

# All waters change over time, including Lake St. Clair, home of arguably the hottest musky “bite” of recent years

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

In 2012, I wrote a two-part article about Lake St. Clair. Part 1 laid out the history of the lake and how different environmental factors have changed this amazing fishery over the last 40 years, while Part 2 discussed fishing techniques, including how the trolling bite had evolved over time. St. Clair had arguably the best musky population of any lake in the world when the articles were published, but that was six years ago.

This begs the question: How has the lake changed biologically, and how has fishing pressure affected the “bite” on the lake?

## Biological Changes

Despite only six years since my article, Lake St. Clair has seen several major environmental changes. Some have had a dramatic effect on how the lake fishes and others have caused little change.

The first major change to the fishery was the water level. In 2012 the deepest natural part of the lake (not including the dredged channel) was just less than 20 feet of water. At that point the Great Lakes were at an all-time low, and since St. Clair is part of the Great Lakes, it is no surprise that it also was extremely low. Today, the Great Lakes are close to an all-time high water mark and St. Clair is at its second-highest level in history with the deepest part of the lake just over 24 feet. Average depth went from 11 to 15 feet. This represents a 36 percent increase in the overall water depth. Despite this rise, the lake remains roughly the same size at around 274,000 surface acres.

One major change brought by the higher water levels is current traveling through the system. The average speed of both the St. Clair and Detroit rivers has increased more than one mile per hour each. Although the lake’s current speed varies depending on your proximity to the channel, it still has increased. This has led to dramatic changes in the movements of fish which relate to current-based areas.

Another biological factor that hit St. Clair in the spring of 2017 was a breakout of VHS virus. As many remember, this virus hit the lake in the early 2000s with a musky mortality rate of 30 to 40 percent. On the surface the die-off seemed horrific, but it ended up strengthening the musky genetics of the lake. The most recent kill was nowhere near as deadly. Most guides believe the mortality rate was less than five percent.

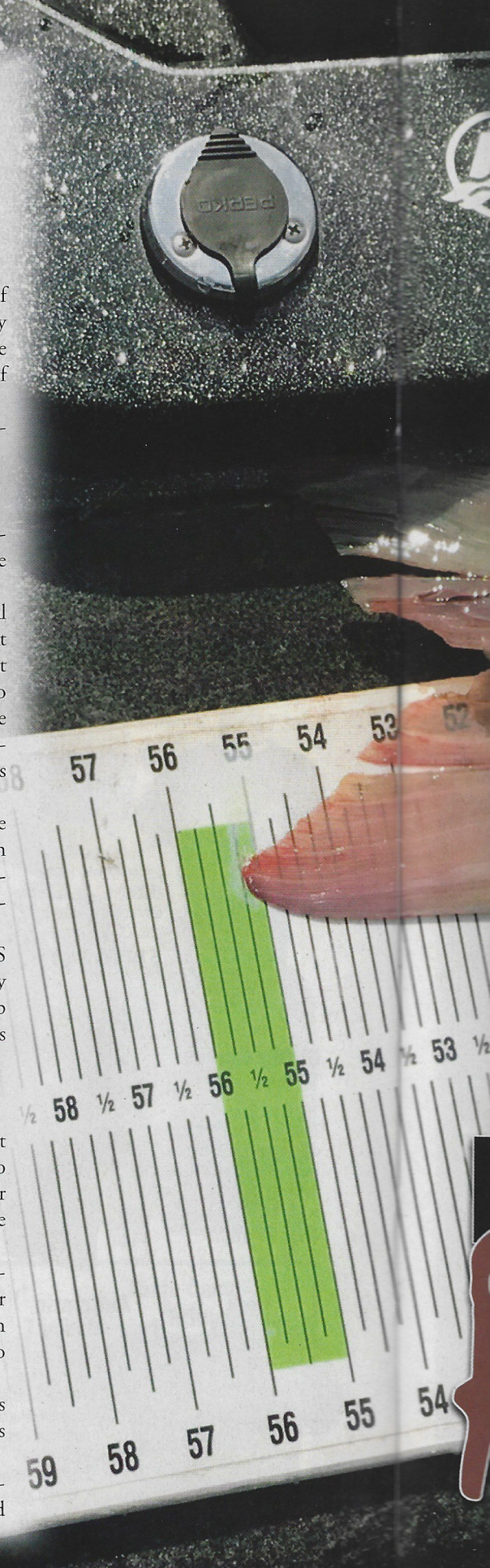
## Fishing In 2018

The biological changes have had an impact on different aspects of the lake. The biggest biological change that impacted musky fishing is the increase in water levels, which led to clearer water. The lake has been very clear since the introduction of mussels to the St. Clair system in the mid 1990s. “Stained” water now comes from wave action rolling up loose sediment.

The increase in water levels has made this much more challenging. When the lake’s average depth was 11 feet it took only two- to 2½-foot waves to roll the water column over and create the desired green water color that muskies and shad seem to favor. Now, with the depth average being closer to 15 feet, it takes much more substantial wave action to roll the water column over. The lake is now much clearer on average.

Also, with water levels going up, the average summer water temperature of the lake has fallen considerably. This decrease in temperature is due to both the increase in the lake’s volume as well as the clearer water holding less of the sun’s heat.

