

## By Spencer Berman

Last November 11, I headed out to fish Lake St. Clair in hopes of catching a monster. Due to a last-minute cancellation by a client, I was going to fish with one of my longtime friends and fishing companions, Bob VanderMeer. In hindsight, saying the day was magical is an understatement. We landed a total of six fish, three of which were over 50 inches, with a 54 1/4-incher and a truly special 55 1/4-incher which carried a 26 3/4-inch girth. Although this was a very special day, times such as these are not set up by luck and can be achieved on a fairly regular basis ... though maybe not always with such top-end size.

### Lake Type

No two lakes are created equal and, in the fall, this is more true than ever. Have you ever noticed that in the fall the same lakes seem to produce monster fish year after year? Although some good fish get caught everywhere, there are a couple places that produce big fish year after year like Green Bay, the St. Lawrence River, Mille Lacs, Vermillion, Lake of the Woods, and my fall home, Lake St. Clair. Why is it that these places are so consistently pumping out big fish? It is because all of them provide anglers with the same few key advantages.

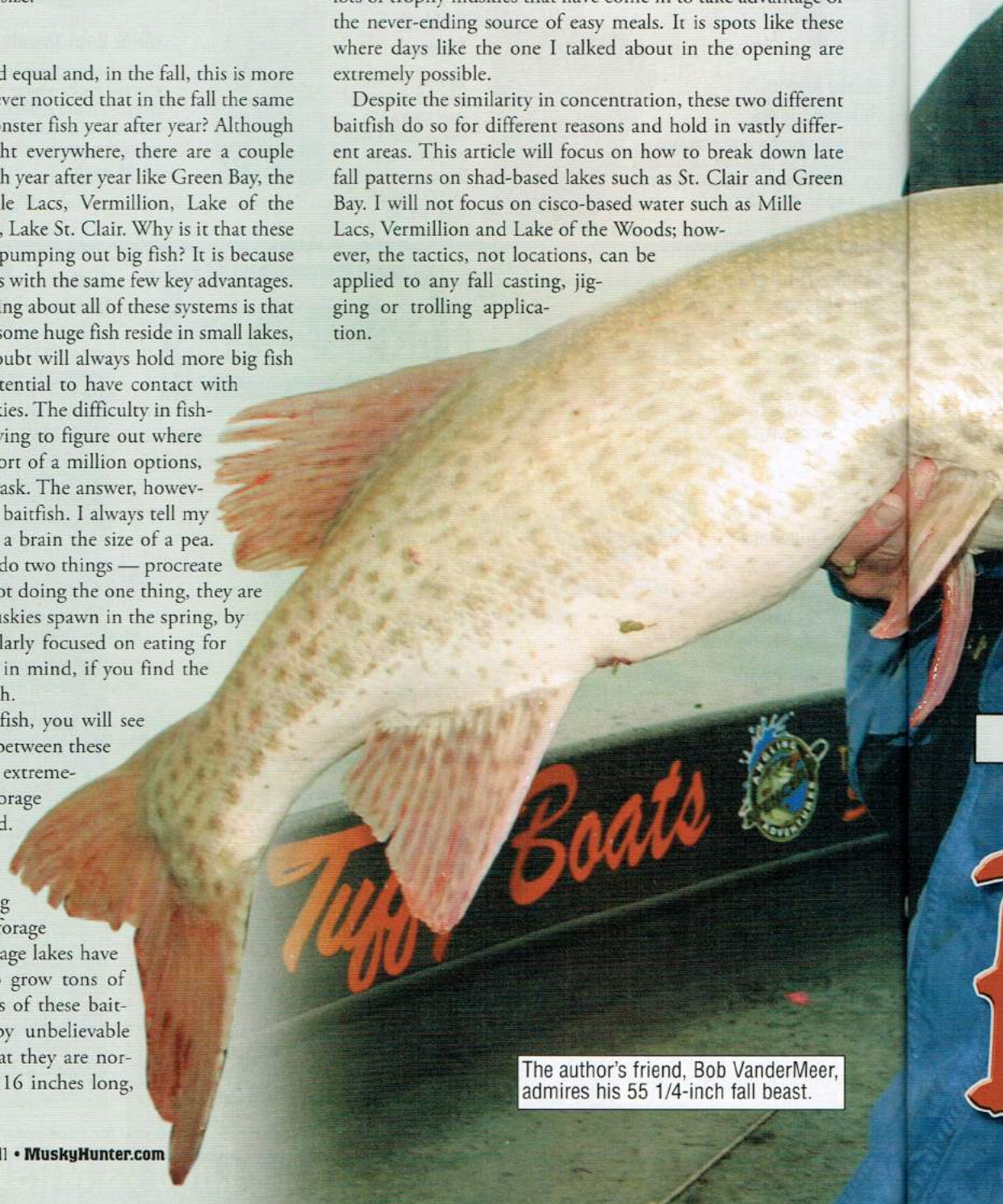
The most important thing about all of these systems is that they are big water. While some huge fish reside in small lakes, bigger water without a doubt will always hold more big fish and will give you the potential to have contact with numbers of monster muskies. The difficulty in fishing these huge lakes is trying to figure out where to start. With nothing short of a million options, it can appear a daunting task. The answer, however, is extremely simple — baitfish. I always tell my clients that muskies have a brain the size of a pea. They are programmed to do two things — procreate and eat. When they are not doing the one thing, they are doing the other. Since muskies spawn in the spring, by fall they have been singularly focused on eating for many months. With that in mind, if you find the food, you will find the fish.

