

Musky season is open year-round in many places. Here's how to catch 'em from very cold water

By Spencer Berman

When does your musky fishing begin ... May, June? For most of the people in the northern range of musky country, the long months of cabin fever can seem inevitable, but I'm here to argue that by starting so late you may be missing out on some of the best musky fishing of the season. You just have to be a little mobile.

For me, as a guide in Indiana, my season starts not when the DNR allows, but rather when Mother Nature melts the lake ice just enough for my boat to float. Beginning at ice-out and running until the spawn is what I call the winter period. This normally runs from early to mid March and ends around mid April when the fish transition into the spawn. Due to the unorthodox nature of this time period it poses to anglers a set of circumstances unseen in traditional musky fishing.

First Open Days

One of the common traps I see anglers fall into during the early season is classifying all muskies as in pre-spawn mode. It is true that there are some muskies that do slide up onto spawning flats extremely early; however, there is a large portion of the fish that move up much later. Muskies spawn when the water is around 55 degrees in most lakes; when the ice melts, surface water temperatures are normally in the high 30s. This means you have a large population of muskies which are more than a month away from the spawning period and thus must be targeted differently. I classify muskies during this time period into two different groups — pre-spawn fish and winter muskies.

Winter Fish

When the ice first melts, the vast majority of the muskies are in winter mode. These fish are not focused on the spawn and thus are still eating normally, keeping in mind the cold water temperatures and thus low metabolic rates. Since females almost always move into the shallows much later and for shorter periods than male muskies, inevitably more of the larger female fish fall into this category for the first couple weeks of the year.

Since muskies in winter mode are still feeding, the presence of baitfish is your primary concern. In most of the southern lakes where it's legal to musky fish during this period, the primary forage is shad. Shad are warm water baitfish that do not do well in cold water. In fact, southern

musky states such as Kentucky, Illinois and Indiana are some of the farthest-north locations for shad. In order for the shad to stay alive during the winter they will pool around deep water areas. In lakes these will be your deepest holes and in reservoirs it will be the river channel. With this in mind, these deep water areas should be your primary concern during the first few days of open water.

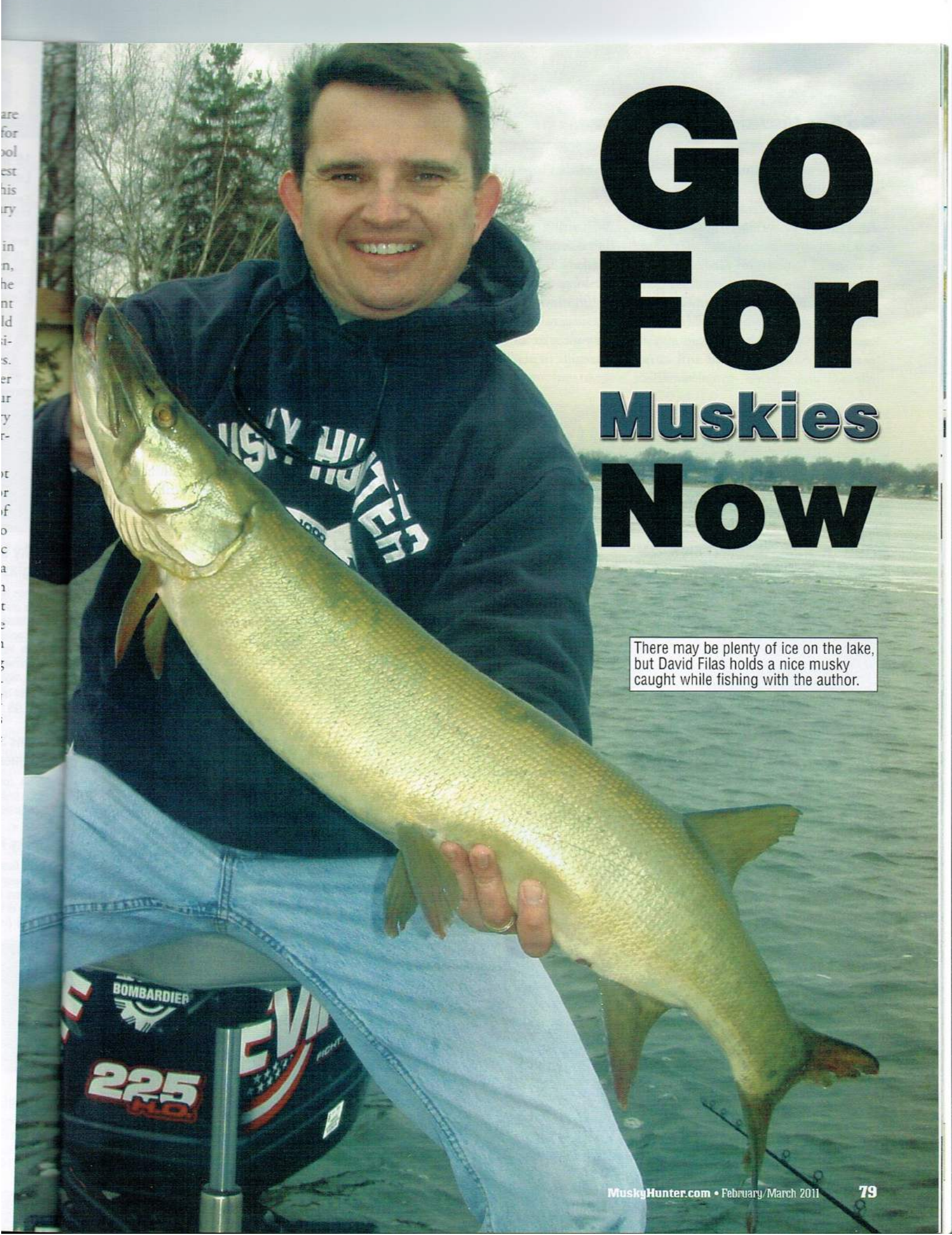
I like to use very similar presentations to those I use in the late fall. Pounder and Magnum Bull Dawgs have been, hands down, the best-producing lures for this tactic for the past several years. These lures do a number of important things. First they give you a large profile — muskies in cold water are looking for larger meals simply because it is easier for them to eat one larger fish than five smaller ones. Preserving energy seems to be very important. Another important factor is the speed at which you retrieve your lures. Once again, due to the very cold water it is very important to move your baits slowly in order to offer near-by fish what appears to be an easy meal.

