

A man wearing a dark cap and sunglasses is smiling while holding a large musky fish. The fish is held vertically, showing its full length and spotted pattern. The background is a body of water under a clear sky. A ruler is visible on the boat's edge at the bottom of the frame.

The author smiles for a photo with a 54 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch musky prior to its release. The fish was caught on a Pounder Bull Dawg.

How Big Is

Big?

When you consider a lure's profile, something that looks big to us really isn't to a feeding musky

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

A fisherman approached me as I launched my boat on Lake St. Clair a few years ago with the question, "I know you're in a rush to get out for your first musky casts of the year but I wanted to ask, do you ever downsize?"

I responded: "On St. Clair, I personally never do. These fish are looking for a big meal and baits like Pounder Bull Dawgs are actually not that big for these fish, only for us as fishermen. I catch both big fish and small on them with great numbers." He took the advice with a nod and a "thank you," and I finished launching my boat and headed out on the water.

After my clients and I pulled up on our first spot of the day, I proceeded to make about five casts with my Pounder and caught a 3½-pound smallmouth! I looked at my clients and said, "Man, I wish that guy could see this. It pretty much proves these lures aren't too big for any musky if I am catching smallies on them!"

The big bait craze has definitely had a dramatic effect on the musky world over the last 20 years or so. We have seen baits grow in nearly every category. Twenty years ago a big bucktail was a tandem Blue Fox and now it's a Musky Mayhem Super Model. A big crankbait was Suick Tackle's Cisco Kid, and now it's a 12-inch Mattlock. With bigger baits hitting the market, there have been a lot of questions about whether they are too big for muskies as well as when we should use them.

And, perhaps most importantly — how do our bodies handle such big lures?

Actual Profile

One of the common misconceptions when it comes to big baits is their profile. I think anglers look at such lures on store



The side profile of a Pounder Bull Dawg (middle) is roughly equivalent to that of a 15-inch walleye or the tail section of a Double Cowgirl.

shelves and think they're huge largely because they're comparing them to other baits on the market. In my opinion, this isn't the best way to perceive lure size. Instead we need to look at the bait's profile as it would be seen by a musky and then compare that to what the muskies are currently eating.

When you look at the profile, don't look at the length of the bait but rather what a musky will perceive as the body of the "baitfish" it is about to eat. For example, when you look at bucktails, it is my opinion that a musky doesn't consider the blades to be part of the overall profile. Instead, the tinsel, marabou or hair is what makes up the body of the "baitfish" the musky thinks it's eating. The blades simply provide vibration and flash to attract the fish to the target — the body of the bucktail.

Obviously short of asking a musky to explain what they see when looking at lures, there is no way to know for sure it thinks is the bait's profile. However, when you consider how muskies eat lures, nearly 100 percent of the time they hit the body of the bait rather than the attracting part. With big rubber, such as a Pounder Bull Dawg which can stretch to over 20 inches in length, the tail constitutes over half the length and does so with almost zero diameter. I believe the tail is there to move water and vibrate to attract the fish to the actual body of the Dawg. When you do this you are left with a meal that is not too big for any size musky. In my boat we get over 500 musky strikes on Bull Dawgs each year and it is common to see only a handful of tails bitten off per season. They are almost always negative fish swiping at the bait or active fish missing the lure's body.

When I posed the same question to top Green Bay guide Bret Alexander of Alexander's Sport Fishing, he told me he saw nearly 95 percent of his rubber strikes from active fish connecting with the bodies of the lures. He too agreed that nearly all tail strikes are negative fish that don't really want to eat the lure or active fish that simply miss, which serves to back up the theory that the body of the lure is what muskies perceive as the profile.

Forage Size vs. Lure Body

The next important detail to consider is the size of the forage the muskies are targeting. If you look at the myriad of data available on what forage shows up in muskies' stomachs, you will see



Compared to a large gizzard shad, a Pounder Bull Dawg appears small. The author found this shad floating on Lake St. Clair; note the teeth marks in its tail section.

How Big Is Big?

an interesting and somewhat scattered result. In some cases large muskies have been filled with smaller fish such as Ken O'Brien's Ontario record fish that was filled with small bullheads. On the other hand, the Kentucky state record fish had a 26-inch carp in its stomach. Despite this large variance, we do know that it is much harder for a musky to achieve trophy size and weight by eating extremely small meals. It is important to look at the calorie output that a musky has to expend to chase a fish of any size because it is believed to be no easier for a musky to catch a smaller baitfish than a large one. It stands to reason that a larger musky will prefer larger meals due to their calorie-per-exertion advantage.