When it comes to baitfish, you will see the next major similarity between these waters — they all have an extremely abundant open water forage fish, either ciscoes or shad. Although it is true that muskies can get absolutely huge eating perch, suckers and other forage types, shad- and cisco-forage lakes have a much higher ability to grow tons of trophy fish. The numbers of these baitfish will exceed others by unbelievable amounts. Considering that they are normally between eight and 16 inches long,

slow, with few spines, and high in fat, they are the perfect recipe for growing huge fish.

With falling water temperatures and the muskies' metabolic rates decreasing, the fall “binge eating” concept, I think, is a bit of a myth. Although it is true that female muskies need to eat a bit more in order to begin amassing the necessary calories and proteins to make eggs, their overall food intake is still not nearly as high as summer warm water fish which will have an extremely high metabolic rate. In the summer, ciscoes or shad can be anywhere, but in the fall, everything changes as the baitfish stage in very predictable areas. In these areas you will see a huge amount of not only baitfish but also lots of trophy muskies that have come in to take advantage of the never-ending source of easy meals. It is spots like these where days like the one I talked about in the opening are extremely possible.

Despite the similarity in concentration, these two different baitfish do so for different reasons and hold in vastly different areas. This article will focus on how to break down late fall patterns on shad-based lakes such as St. Clair and Green Bay. I will not focus on cisco-based water such as Mille Lacs, Vermillion and Lake of the Woods; however, the tactics, not locations, can be applied to any fall casting, jigging or trolling application.



The author's friend, Bob VanderMeer, admires his 55 1/4-inch fall beast.

**Follow the  
baitfish and fall  
musky location  
becomes easy**

# The Fall Bowmanza

## The Fall Bonanza

### Shad

On waters like Green Bay or my home on Lake St. Clair, the primary fall forage fish is gizzard shad. These areas, however, represent the northern-most extreme of the gizzard shad range, and thus in the fall the shad are desperately looking for waters warm enough to sustain them. In places like Green Bay and Lake St. Clair this means that the fish will move from open water shallow flats and congregate around deep inflowing river channels, many of which are dredged to make them 30 or more feet deep. These deeper channels will hold on to their heat much longer and will be consistently 5 degrees or more warmer than the surrounding water.

