas to feed.

On the other hand there are a number of times during the year when muskies will use inside weed edges and sandbars despite the fact that their primary forage is elsewhere. Due to the lack of substantial forage being located in these areas at this time, these fish will be negative and once again looking to warm their bodies and digest food, rather than feed. The key to determining which musky attitude you are dealing with is to always be looking for the presence of baitfish with both your graph and your eyes. If you are seeing baitfish then you will have feeding muskies. If not you are dealing with negative muskies.

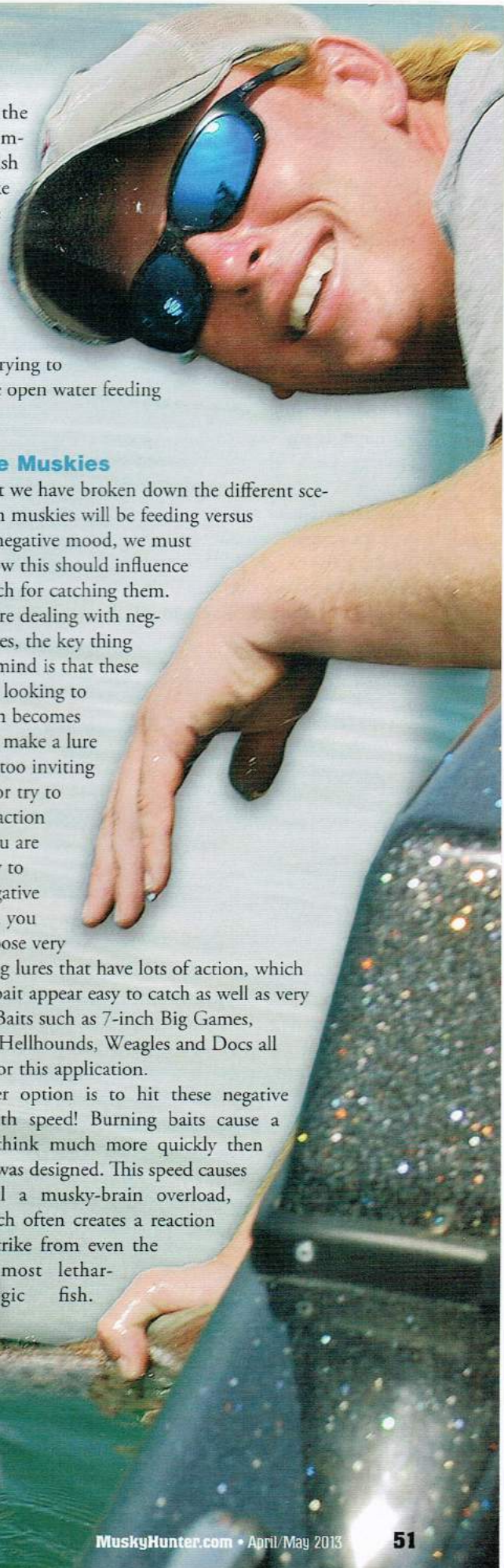
The last major area where we commonly target muskies is in open water when muskies suspend over the basin, normally 20 feet deep or more. When this happens you will nearly always be targeting feeding muskies. Due to the lack of any structure to hold the fish in open water, muskies suspended in open water are relating to schools of baitfish. Some of the most common baitfish to be found in open water are shad, ciscoes, whitefish, walleyes, large perch and crap-

pies. If the most common baitfish in the lake you are fishing is one of these species, then you should be trying to target those open water feeding fish.

Negative Muskies

Now that we have broken down the different scenarios when muskies will be feeding versus being in a negative mood, we must examine how this should influence our approach for catching them. When we are dealing with negative muskies, the key thing to keep in mind is that these fish are not looking to feed. It then becomes your job to make a lure look either too inviting to pass up or try to induce a reaction strike. If you are going to try to entice a negative fish to feed, you need to choose very slow-moving lures that have lots of action, which makes the bait appear easy to catch as well as very appealing. Baits such as 7-inch Big Games, Phantoms, Hellhounds, Weagles and Docs all work well for this application.

The other option is to hit these negative muskies with speed! Burning baits cause a musky to think much more quickly than their brain was designed. This speed causes what I call a musky-brain overload, which often creates a reaction strike from even the most lethargic fish.



