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Contributing Writer**

**W**hy is it that certain guys are so good at catching muskies from certain lakes? Why do some guides catch so many big fish? Most people like to think it's because they have better lures, know secret spots, or just fish more than anyone else, so their catch is a result of all that time on the water.


While these are considerations, they are not the main reason. The key reason that these guys and other great fishermen catch more and bigger fish is because they know how their lakes tick. On most waters, there is no such thing as a secret spot — they simply get too much pressure from far too many people to have any secrets. Having the ability to read the fishing conditions and understand when certain areas are going to turn on, however, is one of the key differences for top anglers. If you understand the ins and outs of your lake you will be able to make critical fishing decisions on a daily basis and thus put yourself in position to catch more monster fish.

### **Dissect Structure**

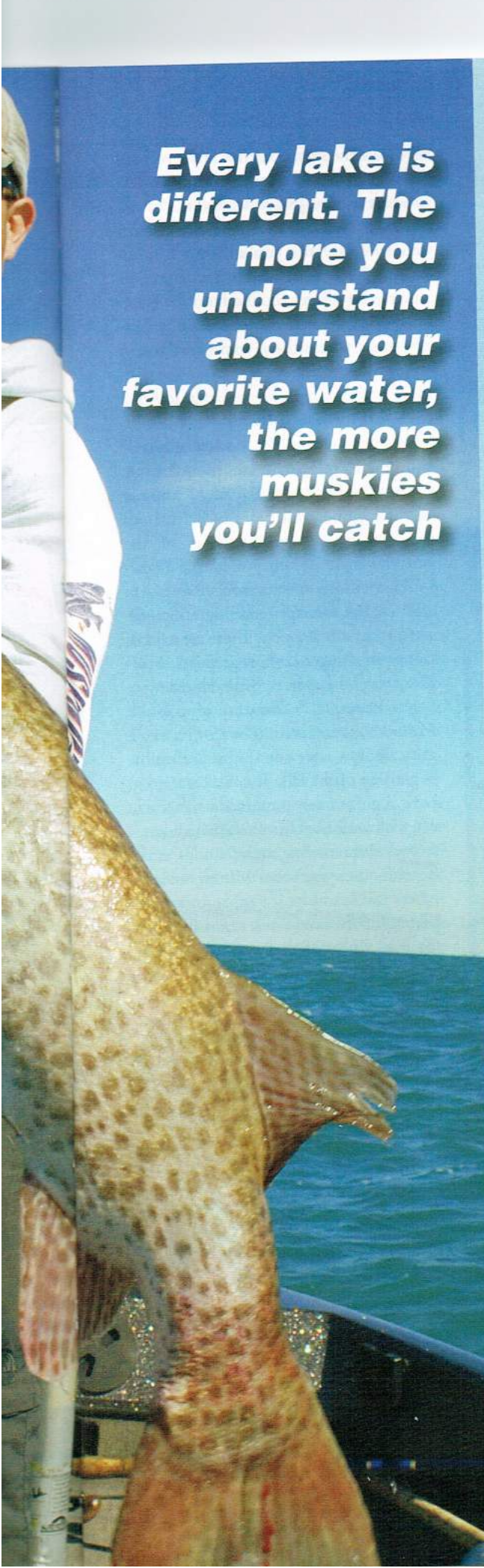
A common mistake is thinking that merely knowing where a reef is located is the same as actually understanding that piece of structure. To really “know” a piece of structure, you need to know all of the sudden changes. For example, you should know not only where all the high points are but also the secondary shelves and extensions. Smart fishermen take the time to drive around a structure and place waypoints on their GPS to denote each feature, and if possible, get a visual of the structure's layout. It may mean sacrificing 20 minutes of your fishing time to make such a scouting run but the investment in time will often pay off with many more fish in your boat.

A good time to scout structures is before the season opens or during the middle of a super-hot, flat day. It may help to know that almost all of the top musky tournament anglers spend the majority of their pre-fishing time using their graphs to learn the spots they plan to fish as well as locate both baitfish and muskies.

The author's client, Jim Gotham, with a Lake St. Clair beauty.

A man wearing a white hoodie with 'MINNAPOLIS' on it, a baseball cap, and sunglasses is holding a large muskie fish vertically. The fish is speckled and has a large head. The background is a clear blue sky and water.

# How A Lake Ticks



**Every lake is different. The more you understand about your favorite water, the more muskies you'll catch**

In addition to this intimate knowledge of the lake's structures, you should also develop a sense for where the muskies are going to position themselves on each structure under various weather conditions. By diligently logging fish locations according to wind and weather conditions, you will clearly see how fish will use certain structures under certain conditions. This will then give you the ability to predict fish movements and positioning so that you can ensure success in future visits to that spot.

### **Subtle Changes**

Less obvious than structure but every bit as important are subtle changes in bottom content, weed type or depth. Since they are often overlooked, these areas tend to get very limited fishing pressure, thereby making them extremely productive. On the flip side, these areas are not going to be the first thing that you notice on a map nor will they have 10 boats sitting on them. In order to find them you are forced to look for small differences.