In addition to deeper water, rivers and channels have two other major advantages. If it is a river, then it will often contain more suspended particles than the main lake, which will heat up on sunny days and will once again raise the temperature of the water dramatically. In addition, rivers and their tributaries are constantly fed by ground water. This time of year the ground water, insulated by numerous feet of dirt, concrete, etc., will be maintaining a lot of heat and will again raise the rivers' temperatures.

Another major factor in these channels and rivers is the abundance of industry. The Port of Green Bay or Lake St. Clair's Port of Detroit and Port Huron have several large factories containing warm water discharges. These warm water discharges attract tons of baitfish with the muskies close behind.

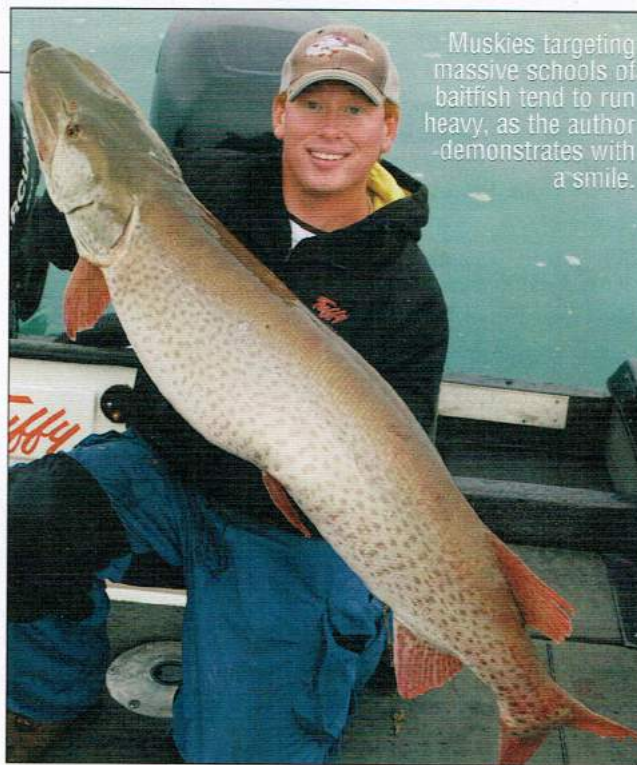
### Presentation

Once you have managed to successfully find both muskies and baitfish in one of the areas mentioned above, it is time to start focusing on your presentation. First, you need to discern where the fish are located in the water column. If the bulk of the fish are in the bottom half of the water column, mainly 12 to 15 feet down or more, you need to focus efforts on getting baits down deep, either by trolling or jigging. On the flip side, if you are seeing fish high in the water, suspended normally up along the breaklines (which in most cases are the channel edges), you should be thinking more about casting. It simply boils down to putting your baits in front of the fish.

### Go Deep

Depth can often be a problem when targeting deep water areas. The water is no longer stratified and instead there is well-oxygenated water from top to bottom. This often allows muskies to go deeper than normal casting presentations will allow. When you combine that with the fact that some of these areas, such as the St. Clair River, contain current that frequently exceeds seven miles per hour, muskies relating to the channels are forced to go deep and use the bottom as a current break. In either one of these scenarios, it is clearly evident that you will often need a deep water presentation.

When you are forced to go deep you have only two good options — trolling or jigging. Long-line trolling with deep-diving lures allows you to get deep and cover a lot of water



Muskies targeting massive schools of baitfish tend to run heavy, as the author demonstrates with a smile.

quickly. This tactic normally works best when you have a large river or channel area that is holding fish and you need to find active ones. A couple of my favorite lures for this are 14-inch Jakes, straight DepthRaiders, and 12-inch Custom X's, but the lure that has really caught my eye of late is the new Big Game Scuba Diver. This lure gives you the unique ability to reach depths beyond those of other lures. A good rule of thumb is to run something down extremely deep, like a Big Game Scuba Diver, with 100 feet of line hitting near the bottom about 20 to 22 feet down and then keeping another lure, like a 14-inch Jake, higher in the water column, running 14 feet down with 55 feet of line out.

