

Baitfish Densities

How to determine a lake's baitfish density, and then utilize the right approach to fishing

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

What's your first consideration when you consider how to fish a lake? Most look at the structure of the lake, the size of fish they want to target, and which of their favorite techniques would best be applied. An important factor we seldom consider is the amount of baitfish in the lake. Not only can baitfish tell us what to expect from a lake, they can tell us how to fish it.

By doing a bit of homework, you can predetermine the expected size and average build of a lake's muskies, and how to catch them. When you compare lakes with abundant forage with waters containing lower forage numbers, you can figure out the styles of success are extremely different even if the numbers of muskies per acre is similar. Once you understand how muskies behave in each of these fisheries, you will quickly realize the best ways to have success.

Livebait Example

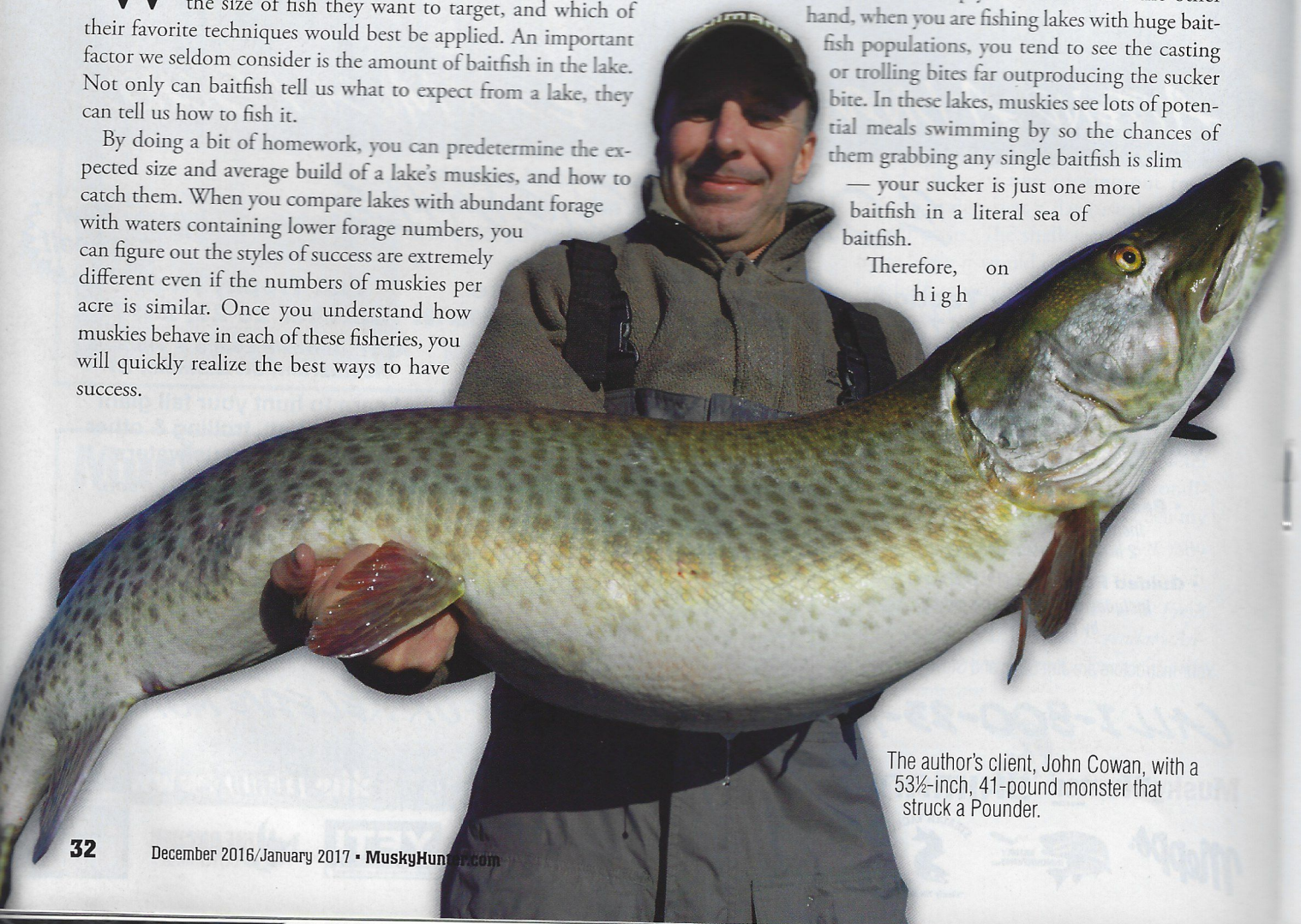
It was livebait fishing that sparked my thinking about the difference in fishing styles between low musky forage lakes and high musky forage lakes. Why is it that on some lakes, fishing in the fall with suckers is a lights-out technique, while on others suckers are vastly perceived as a waste of time. The common denominator is the lake's baitfish level.

