

Mimic

When somebody gets a 'hot' hand, it's often because of the action or speed imparted to the lure, rather than the lure itself

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

It was midsummer on Lake St. Clair, and I was on the water for the evening "bite" with two good friends, Jim Gotham and Matt Quintano. My guide trip ended a bit early that day, giving me a rare opportunity to fish with them.

Earlier that day, my clients and I fished in overcast conditions and caught five muskies up to 51 inches. Once we left the water, however, the sun came out and the air temperature climbed well into the 90s. When Jim, Matt and I got back on the water around 6 p.m., I noticed the water temperature had climbed nearly three degrees. Jim started with a walleye-colored Medussa, Matt cast a cisco Medussa, and I fished a cisco Pounder.

Right from the beginning, it was clear Jim was going to be unstoppable. By 7:30 he had landed five muskies including a beautiful 50½-incher, while Matt and I had only one small fish between us. Matt and I switched to walleye Medussas, but it didn't matter because by 10 p.m. Jim had his tally up to 11 fish — with another giant at 51 inches.

What was Jim doing right? Obviously, we were fishing from the same boat, and we were casting to open water from opposite sides of the boat. "First water" was clearly not a factor. The answer was something few musky fishermen may consider — rather than only thinking about the lure and the color, you need to analyze exactly how the hot lure is being fished. In this example, Jim was fishing his Medussa in a very methodical, pull-pause retrieve, which allowed his bait to run a couple feet than my super-hard-and-erratic retrieve that tends to be my default summer retrieve. Both retrieves have their time and place, but on that day it was clear which retrieve the fish wanted.

Consider this lesson the next time your buddy has a "hot" hand. Quickly adapt your retrieve to mimic the action that he is using to dial in your presentation. This may allow you to vastly increase both the number and size of your catch.

Magic Bait Syndrome

When it comes to casting lures, anglers often believe there is a "magic" bait — if they could pick the right color of the right lure they would catch fish. Truth be told, the way you work the lure is usually more important than the color.

If you have no idea what cadence and speed the fish want when you first get on the water, it's best to vary your speed and retrieve style every single cast. For example, if you are fishing a Double Cowgirl, burn it back to the boat on the first cast. Follow that up with a medium retrieve speed and then try a slow retrieve. By doing this you will really maximize your chances of discovering which speed the muskies want that day. Once you hook up, then continue with the retrieve speed that worked. Stick with that retrieve for a while and as long as it continues to produce, keep going with it all day or even a number of days.

Changing conditions — either in the weather or amount of light, such as morning shifting to midday or midday to evening — often change the fishes' attitude. Therefore, if your action begins to slow down, especially as the weather or light conditions are changing, you should begin to slowly work your way back to rotating through different retrieve speeds to make sure you are always using the retrieve they want.

In contrast, when you are using baits that are best worked erratically, such as a BullDawg or Medussa, the speed of the retrieve is no longer the only variable. For these baits, you must also consider other factors such as the length of your pulls, how hard you pull, and how much of a pause you're giving the bait between rips.

Since I have started to study this concept I have experienced days during which each of these factors made the difference between catching multiple muskies or not getting a bite. For example, on one day last year my clients were using a different rod than I, and the muskies wanted the lures snapped, with super-hard rips being critical. I was using a Mark Lijewski-signature 4XH rod made by Musky Innovations, which performed the technique flawlessly, while my clients' rods had a lot of flex in the tip which absorbed the pressure and did not move the bait with the necessary hard snap. By about noon both of my clients had grabbed some of my extra rods. However, I have also seen it when the fish are slower and want the lure to glide through the water without sudden movements, especially in the fall cold-water period, and a softer action is a better choice.



The author's friend, Jim Gotham, with a 51-incher caught during his "hot" evening.

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This is a prime example of when muskies seem to be very keyed in on how your bait acts after it is paused. On the other hand, there are times when the key factor in the retrieve can be the length of pulls, length of pauses or overall speed of pulls. In order to help you determine

this, it is important to constantly vary your retrieves during every cast until you figure out what the muskies want that day.

Varying retrieve speeds is also important. When you find a speed that works you should focus on replicating it in the

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future, as should anyone else in your boat. If you find yourself in a scenario like the one I talked about at the beginning of the article in which one person is catching a disproportionate amount of the fish, do not be stubborn or get frustrated. Rather, watch what they are doing and learn from it. Stand next to the hot-handed angler if needed, and mimic exactly what he is doing until you feel you have the cadence right. In this way you can get dialed into the correct retrieve speed while you are still on the water, rather than back at home reflecting on why you did not catch as many muskies as your buddy.

