

Under Pressure

Pressure from boaters and other musky anglers affect our quarry. Here's how to succeed

By Spencer Berman

There is nothing in freshwater fishing that is comparable to catching a musky, and over the last couple of years more anglers have come to realize this fact. Therefore, the amount of pressure muskies face has risen exponentially. With this added fishing pressure, many dynamics of musky fishing have been either altered or entirely redefined.

We are also seeing musky lakes becoming more heavily utilized by other forms of recreational boating traffic, so this must also be factored into any general fishing equation. By learning how these different forms of pressure influence musky behavior you will be able to adjust accordingly.

Boating Pressure

As a guide operating in the Minnesota Twin Cities Metro area I am often asked how I deal with boating traffic. The answer is complicated. I break down the pleasure boat traffic based on different variables. The first and most influential is deviation from the norm. Muskies in Lake Minnetonka, near Minneapolis, have no idea what it's like to not have boats constantly overhead. They only understand what they experience every day and thus are not greatly influenced by an average day's boating activity. Any musky living in a lake such as this has either learned to feed while boats are around or has died. On the other hand, the behavior of muskies in waters that receive relatively low amounts of boat traffic may be dramatically influenced by sudden heavy pressure.

In either case, when a lake is exposed to an increased amount of pleasure boating activity it will affect the muskies in a couple of distinct ways. First, it will cause your window of opportunity to be staggered toward morning versus evening. As a general rule, pleasure boaters don't get out on the water en masse until after the early morning has passed, and traffic normally tapers off as it begins to get dark. When you factor in a short period of adjustment for the muskies to reposition themselves after the boat traffic has subsided, you normally find yourself flirting with darkness. Keeping this cycle of boating pressure in mind, your

best periods are usually going to be early mornings, late evenings and night fishing. Unfortunately, many of us cannot fish during peak feeding periods, so we will inevitably face boating pressure.

Muskies respond in a couple of distinct ways to a sudden influx of boating pressure. One of the most common effects you will see is the muskies holding much tighter to the weeds. When you have a relative lack of boat traffic it allows the muskies to cruise much more freely without much bother, but once boating pressure is added this casual roaming style is replaced by hunkering down into thick mats of weeds. There are two distinct options to catch these fish. First, you can try slower-moving baits along the weeds in the hope of prying a reluctant musky out by forcing it to look repeatedly at a bait. The second option is to go in after them by running a very weedless bait through the weeds. Although this tactic is tedious and frustrating, with large percentages of your casts coming back fouled, it can pay huge dividends.

The other major trend you will see when muskies are exposed to high levels of boating pressure is a migration to open water. Normally these fish will be located 10 to 25 feet down unless the lake's open water is more shallow than that, in which case the muskies will normally position near the bottom. It is now extremely important to use your graph to determine the depth in the water column the fish are holding.

For casting, I prefer baits which either dive quickly or can be counted down. Keep in mind that "countdowns" will spend more time in the strike zone simply because a large portion of your retrieve isn't wasted as they dive to the desired depth. For this I normally prefer to throw Bull Dawgs, gliders or sinking crankbaits. Another major option is trolling, and depth remains the key. Boat-shy muskies have been moved from their preferred structure and are much less apt to travel any distance to hit a bait. With that in mind, it's important to know the exact running depth of your lures so you can place them in the strike zone.

Fishing Pressure

The second and more influential form of pressure is from other fishermen. Fishing pressure can completely alter a musky's overall behavior.

To succeed in heavy fishing pressure an angler must focus on breaking the trend — if you do the same as everyone else you're not setting your efforts apart and are merely hoping to get lucky.





Think of it this way — if you're fishing a lake where casting Magnum Bull Dawgs is a standby tactic and a good portion of the muskies are susceptible to this pattern, say 5 percent on a given day, but if a large amount of anglers are using this popular lure, you must divide that 5 percent of muskies between the anglers using them. On the other hand, if you were to break the trend slightly and throw a Pounder Bull Dawg rather than a Magnum, you are setting your efforts apart from other anglers and giving yourself the chance to do something spectacular. Overall, some of the easiest and most consistent ways to break or alter these trends is by lure selection, night fishing, open water fishing, fishing unpopular spots, and livebaiting.