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Remember, the key to this technique is speed — forearm-burning, wrist-breaking speed. I normally like to cast extra-weighted Cowgirls in this scenario and burn them in using a high speed Tranx. The extra weight on the Cowgirl, normally around 1 1/2 to two ounces of lead, opposed to the traditional 3/8-ounce, will allow the bait to be cast with ease as well as allowing it to stay beneath the water despite the speed and extreme lift of the blades.

Another bait that works well for this technique is the new Musky Mayhem Trolling Girl. Though designed for trolling, it is perfect for being burned. The thicker blades will wear much less than the thinner, normal blades, allowing the baits to last much longer, and with the two ounces of weight they are ready to be burned right out of the

package. Other lures that I like for this approach are fast-moving topwaters such as the Pacemaker.

Think of how many times you have heard someone say about a large, negative fish, "She has to eat eventually." Then think about how many times the monster fish did, in fact, decide to eat a lure — it's usually not too many. The reason for that is simple. Although it is true that a monster musky does need to feed eventually, if you are encountering her on a location where she is negative and merely sitting to digest, chances are good that she is going to leave that structure to feed.

An example of this would be a musky sitting on a shallow rock reef that has followed your baits for a couple of days. When it actually wants to eat, it will normally slide out to open water or to a

deep reef and eat a large walleye, cisco or whitefish. When that is done, the fish will return to the shallow rock reef with a full belly and will once again go into a negative mood, providing only follows. One way to put the chances in your favor and entice a fish like this to eat is by using the presence of feeding windows, such as Solunar majors and minors, and moonrise, moonset, sunrise and sunset, all of which may encourage a positive response.

It is always a good idea to throw a variety of different baits at these fish. I normally like to have one high speed bait in the front of the boat and one slow-moving bait in the back. This will give you the best chance of finding something that a negative fish will find appealing. Also, if you have raised a musky several times from one piece of structure, on one particular lure, it is a good idea to come back to her with a different lure next time. Traditionally what I try to do is approach her first with the opposite type of lure speed she followed the last time. If she first followed a high speed Cowgirl, try putting a slow-moving Softail Phantom on in the front of the boat. In the back of the boat I would be throwing whatever she followed the first time, just in case she decided that this time she wants it.

The last major technique you can use when trying to catch a negative fish is to target it once it has moved out to feed. Look for whatever structure is nearest and has the most baitfish around, or nearby baitfish schools over open water, and then try casting, trolling or jigging over that structure depending on the depth of the structure. This is definitely a low percentage technique, however every once in a while it can produce some tremendous results.

Feeding Muskies

One of the first things that you are going to notice about feeding fish is that they tend to very rarely follow a lure. Due to their aggressive nature, they tend to be extremely aggressive with a much higher bite-to-follow ratio. When targeting these fish, I look to utilize both trolling and casting techniques

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depending on the conditions. If you have a musky located in a very small area, whether it is in open water or on a weed edge, I would prefer to be casting. On the other hand, when you need to cover large areas of water in order to locate fish, it becomes necessary to troll.

Trolling allows you to cover much more water in a very short period of time. I like to use lures such as Jakes, Believers, Big Games, Custom X's, Donatos, and Big Game Scuba Divers, all of which trigger active fish and allow you to cover a large variety of water depths depending on where the fish are located. I normally troll around 3.0 to 3.4 mph in dirty water and between 3.5 to 4.0 mph in clean water.

For casting, I like to keep my lure selection very simple. A BullDawg, particularly a larger one such as a Pounder, gives a hungry musky a simply irresistible target and is my hands-down top choice when fishing for feeding muskies. A couple of other options would be a Medusa or a slow-rolled Cowgirl.

The biggest thing to remember when targeting feeding fish is that you do not need to get super creative with your lure selection. These muskies want to eat, and baits like a BullDawg, Medusa or Cowgirl will give them the best opportunity to do so.

Being an effective musky fisherman simply means that you have properly read into all of the variables and have made the correct decisions. One of the most important of these variables is the attitude of the fish that you are targeting. By analyzing where the muskies are located compared to the baitfish, you will be able to determine the muskies' attitude both quickly and correctly, and thus will be able to tailor your presentation accordingly.

For more about Contributing Writer, Captain Spencer Berman, visit www.spencersanglingadv.com



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