

Develop A Pattern

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Many things factor into a musky pattern, and these can change by lake and/or by day

By Spencer Berman

Musky fishing is different than any other type of freshwater fishing for many reasons. The major difference is the number of fish we deal with in a given outing. Most good musky lakes have less than two fish per acre. When you compare that to, say, bass, whose numbers can easily exceed 20 fish per acre, we realize that many aspects of our strategy must be different to catch our elusive gamefish.

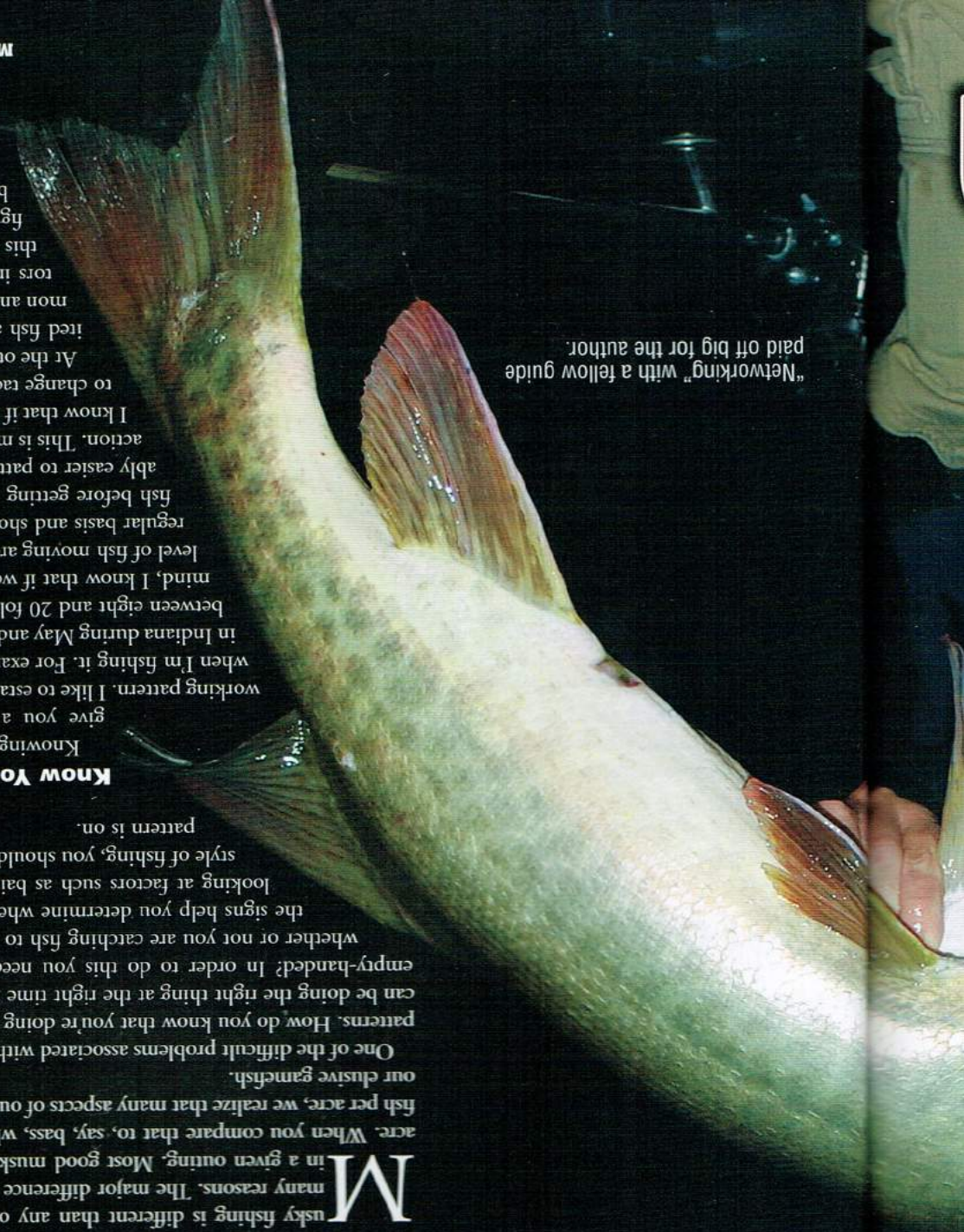
One of the difficult problems associated with low numbers of fish is establishing patterns. How do you know that you're doing the right thing when, at times, you can be doing the right thing at the right time in the right place and still go home empty-handed? In order to do this you need to look at signs other than just whether or not you are catching fish to determine a pattern's potential. Let the signs help you determine whether your pattern is happening. By looking at factors such as baitfish, weeds, lake reports and your style of fishing, you should be able to determine whether your pattern is on.