As a general rule, muskies in lakes with low baitfish populations are more opportunistic in their feeding habits. When a musky sees a meal swim by, it will likely attack it because it may not soon have another chance to eat. This makes suckers hanging off the side of the boat simply irresistible. On the other

hand, when you are fishing lakes with huge baitfish populations, you tend to see the casting or trolling bites far outproducing the sucker bite. In these lakes, muskies see lots of potential meals swimming by so the chances of them grabbing any single baitfish is slim

— your sucker is just one more baitfish in a literal sea of baitfish.

Therefore, on high



The author's client, John Cowan, with a 53½-inch, 41-pound monster that struck a Pounder.

forage density lakes, casting or trolling offers your best chance of success. As a whole, lures take the motions and vibrations of a dying baitfish to the absolute extreme, making them more likely to get noticed.

Although this livebait example explains the difference in musky behavior, it is not the only difference in fishing these two types of waters.

Determining Forage Numbers


To determine whether to use high forage density or low forage density techniques, you must first decide the type of lake you are fishing. There are a few different things to look at.

The first is the type of forage you see in a lake. If the predominate forage fish are shad, ciscoes or whitefish, the lake likely has a high forage density because these species are extremely prolific. Also, since shad are filter feeders and whitefish and ciscoes eat mainly bug larva and other super abundant items, their food supply almost never limits their numbers.

On the other hand if you are dealing with forage fish such as suckers, walleyes, shiners, panfish, perch or carp, your lake has a relatively low forage density. While there may be plenty of such fish species in your favorite lake and they keep the resident muskies relatively fat, there are nowhere near as many as high forage fish, which commonly swim in giant schools with thousands of fish.

The only exception to this could be perch, which often exist in large numbers. However this occurs almost always in larger fisheries, and it is up to you to determine this on a lake-by-lake basis. If the perch population is extremely high it is easy to spot because there will be large numbers of perch fishermen. If the lake you are fishing is known as a perch mecca, then the lake could be considered as having high density forage.

If you are unsure of the fish species that makes up a lake's forage base, look at lake maps (most have basic descriptions of the lake, including baitfish), DNR reports or surveys, *Musky Hunter* articles featuring the lakes, Internet reports, or ask a local guide. Even a secretive guide will likely



The author measures a 55-incher he caught while casting a Pro Pounder over open water.

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answer a simple question about the forage base of a lake.

Your fishing strategy should be based on whether you are fishing a high forage or low forage lake. The difference in the muskies' feeding preferences affects boat control, feeding windows and lure presentation.

Boat Control

Opportunistic muskies in lakes with low forage densities are more likely to travel larger distances to eat a lure, making it less important to pick areas apart with casts landing every couple feet. Instead, I prefer to move the boat quickly, normally around 0.7 mph to 1 mph. For trolling, I lean more toward 3.5 mph to 5 mph on such waters.

These opportunistic fish are also less likely to pass on your lure due to casting angle, presentation, or lure color. For these reasons covering water is always your best weapon on these lakes. By moving the boat quickly through areas and covering a lot of water, you are guaran-



Waters with high density baitfish populations require you to slow down and methodically pick the spots apart while using giant baits. The author caught this monster on a Medussa from Lake St. Clair.

teed to put your baits in front of as many muskies as possible.

On the other hand, when you are fishing high forage density lakes, you are dealing with muskies that will let lure after lure go over them until the conditions and presentation are just right. In

this situation, I fish through areas where I think muskies are located very methodically, placing casts every few feet. I prefer to run the boat between 0.3 mph and .5 mph for casting, and 2.6 mph to 3.5 mph for trolling. This will ensure that your lures will land near each fish at some point, which helps make a lazy musky commit. Additionally, on such lakes it is a good idea to go over prime areas several times from different angles and with different presentations.

Feeding Windows

Feeding windows, whether they are moon-, sun- or weather-oriented, are usually your best time to contact muskies. However, this can vary with the lake.