Spot Selection

What is the first thing you do before going to a lake you have never fished? You look at a map of that lake ... as you study the map, you quickly pick out a handful of spots that look great. The only problem is 500 other musky anglers have done the same thing with that same lake map. The bottom line is such obvious spots are referred to as "community spots."

Without a doubt these spots hold fish, and frequently they are some of the most generous fishing spots on the lake when you look at it strictly from the perspective of fish catches. However, once you compare the number of fish caught versus the number of hours a spot has been fished by the parade of anglers, you realize that the math simply does not add up. For that reason it is always a good idea to try to find spots in pressured waters where fewer anglers fish.

The easiest way to locate these spots is, again, to look at the lake's map but concentrate on less obvious, yet distinguished, spots. I call these "B Spots." Obviously, "A Spots" are what I consider community holes, rock bars, weed reefs, points, and so on. "B Spots," however, are less-obvious such as winding weedlines, secondary points, inside weed or rock turns, saddles etc. As you're fishing these "B Spots," keep in mind that if you only fish them during low percentage times of the day you're not exactly giving them a fair chance to prove their potential.

Although you can learn a lot about a lake

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from looking at a map there is still no substitute for time on the water. I scout secondary spots by driving my boat while looking for one of a few signs that distinguish otherwise nondescript stretches. The first distinguishing factor that I look for are deeper weeds — an edge where the weeds grow deeper than in the surrounding area. Another characteristic is scattered weeds or rock. Where you find scattered weeds, be on the lookout for areas where the weed growth is extremely nonuniform, such as where clumps exist,

which allow muskies to hide in the vegetation. Depressions, or pockets, in a weedbed, can serve as a great feeding area for a hungry musky. When considering rock, watch for areas with boulders or ledges. This complexity makes them great ambush points for muskies and a spot with such features will hold a lot more fish than a simple, flat rock bottom.

Night Fishing

The more fish are pressured during the day, the more they feed at night. In addition,

big muskies have the least tolerance for dealing with a daily bait bombardment. These fish become more aggressive at night but are also easier to dupe. Darkness makes it much more difficult for a fish to pick out the difference between a real baitfish and a bait.

The last major reason to night fish on highly-pressured lakes is the numbers of anglers will be less than during the day.

Lure Selection

To break trends you need to do one of two things — use a standard bait with a bit of a twist, or completely change the style and tactic. When you want to present something different than what other anglers are using there are normally two categories of lures that you can count on being overlooked — gliders and topwaters. Generally, I try to match my contrasting bait to the running depth of the standard presentation. For example, if fast-moving bucktails are extremely popular, being that they are running maybe a foot under the surface, I would try a topwater. On the flip side, a weighted glider would be the alternative to a Bull Dawg because it would be fished at the same approximate depth.

It is always a good plan to use different variations of popular lures. A couple of the obvious choices are increasing or decreasing the size of the bait, or changing the colors. If for example, black bucktails with silver blades are working, try a bucktail with both black and silver tinsel in it. The biggest thing about this concept is to be creative.

Although pressured waters are not always the most fun to fish, at times they can have great potential. By standing out in the crowd and fishing smarter you can stack the odds in your favor to catch some big, smart fish.

The author guides in Indiana during the spring, and on Minnesota's metro waters during the summer and fall. For more information, visit www.spencersanglingadv.com



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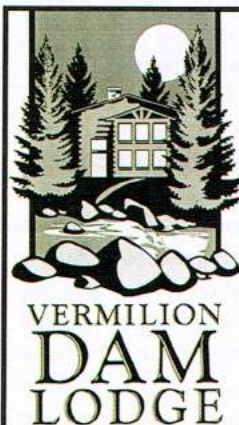


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