Know Your Lake

Knowing the lake that you are fishing can give you a huge advantage in developing a working pattern. I like to establish a follow-to-bite ratio for a lake when I'm fishing it. For example, I know that on Webster Lake in Indiana during May and June I can expect to see somewhere between eight and 20 follows for every bite. Keeping that in mind, I know that if we were on a good pattern, with that level of fish moving around, we should be seeing fish on a regular basis and should expect to be seeing numbers of fish before getting a bite. Lakes like this are considerably easier to pattern than lakes with less average fish action. This is more of a bass fishing situation where I know that if I am not seeing fish I probably need to change tactics.

At the other extreme are lakes with very limited fish activity where follows are not common and an angler must consider other factors in order to dial in. One example of this is Pigeon Lake in eastern Ontario. I figure I can expect to get around two bites for every follow I see. With that in mind, a good day on the water may be only one or two strikes

"Networking" with a fellow guide paid off big for the author.



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and/or follows, so simply seeing fish cannot be your only way of establishing your pattern. Here I look for other factors that indicate a pattern is going to be successful.

Weed Lines vs. Open Water

After I have established some ground rules for the lake I am fishing, I determine how I want to fish. As far as establishing a pattern is concerned, the two major categories involved are open water fishing or shallow water fishing.

When fishing shallow weeds or rocks, it is not necessary to rely on electronics to locate fish nearly as much as over open water. In water less than 14 feet the sonar cone is simply too narrow to provide useful data. For example, if your boat is over 12 feet of water just outside a weedline, your cone is only a little more than a foot wide at the bottom. While sonar can't be relied upon to mark fish at this depth it is not an entirely ineffective tool — it can still provide extremely useful information on the nature of the weed or rock structures below. Look at factors such as maximum weed depth, weed height and weed density. Remember, when casting you're trying to catch fish that are away from the boat and if the weeds below look like they would hold fish you must move out in order to present your lures to these areas.

There are a number of factors to look for in when fishing weeds. The first is the weeds' color; if they're green and healthy there is a good chance muskies will be using them. Another major factor is weed type — not all weeds are created equal. As a very general rule of thumb, look for big, broad-leafed weeds such as cabbage since these allow muskies and baitfish to easily move through them. The last factor is weed depth. When muskies are holding on the outside weed edge, chances are good that the deeper a particular weed edge grows compared to the rest of the lake, the better it is going to be.