These changes have not necessarily hurt the musky fishing but have caused the movements of the fish to change. The learning curve involved with these changes has caused





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Lake St. Clair is home to many giant muskies, including this 55-inch monster caught and released by the author.



# Lake St. Clair

# Revisited

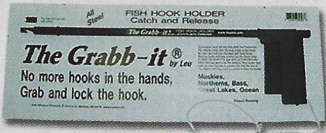


# Release Tools & Stuff



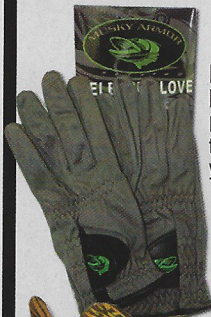
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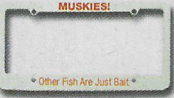
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## Lake St. Clair Revisited

many fishermen to struggle at times, as spots that held fish in previous years have gone dry.

The first major change we have seen in musky habits is the movement of more muskies to the east and southeast portions of the lake, which tend to have darker water due to harder bottom and less weed growth. Also, the east end gets most of its water from the Thames River which tends to be darker stained than the rest of the lake, whose water comes from Lake Huron. These areas heat up quicker in the spring and attract fish, so many muskies migrate there in the spring to spawn. Since this area contains everything a musky needs to live, many of the fish remain in the east end all year.

The other major shift in the musky movements on Lake St. Clair concerns the area known as "the middle." Also known as the weather buoy area, the middle used to be the place to fish in July and August because the current flow from Lake Huron is dramatically cooler. In the meantime, the perimeter of St. Clair would get too hot for shad and muskies to live comfortably. However, with the increase in water levels, we seldom see the perimeter of the lake getting warm enough to drive muskies to the center in the same numbers as in the lower water period. Although we do see plenty of fish in the middle in July and August, it definitely isn't the only place to get bites in midsummer.

One very exciting biological impact we are seeing right now are the benefits of the VHS outbreak in the mid 2000s. The year classes of fish after VHS are some of the strongest the lake has ever seen, and starting in 2018 these fish should be reaching 50 inches. In 2017, nearly every guide on the lake saw a huge number of muskies just under that standard.

## Trolling

Over the past six years, the trolling bite on Lake St. Clair has not seen many changes compared to the casting bite, but the top captains have made some tweaks to adjust to the new conditions.

First, slightly slower trolling speeds tend to produce better in colder lake temperatures. Whereas 5 mph was the standard in the early 2000s, and 4.2 mph in 2012,



now most top trolling charters would agree that 3.7 to 4 mph is most common. Also, due to the increase in water clarity, most trollers have noticed fewer bites on rods run straight behind the boat while rods rigged with planer boards have produced more fish. This change is assumed to be due to the muskies being warier in clearer water.

Another major change we have seen is in lure selection. Lake St. Clair Captain Jason Quintano says "today the cooler lake temperatures combined with the musky crankbait evolution has definitely had an impact on our selection. In the summertime our crankbait selection used to consist of almost all six-inch baits due to their super erratic nature. Now, with the invention of such lures as the Headlock and Mattlock, we are using 10- and 12-inch baits all summer long with great success. These baits have the same erratic motion as the smaller lures which was something we hadn't seen before."

Another change Quintano noted was the shift in bucktail colors from mostly

solid colors to a variety of color combinations. "A few years ago you only really needed to run lavender and "Hulk Hogan" (a light chartreuse color) colored bucktails, but today we see all different colors going at certain times and in certain conditions. Now you must have a large variety of colors to adjust to the water conditions and fish preferences for that day."

For bucktail selection, double tens still seem to get the nod with Musky Mayhem Trolling Girls being a top choice.

### Casting

In 2010-2012, the casting bite on the lake was very much untapped. I would go weeks and sometimes months on the water without seeing another caster, but those days are pretty much over. Despite this, the lake's overall size and the incredibly high number of muskies virtually ensure that the increased pressure won't serve to overpressure or educate the fish.

One major impact the increase in pressure has had on the casting bite is the number of figure-8 bites. Today we see 20

to 40 percent of our strikes coming on figure-8, versus 2012 when it was virtually unheard of to get a fish boatside.

Rubber baits such as Bull Dawgs and Medussas maintain their stranglehold on the lake. Other baits, such as bucktails and paddletail swimbaits, have fallen off slightly as the pressure increased. One change, however, is in the color of the baits that seem to be working. Water clarity improvement now requires natural colors such as walleye, sucker and cisco.

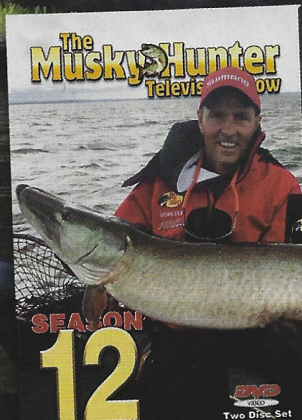
Lake St. Clair's musky fishing remains some of the best in the world, and with great year classes of 50-plus-inch fish coming up combined with a better understanding of the lake in higher water conditions, we hope to have record years ahead of us. Lake St. Clair should remain at the top of everyone's list.

*For more about Field Editor Spencer Berman, visit [spencersanglingadu.com](http://spencersanglingadu.com)*




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