When you are dealing with most other baits you are not able to get great action out of the lure at slow speeds, or while pausing. Big rubber such as Bull Dawgs solve both of those problems. Having said that, another advantage to throwing big plastics is that they sink. Muskies are lethargic in cold water and will not normally travel very far to hit a lure. When you combine that with the fact that these fish are normally suspended around open water shad schools it becomes necessary for you to get your baits down to the depths the fish are located. By fishing sinking lures you can count down your baits to the proper levels, thereby keeping them in the strike zone for nearly all of your cast. I generally count my lures down to around two feet above where I think the muskies (not the baitfish) are, then use slow pulls along with pauses on the retrieve. For example, if you have shad or any baitfish school running from 7 to 12 feet down with muskies positioned beneath them at 15 feet, I would count down my bait to around 13 feet under the surface and begin using a pull-and-pause retrieve working to keep the pulls and pauses close to balanced so that my bait does not move too far away from the critical 13-foot depth. The key to this is to make sure that the amount that you are lifting the bait is equaled out by the amount that you pause your bait, basically letting your bait sink back to the desired depth before each lift.

One important factor when counting down lures is properly compensating for the added depth at which your transducer sits in the water. For example, if your transducer on your trolling motor head is two feet under the surface then you must add two feet to whatever depth you are seeing muskies or baitfish. This may not be important in summer but it's vitally important to catching cold water muskies.

Two other often-overlooked tactics for this time of year are vertical jigging and livebaiting. Vertical jigging is a great way to keep your bait in the strike zone for a longer period of time along with giving you a chance to go after fish deeper than you would be able with a countdown presentation.



A man with short brown hair, wearing a blue hoodie and light blue jeans, is smiling and holding a large, golden-brown musky fish. He is sitting on a black stool with 'BOMBARDIER' and 'EVIA' logos. The background shows a body of water and trees under a cloudy sky.

Go For Muskies Now

There may be plenty of ice on the lake, but David Filas holds a nice musky caught while fishing with the author.

Go For Muskies Now

As a general rule, I normally don't try counting down baits after the muskies are more than 20 feet beneath the surface simply because your bait spends too much time out of the strike zone. The use of livebait, on the other hand, is an extremely effective and often overlooked option. When you consider that livebait is really the only tactic that we can use in which the bait can stay in nearly the same place and still be an effective presentation, it makes perfect

sense that it would have such a tantalizing effect on these fish. The problem with livebait this time of year, however, is figuring out where to get suckers large enough to use for muskies. Suckers measuring seven or eight inches long are my minimum. The best solution when the baitshops don't have them is to catch your own if it is legal in your state of course. Anything from bluegills to perch to crappies will work great.

As Things Progress

Once the water begins to warm up into the 40- to 52-degree range you are going to see more fish move into or near spawning areas. During this time you will find a good portion of the smaller fish, especially males, on the shallow spawning flats. One approach that has paid off for me is fishing deeper transition areas between open water locations and spawning areas. When fish move toward these areas there is no doubt that they are starting to prepare for the spawn and thus are a bit less likely to key on baitfish but rather on spawning areas.