Keep in mind that all of these things

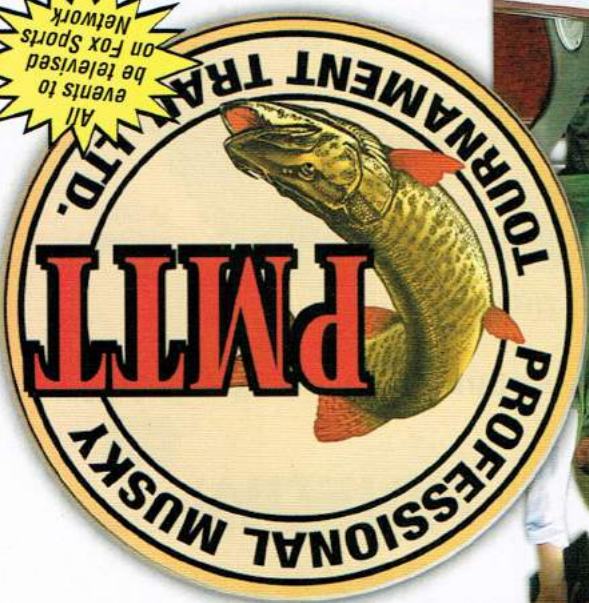
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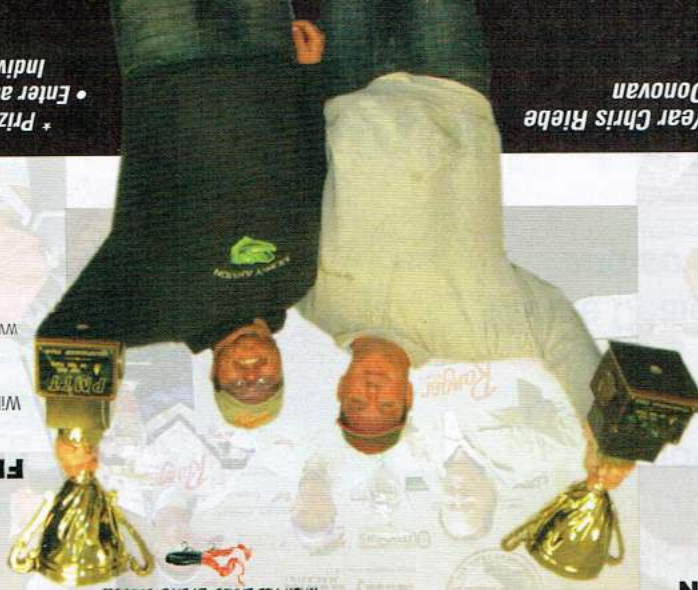
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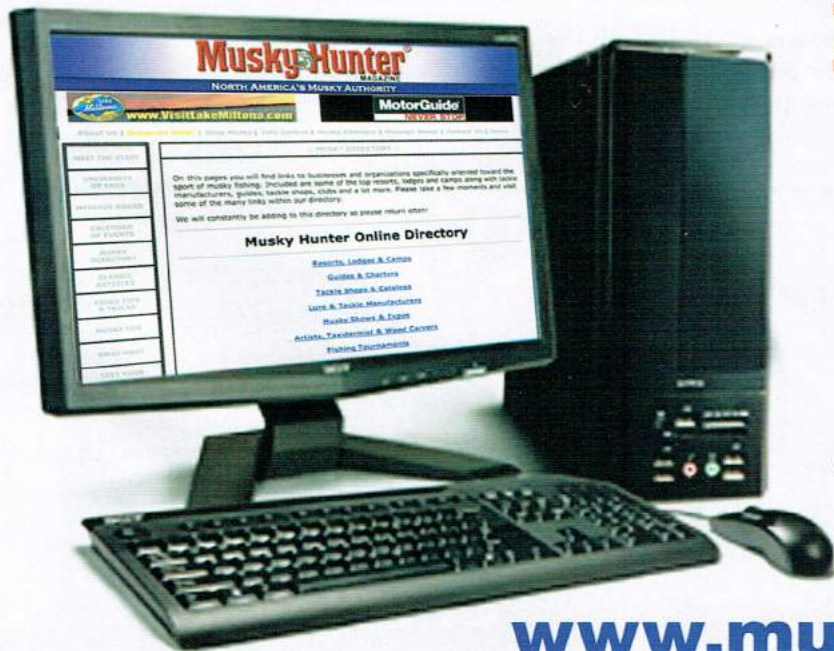


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are comparative to the rest of the cover and structure that a lake has to offer. For example, if a lake has a mostly-consistent weedline at 7 feet but a particular stretch has weeds that grow in 7 1/2 feet, this deeper stretch would have the same fish-attracting effect as a 21-foot weedline would on a clear water lake where the weedline is normally 17 feet. Any area where the weeds are deeper than the lake average will normally be a good bet to hold fish. Find a number of these different factors in one area and there is a good chance a pattern is going to hold muskies even if they don't show initially.