First, on low forage lakes, the opportunistic nature of the fish is going to make them more likely to bite outside of feeding windows, which leads to more consistent action throughout the day. Due to the expected higher activity levels of these fish, I prefer to cover key areas throughout the day, only returning to the

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ones where you have had the best action during feeding windows. If your action has been limited, don't be afraid to fish a spot you previously haven't fished during the prime window. Basically these fish should be more aggressive, so keep changing areas and lure presentation until you have success. This makes you less reliant on feeding windows to dictate your day.

When you fish lakes with high musky forage, feeding windows may be your only true chance for success. This makes it important to not only be fishing prime spots during these windows, but also to not rule out any promising areas until you have fished them during a prime feeding window. Try new areas between your expected windows, and then return to the best-potential spots for the windows.

Due to the lower musky activity level and the extremely concentrated feeding of these fish around the feeding windows, it is not uncommon to have little to no action between windows. Since you may not have contacted any fish between windows, it is often necessary to use other factors to determine where to fish during the windows. You may have to rely on things such as the amount of baitfish in an area, the depth and color of the weeds, or the presence of big boulders on a rock reef to choose a location for an upcoming window.

As a guide on Lake St. Clair, I may fish an area for hours without even seeing a musky if big schools of baitfish are present. Without having any musky action at the moment, I know if the baitfish are densely-packed, it will most likely take a good feeding window to get the fish going. Waiting them out is always a good call.

Lure Presentation

The last major concept affected by baitfish density is lure presentation. If you're fishing faster and covering water on a low-density lake, you should use baits that are effective when fished quickly. My favorite lures for this situation are Double Cowgirls, Jr. Cowgirls, Hellhounds, Low Riders, Medussas and BullDawgs.

On the other hand, on lakes with high densities of forage, you are going to be

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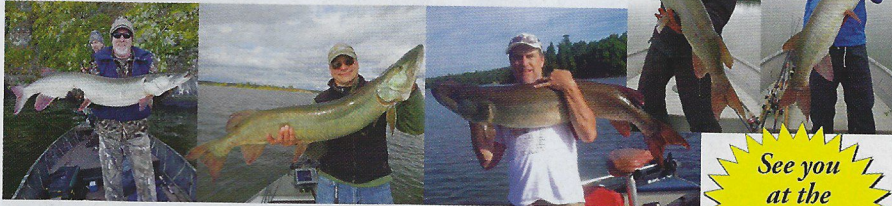
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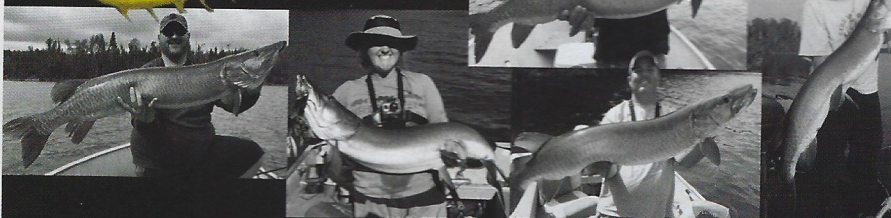
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picking areas apart so use lures that can be fished in a slower, more methodical manner. My short list would consist of Double Cowgirls, Softail Phantoms, a Doc, Suick, Medussas and BullDawgs.

Always choose bigger lures on waters with higher baitfish densities because their larger profile, combined with high water displacement, will get them noticed despite the abundance of baitfish. Muskies in these situations also tend to eat larger baitfish. The logic behind this comes down to simple calories burned versus calories consumed. It takes muskies roughly the same amount of effort and energy to chase down a four-inch baitfish as it would a 14-inch baitfish, but the larger baitfish gains the musky several times as many calories. Knowing this, it only makes sense that a musky would prefer to eat one bigger meal than several smaller meals.

The final presentational aspect is lure color. While it will always be based around factors such as light conditions and watercolor, baitfish density also plays a role. As a general rule, when you are fishing lakes with dense baitfish populations, you want to use less natural, brighter color patterns, which help the lures stand out and get noticed. Conversely, on lakes with lower baitfish densities, I prefer natural patterns. Muskies in these waters do not see hundreds of baitfish a day, so a natural color pattern will stand out by itself.

The thing I love most about musky fishing is how many different pieces there are to the puzzle. Nothing is ever cut and dried, so you should always be thinking about the factors that influence your on-water decisions. A lake's baitfish density is one overlooked factor that really can help you develop fishing success. By understanding your lakes' baitfish densities, and how those densities affect musky attitudes, you will be able to put one more aspect of the muskies' behavior to work for you.

For more about Field Editor Spencer Berman, visit www.spencersanglingadu.com



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