I believe the presence of smaller meals in some muskies is often due to the extremely opportunistic nature of a predator fish. When a chance for an easy meal presents itself, no matter the size of the baitfish, a musky will often take advantage. To take this a step further, consider



The profile of a large perch compared to a Spanky double ten and a Pounder Bull Dawg.

how many large musky are caught by multi-species anglers using extremely small lures. On the other extreme, there have been countless examples of muskies that were found dead after having choked

to death trying to eat a fish that was simply too big. Remember, a musky has no idea how big it is as there is now way for it to compare itself to other fish. In the right proximity and circumstances, a musky will eat both extremely large and extremely small baits. Still, we must consider the calories taken in by a musky and the calories it expends to catch its food, which means bigger baits should appeal to them the majority of the time.

Another good way to look at musky forage size is livebait fishing. Most livebait fisherman prefer to use suckers in the 12-plus-inch range and often much bigger, and 34- to 42-inch muskies have no trouble grabbing them.

Thus, most of what we consider to be large baits are really not that big when compared to what most muskies are eating.

Neutral Or Negative Fish

When using bigger baits it is important to realize they really shine when

THE GLORY OF CATCH AND RELEASE

**CHRISTMAS
RUSH & GIFT
CERTIFICATES
AVAILABLE**



Thank you Caleb Stidd for letting LAX replicate this 55" St. Clair trophy.

See us at the Ohio, Chicago, Milwaukee, Wausau, Pennsylvania and Minnesota musky shows in 2019. Mount delivery/pickup to all 6 shows is available

www.laxreproductions.com

Email: laxreplicas@gmail.com

5455 Hwy 45 • Conover, WI 54519

(715) 547-3710

Rick **LAX** REPRODUCTIONS

muskies are looking to feed. However, when you find the muskies to be in a neutral or negative feeding mood, success can be far more limited. If you find yourself fishing for muskies which are not actively feeding, for example in post-frontal, spawning, post-spawn or extreme high pressure conditions, you will likely be dealing with fish that are not looking to feed. In these situations we often see these fish unwilling to consistently eat bigger lures, and resultingly smaller baits can be more effective. Smaller baits don't try to evoke the same feeding response from the fish and may instead simply trigger reaction strikes.

"Big" To Us

The most common complaint I hear when talking to clients about using bigger baits is the challenge they pose to the angler, and big baits are probably under-utilized for that reason alone. However, today we have a plethora of top-of-the-line tools to help fish larger lures with minimum effort.

The first essential is a longer rod measuring a minimum of 8-foot-6. The reason is simple physics. The longer the rod, the faster the lure will travel when you cast. This allows for maximum distance with a minimum amount of effort. Another important thing to remember when choosing a rod is a longer rear grip, which allows you to space out your hands while casting, which loads the rod with minimal effort. I prefer Chaos' nine-foot rods and choose the model based on the weight of the lures I am casting.

Another easy addition to your rod when using big bucktails is to attach a Musky Innovations or Outdoor Grips handle to the foregrip. Such grips change the angle of your hold on the rod which will vastly reduce the pull of big blades. This limits wrist and forearm fatigue which is the No. 1 complaint of anglers using big bucktails.

Casting larger, heavier baits is much different than smaller baits where a flick of the wrist sends them flying. With bigger lures you need to make sure you take the bait back slowly. I then usually recommend letting the lure hang at the back of your backswing for a split second to

ensure the rod is loaded before lobbing the bait. There should be no snapping motions but rather a deliberate lob-cast. When you do this properly you end up using the lure's weight to gain the momentum and get the distance you need while exerting minimum effort.

When you examine big baits as we have here, it should come as no surprise that they work so well. Combine them

with good equipment, and big baits are clearly a tool that should be in every musky hunter's arsenal.

For more about Captain Spencer Berman, visit spencersanglingadv.com



THE ORIGINAL BIG BLADED FLASHABOU BUCKTAILS

**MUSKY
MAYHEM**
Tackle LLC

**CUSTOM COLORS
NOW AVAILABLE AT**

www.MuskyMayhemTackle.com