When casting to open water, however, the name of the game is electronics, electronics, electronics. Here you must be totally dependent on your sonar to show whether a pattern will hold fish. As is true in any open water situation, the two factors to look for are baitfish and muskies.

It is a common misconception that muskies will always be around pods of baitfish. Most of the time baitfish will indicate muskies in the area; however, you can't follow baitfish blindly. To verify that they're in the area, you should be seeing good arches on your electron-



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long they should stick with it. Musky anglers new to trolling often wonder when they should troll and how

Trolling

These fish seem to have an almost unlimited supply of food following schools of baitfish, which allows to become much less opportunistic than their weed or rock counterparts.

ics, normally next to or under the pods of baitfish. In an open water situation in which both baitfish and muskies appear on the screen, be sure to stick to the pattern even if it does not pay off immediately. Often suspended fish are more prone to specific feeding windows (moonrise or set, sunrise or set, along with any majors or minors) than shallow water fish.



The author caught this musky on the fifth trolling pass through an area where his sonar had marked lots of baitfish, as well as muskies.

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Obviously, the nature of trolling does not allow an angler to know how many fish have engaged the lure(s) and only strikes are known. Keep in mind, if you spend five hours trolling with no bites, or you spend five hours casting and see ten follows but don't have any strikes, your overall results were the same. Many anglers like to compare casting action to trolling bites, but this provides an inaccurate accounting of what happened and does nothing to discern whether casting or trolling are better. Focus on factors other than immediate results in order to establish whether trolling is going to produce.

Watching electronics while trolling should show whether muskies are holding beneath the trolling run. This will be tough to see while weedline trolling, but while open water trolling it should be easy to mark both muskies and baitfish. If there are large arches (muskies) and baitfish on the screen it becomes a simple matter of keeping baits in front of them and waiting. Trolling is a patience game. If you hope to boat between one and three muskies in a 12-hour day, remember that only calculates to around a fish every four to 12 hours — a 45-minute trolling run is not exactly a fair crack. When muskies are present on the graph, give your trolling efforts at least two hours before writing off the pattern as unsuccessful.

Night-Fishing

Night-fishing has, without a doubt, become one of the most consistent producers of huge muskies. As a guide in Minnesota, I have experienced first-hand the enormous benefits of night-fishing. Three of the top five fish in my boat last year were caught after the sun had set. On the other hand, night-fishing offers tremendous frustration, especially when trying to pattern fish. In night-fishing, as in trolling, an angler is unable to see follows and thus is only aware of a musky's presence when it bites. This amount of inaction, again, makes developing a pattern very tough. There are, however, a few key signs in night-fishing to let an angler know that a pattern is going to pay big dividends.

The first major indicator is the presence of muskies in the same location during the day. I often spend bright sunny day after bright sunny day looking to find fish and get follows, so that at night I can come back to those same fish and put hooks into them. Whenever you're seeing large numbers of lazy follows in an area or on a lake it is normally a quick sign that these fish are eating at night.

Another sign that night-fishing will produce is the presence of both baitfish and muskies just outside of a structure. If a night pattern is occurring, baitfish and muskies will frequently suspend just off of structure during the daytime hours before moving shallow at night. If this is the case you will often see the suspended baitfish rise and then start to disappear off the graph when it gets dark as they begin to leave open water and move to the structure. When the majority of the baitfish and arches have disappeared from your screen muskies are likely on the structure and looking for food.