The other option is vertical jigging, which provides the unique opportunity to effectively fish an area far under the surface while keeping your bait constantly in the strike zone. This tactic seems to be better when you find a bend, eddie, or other area where there is a large number of fish in a small area, thus allowing you to do short drifts with your jigs always in the strike zone. When vertical jigging, there are really only two lures I use — the Fuzzy Duzzit and my favorite, the Bondy Bait. Both sink extremely quickly and can be fished very easily off bottom. The Fuzzy Duzzit can prove difficult to use in substantial current, but the Bondy Bait was designed for this. Be sure to let the jig fall while keeping some tension on the line. Many of your hits while jigging will come when the jig is falling. Since muskies normally feed up, they will normally eat your bait as it is falling. This will result in slack in your line and unless you have some contact with your bait you may not even realize that the fish of a lifetime has your bait in its mouth until it is too late.

### Go High

The advantage to last November 11 was that all of the fish

were suspended high in the water column. That day, the muskies were using the steep channel edges and the surface to congregate baitfish. When this happens, casting is difficult to beat. The key to casting at this time of year is knowing what the fish are relating to. Occasionally the fish will be out in the middle of the river or channels, but nine times out of ten the most active fish will be hugging the channel edge or shoreline.

There are a couple major indicators that the fish will be suspended high and tight. First, look at your graph. If you see fish just under your transducer, then you know you're in for a casting bite. However, this is not as easy as it sounds because marking baitfish less than 12 feet under the surface can be extremely difficult. At those depths your sonar cone is extremely small, and with your boat immediately overhead the baitfish often spook out of the reach of your transducer. Also, many times the fish are suspended just under the surface. When this happens your graph will be too low in the column to mark anything and it will appear that you fishing the Dead Sea. For these reasons you may be forced to rely on more primitive tactics, like looking for baitfish surfacing or seagulls diving to the surface.

The most primitive yet effective tactic I use to determine a casting bite is to start casting! It seems like there will always be some fish hanging around the breaklines, and even if the baitfish masses are not there it is still a good idea to throw a couple and see what happens. On the other hand, if fish are there it should not take long for them to let you know it.

One last important factor is the weather. If you have stable weather for two or more days then there is a better-than-average chance the fish will be up and active. Also, whenever you have high pressure (always associated with stable weather) it normally means that you have relatively warm air temperatures and sun. When this happens the warmer air and sun will heat the top of the water column, thus moving the shad

and the muskies toward the surface.

I keep it pretty simple when choosing lures for casting — Pounders, Pounders, Pounders, and occasionally another bait. It is no secret that big rubber baits outproduce everything else for fall casters because they provide a large profile, therefore drawing much-needed attention to your bait in an environment with extremely abundant food. Also, because these lures sink you can control the depth at which they run by changing the speed of your retrieve. This allows you to put your lure at different depths in the water column, thus making it easy to mimic the level the baitfish are holding. I like to fish Bull Dawgs with a long pull-pause retrieve, which pulls the bait up at an angle on your sweeps and then allows it to sink during the pause. Other good casting options are large crankbaits such as 12-inch Big Games, 12-inch Custom X's as well as 10- and 14-inch Jakes. Again, use a pull-and-pause retrieve.

Although it is true that you can get a monster fish any time of year, fall is the time when a good fish becomes a trophy fish, a trophy fish becomes a monster fish and a monster fish becomes a record fish. This is the time when the fish pack on the pounds. It's true that it can be extremely frustrating with constant temperature swings and cold temperatures. However, by choosing waters that put the odds in your favor, you will give yourself a chance to catch something truly spectacular.

*Spencer Berman guides in Indiana in spring, in Minnesota in summer and fall, and Lake St. Clair in the late fall. For more about him, visit [www.spencersanglingadv.com](http://www.spencersanglingadv.com).*



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