When you are fishing rubber or other stop-and-go jerkbaits such as Suicks, Custom X twitchbaits or Hellhound gliders, there are a few general trends in the retrieve speeds that seem to hold up most of the time and can serve as a starting point. First, when you are fishing high-sky, bluebird conditions, a super-hard-and-fast snapping retrieve works well. It seems these fish need to be triggered with that speed to get strikes. On the flip side, when you are in post-frontal conditions or the water is cold, very slow, long sweeps tend to work great and are a good place to start. Lastly, during the summer in prime conditions, it seems like a medium retrieve speed with medium pulls is hard to beat. Remember to change the retrieve each cast until you determine what the fish want.

Default Speed

If you look again at my opening example, Jim outfished Matt and me 11 fish to two. There are two main takeaways from this. First, there is some truth to the fact that the way you work a bait is important to catching fish. Second, I did not practice what I am preaching here. The reason for that is simple. I, like all anglers, have a default speed and way of working baits that I naturally go to. In the summer with big rubber, such as BullDawgs and Medussas, I like to fish extremely aggressively with big rips. My baits ride high and fast most of the time. Some days that will work but on others it does not. The problem is overcoming that default speed when the fish don't

want it.

In order to do this you need to focus on every cast and think about what you are supposed to be doing. Try to avoid that all-too-common sequence of "focused cast, focused cast, distracted 20 minutes with all default casts followed

by the 'Oh, shoot!' revelation that you have spent 20 minutes not retrieving like you are supposed to."

One way that I try to overcome my default speed is to use different equipment, specifically different reels or rods. For example, in the summer I like to cast

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big rubber lures on a power gear Shimano Tranx, which is a high-speed reel that picks up 34 inches of line per crank. This fast reel combined with my typically fast way of retrieving baits means I normally work my lures very quickly. This is fine when the muskies want lures moving fast, but when they don't I am in trouble. Rather than trying to fish my lure slower and fight my default speed, I switch to a Shimano Calcutta TE reel, which only picks up 24 inches per crank. This slows my presentation down while maintaining my default speed.

Another trick that I use in the fall period when I need to work lures slowly is to short-spool my reels so that they have less line pick-up per turn of the reel handle. By doing this you cannot only utilize a slower reel but make it even slower by making a 24-inch-per-crank reel into an 18-inch per crank reel due to the lowered

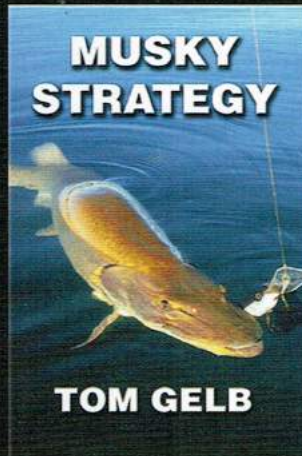
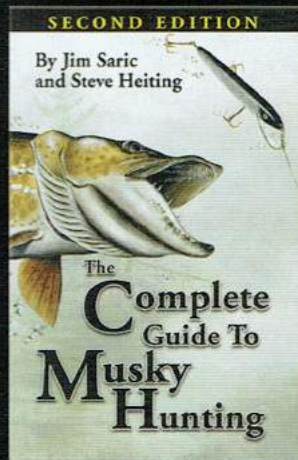
Don't think Jim Gotham only had a "hot" hand in the opening anecdote. Here he holds a 53-incher caught during another day fishing with the author.



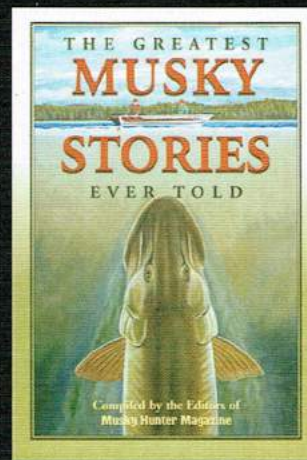
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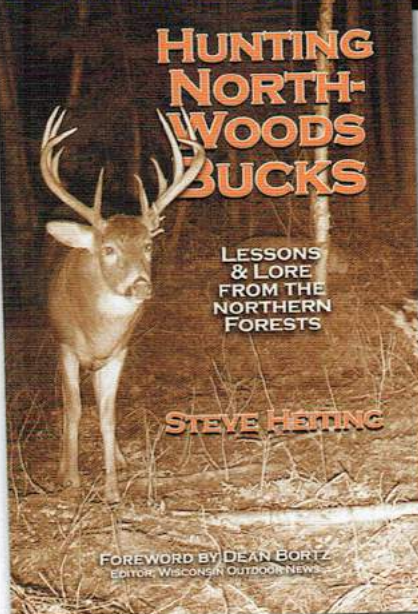
spool size. This will help you to mimic the retrieve speed that seems to be working while allowing you to use your default retrieve speed, thus reducing the work involved. The end result is the proper retrieve with less thought.

At the end of the day most guys who make a living on the water will tell you that the way a bait works in the water is far more important than its color. It is hard to get people to change from their default reeling speeds. If, however, you can get over that and start focusing on what the fish want, then you will be the guy in the boat who ends up outfishing everyone else, or at least setting the pace for them.

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