Both of these scenarios are primary examples of times when you can expect a good night pattern. Despite these positive factors always remember that this is still musky fishing and it is rarely easy. Often times you need to pound the water with little to no apparent results before success. With that in mind, look for positive signs of action, then work hard to reap the rewards. Always remember that fishing until there is only a bar of yellow light on the horizon is not really night-fishing, and most of the time you need to give it considerably more time in total darkness before writing off the night pattern.

Networking

Musky fishing has always been a sport of extreme secrecy, with anglers driving to ramps in the dark to make sure they were not followed. In addition, there is misinformation distributed among anglers. With the inception of resources such as Internet forums, musky anglers are beginning to learn the mutual benefit that can result from networking. By employing these tools anglers can get a healthy idea of how a lake is producing, thus allowing them a better idea of what to look for on the water. This information can go a long way toward discerning a pattern. When you have been getting consistent reports of "your" lake being slow, then you know in advance that you are probably in

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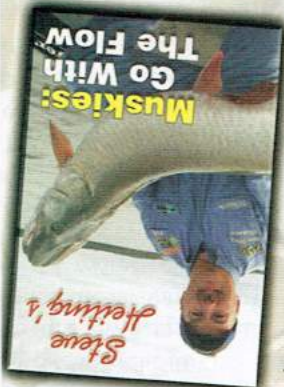
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disproportionate amount of time. If you cast over a favorite weedbed every time a potential feeding window occurs and troll in between the feeding windows you are probably not going to get a very accurate description of how effective trolling may be.

Another thing to be careful of is lure selection. Remember, all baits will catch fish, eventually. Just because a lure caught a fish does not mean it was your best choice for the day. Another lure could have caught four in the same shift. Keep track of what lure was used, how long it was thrown, and once again, how much prime time each lure was given. You may find that some lures produce just because they are the only ones used during prime feeding windows, while others occasionally grind out fish under tough conditions and should possibly be considered during prime times.

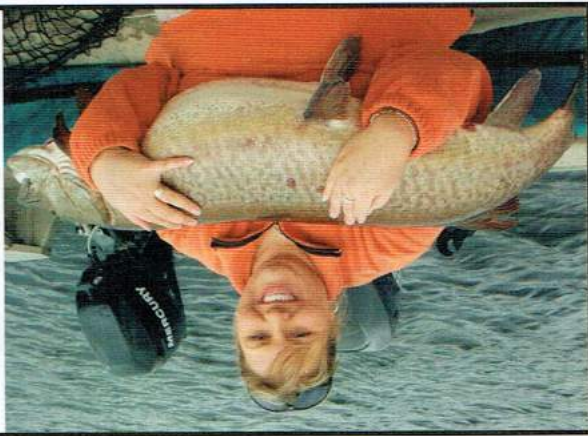
Muskies' extremely low population densities force anglers to fish harder and smarter. However, once you start fishing smarter and apply these methods of pattern development you can work to minimize the amount of guesswork needed to consistently produce trophy fish.

Spencer Berman operates Spencer's Angling Adventures in Indiana and Minnesota. For more information, visit www.spencersanglingadventure.com



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for a tough day. Any pattern attempted should be tried for a longer period of time since the fish are inactive. On the other hand, if you are getting reports of a lake being "on fire" with multiple-fish days, then you should plan on giving any pattern limited time to produce. The best plan in this situation is to try multiple patterns until you determine what's working.

Numbers

One of the things that make the sport of musky fishing so fun, and also so challenging, is there are no certainties to it. There is never one pattern that produces fish or one lure that works every time. Instead there are different levels of success depending on how many of the right variables you can align in a certain day. For example, one day on a lake a person fishing weeds with bucktails may catch two muskies while a person casting to open water with Bull Dags on the same lake during the same day may get four. Both patterns produced; however, the Bull Dags pattern was more effective. Always be aware of the fact that these different levels of success exist.

Look at your fishing as a mathematic equation. Break down the time you spend doing different tactics, the amount of success you enjoy, and then account for how much prime time you gave each tactic. This should start to show which tactic is producing on a consistent basis and which ones produced simply because they were used a