One of the easiest subtleties to notice is the change of weed type. Many of our lakes today have been overgrown by the invasive weed Eurasian water milfoil, but natural cabbage still survives and tends to grow within milfoil beds. These pockets of cabbage tend to hold lots of muskies and big ones as well, but finding them is tricky. To do this you either need clear enough water to actually see the pockets with your eyes, or to notice the difference between the two types of weeds on your graph. The easiest way to learn how each weed type looks on a graph is to look online for demo videos from Humminbird or Lowrance. Milfoil grows densely and should more or less fill your sonar screen with solid color, whereas cabbage grows with more holes in it and the strands normally look like a string of Christmas lights, which are the stalks and the clumps of leaves.

Another key weed factor is the depth of the outside weed edge. In most scenarios deep weedlines will grow out until there is not enough light penetration. If that depth is 10 feet, the weeds usually stop at that depth, but occasionally you can find spots where the weeds grow just a tad bit deeper, say to 11 or 12 feet. These deeper weed edge areas create a subtle change which normally will create a key spot for muskies to set up and feed.

The next key subtle spot is a small depth or contour change. Secondary points are a great example of this. Dwarfed by other points in the area, these smaller or more subtle points are much less obvious and tend to get much less fishing pressure.

The last and most difficult change to notice is in bottom content. These are areas where the bottom of the lake transitions from hard to soft or vice versa. These changes are normally made up of sand to rock, sand to mud, and mud to rock areas. Since these areas are normally not just a distinct line but rather may occur over a hundred feet or more of transition, they tend to be very hard to notice. On Lake St. Clair, where I guide, these areas play a huge role due to the lake's lack of structure.

Last year it seemed like all of my big fish were coming from one particular stretch of water on a massive spot in St. Clair that is 500 yards wide and one mile long. On either side of the line we caught small fish, but all the big girls were coming on the line. There were no depth changes or structural elements that I could find to warrant such a distinct change in fishing, just a growing mountain of evidence as I kept catching big fish only along that line. Then one day it all clicked. On the north end of the line the bottom was soft — all mud. When I studied the south end of the line with my Humminbird sonar, I discovered a harder bottom area of sand. A couple quick minutes with an underwater camera confirmed my suspicions that the 500 yards between the two ends of the line was the transition area that held the big fish.

In order to best notice these key spots watch your graph intently and try to

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## How A Lake Ticks

envision the layout of the areas you are fishing. I would, however, also really encourage you to put in waypoints for all the fish you encounter, especially in open water. Make sure you differentiate between big fish and small ones, as well as mark areas where you find baitfish. These waypoints will allow you to quickly identify areas where these transition points might be located.

## Fish Movement

In order to really understand the movements of baitfish and muskies, you must consider that every lake is unique in the number and types of baitfish, as well as the general attitudes of the muskies in it. When you actually start looking at lake specific movements you will see that some general migration patterns normally happen. There are a lot of things in the general progression, however, which happen to different extents.

For example, a handful of popular Minnesota lakes are known for having a great shallow water sand bite during the beginning of the fall. These lakes tend to have high panfish populations and you can load your boat for weeks with aggressive muskies moving to the sand. On the flip side, there are other Minnesota lakes where the sand bite is simply an average pattern or, in some cases, not really a factor at all. This difference can normally be attributed to the breakdown of baitfish

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in the lake. If most of the muskies are eating a certain type of baitfish and then that baitfish goes shallow or deep, it stands to reason that the majority of the muskies will do the same. On the flip side, if a type of baitfish is simply a small part of the muskies' forage due to the abundance of many other species, it would stand to reason that when the baitfish move shallow or deep it is not really going to have too much effect on the muskies' movements.

This further proves that in order to truly know a lake you have to look at each as an individual to learn its ins and outs.

### Lures

Recently I fished with a father and son for a May musky trip in Indiana. After about 30 minutes with no action, the 14-year-old asked me when I started switching baits due to lack of action. To his dismay I responded "I start changing lures in June when I move up to Lake St. Clair." Although that was a slight exaggeration on my part, it really was not far from the truth. The bottom line is that I have been fishing those Indiana lakes for more than 10 years and after hundreds of guide trips, tournaments, plus numerous conversations with other guides, you really start to get a sense for what these fish like to eat. For that reason I can pretty much tell my clients that they get to cast one lure all day. The only way they are changing is if I start varying things a bit and start moving fish. Then I will give them the bait on which I had action. Until that happens, they get the baits in which I have the most confidence.

It's not that you should never change lures, but if you pay attention to a certain lake and fish it enough you will find that most of the fish normally get caught on a short list of baits. You can experiment, but you should try to have the high percentage lures for that lake in the water the majority of the time. By paying attention to which of your lures get eaten with consistency, as well as networking with other fishermen, you should be able to develop a good idea of what lures tend to work best on a specific lake day in and day out.

Most guides will tell you that truly learning how a lake ticks takes a very sharp eye, a big network of guys, and most importantly, lots of time on the water. They will also tell you that it takes years to truly understand the ins and outs of a lake. However, by using the techniques I have highlighted, as well as having a sharp eye with good electronics, you will be able to quickly understand a lake

and start catching more and bigger muskies!

For more about contributing writer Spencer Berman, visit [www.spencersanglingadv.com](http://www.spencersanglingadv.com)



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