This breakline fishing, normally in eight to 20 feet of water, calls for you once again to watch your graph for the presence of muskies. Considering that these fish are still not completely into spawning mode, they are extremely susceptible to various presentations. In this situation I prefer to break the traditional Rat-L-Trap trend and prefer to throw baits, medium to small in size, that get down a couple feet and can be fished slowly. A couple baits that have produced for me in the past are regular Bull Dawgs and small Kickin' Minnows. Hands down, however, my best producers have been medium- to deep-diving suspending twitchbaits such as a 7-inch Big Game. As is true with most crankbaits, a Big Game lure floats. However, when you change out the hooks to a slightly larger size you can make it suspend perfectly, thus making it a deadly spring weapon. These baits allow you to present your lures in the proper depth range for these suspended fish. Additionally, due to the fact that these baits suspend, you will be able to work them extremely methodically with a pull-pause technique which can prove irresistible.

The Shallows

It is no secret during the early season that fishing large, shallow, spawning flats can be a great way to find muskies. However, if you refine your techniques

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Starting with the day that the ice leaves the lake, it is always a good idea to check shallow areas quickly even if you are planning to focus on one of the tactics mentioned above for the majority of the day. From ice-out until the water hits 52 to 54 degrees, there will be a population of muskies which are interested in eating on the shallow flats. There are basically two presentation options that will work. The first is an extremely fast-moving lure such as a Rat-L-Trap to trigger a reaction strike. When the water is not extremely "dirty" (like you might find in a reservoir), fishing slow-moving suspending baits for feeding fish can be an amazing way to put huge numbers of fish in your boat.

In order to determine how "dirty" your lake is, compare the normal water clarity to the current condition. As a guide in Indiana, I deal with early season muskies on several lakes, not reservoirs, and thus normally see 2 to 5 feet of water clarity. When working suspending twitchbaits, remember that you are trying to induce strikes from fish that otherwise don't really have to eat. Downsizing to extremely tiny baits is often a must.

Although a pull-pause technique with a suspending twitchbait seems easy, there are a number of small details that may provide better results. First, it is absolutely essential that your suspending twitchbait actually suspends level in the water. I know that sounds simple, however it is one of the most important and easily blundered parts of this technique. If you use a leader with a big heavy snap there is going to be almost no way that your bait will not sink nose first. In order to correct this I often tie baits directly to a lighter fluorocarbon leader, around 65- to 90-pound test. Obviously if you want to be changing up baits and colors more frequently than such a concept would allow, you should tie the same 65- to

90-pound test fluorocarbon to a No. 5 split ring, which is a better choice than a small snap for two reasons. They are much lighter and thus will have less negative effect on your lure's action and they are much stronger than light wire snaps which have a tendency to break, open or straighten under strain. Once you get your bait rigged it is then crucial to check it at boatside to make sure it is working properly. When doing this be sure that you give your lure slack

line and do not misrepresent the action of the bait by holding up the leader with your rod. The slack line will assure an accurate representation.

The last major thing to consider is the concept of "camping." These fish are extremely lethargic and with their metabolic rates down to almost zero they do not need to eat very often. The best way to deal with this is to find areas you know are holding fish and work them very thoroughly. This will

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allow you to do two very important things. First, you are assuring that when

a feeding window opens up you will be on fish and ready to capitalize. Secondly, your baits will pass near every fish.


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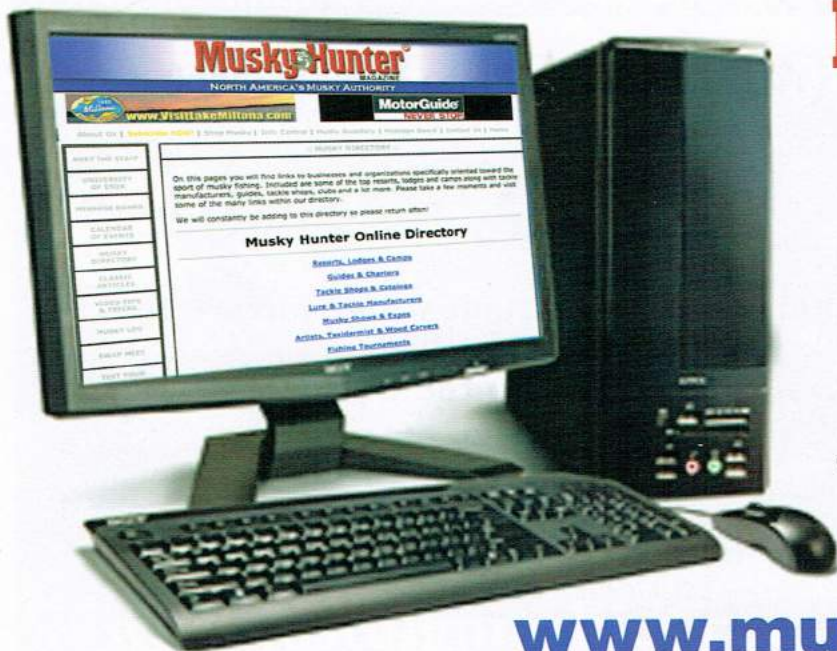
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