

In the last 10 years, we have seen the rubber bait market explode. Where it used to be just BullDawgs and Big Joes for your options, there are now almost too many companies to count. On top of that, each of these companies offers several different options of rubber baits to choose from, including single-tails, double-tails, triple-tails, paddle-tailed baits, shallow-harness baits, deep-harness baits, flexible-harnesses, tails stacked vertically, tails stacked horizontally, and the list goes on.

Call 'em rubber or soft plastic, the large number of bait options adds versatility to our rubber arsenal. But it also makes it extremely complicated to determine the best time to use each bait. However, by taking an in-depth look at the baits' unique qualities, including running depth, water displacement, profile and retrieve type, you will be able to choose the best bait for any fishing application.

For the sake of simplicity I will only discuss the products of the two largest and most popular rubber lure manufacturers — Musky Innovations and Chaos Tackle. But you can use the same principles to categorize any rubber lures, whether they are made by Suick, Savage, Musky Mania Tackle, Water Wolf Tackle, etc.

Running Depth

One of the best ways to categorize the long list of rubber baits is by running depth. This will not only help to set these lures apart from one another but will allow you to make an educated decision on which lure to choose based on the depth of water you are looking to cover.

I prefer to break down the lures into three basic categories — shallow, medium and deep — based on a medium pull-pause retrieve speed. The “shallow running” rubber baits will run three to four feet down and consist of the Spring BullDawg, Shallow Regular BullDawg, Shallow Magnum BullDawg, Regular Double Dawgs, Mini Medussa, Shallow Mid Medussa and the Shallow Husky Medussa. Next are the medium running depth baits which get down to between five to seven feet, and include Regular Bulldawgs, Magnum Bulldawgs, Shallow Pounders, Magnum Double Dawgs, Pounder Double Dawgs, Mid Medussas, Shallow Regular Medussas, Husky Medussas and Shallow Monster Medussas. Lastly, the deep-running rubber baits get down to more than eight feet and include the Pounder BullDawgs, Regular Medussas, Monster Medussas and UnderDawgs.

The next step to selecting a rubber bait is to determine the depth of the strike zone in the water column. When doing this, keep in mind muskies are designed to feed upward, with eyes located on the top of their heads. This makes your ideal depth zone located just above where the muskies are located in the water column. For example, if you have schools of baitfish suspended in open water topping out at four feet under the surface and bottoming out at six feet, and the muskies are beneath them at eight feet, you want to choose lures that are going to run just over them at six to seven feet. By presenting the lures just above the muskies, your bait is an easy meal because the

musky won't have to swim far to eat it. Always err on the side of being too shallow, not too deep.

Your Cadence

Another important factor to determining the correct rubber bait for your fishing situation is the cadence of retrieve you use, and how it will affect your bait's running depth. Since rubber lures fall at a rough rate of six to 12 inches per second, the more time you give the bait on the pauses between pulls, the deeper it will run. Conversely, the faster you rip your bait in, the shorter the pauses will be and the higher your bait will run. As a general rule, when muskies are more aggressive, typically in warmer water when their metabolic rates are higher, you want to fish your baits faster. On the other hand, when you are fishing colder water, you want to slow down your retrieves, tailoring your approach to the fishes' slower metabolic rate and activity level.

This increase or decrease in cadence speed based on musky activity will not only help you to trigger more bites but will also alter your lures' running depth. If you are planning to rip your lures faster, it will normally raise your lures in the water column about two to three feet from that of a medium retrieval speed. This means a bait I had classified as a medium-running bait will now actually track through the water depth specified for shallow lures. On the other hand, when you are planning to fish the lures slowly, you can expect they'll run two to three feet deeper with a medium retrieve. Therefore, if you plan to use either a faster or a slower retrieve speed, you must factor this information into your desired depth equation to ensure you get the lure where you want it in the water column.

In addition to these basic retrieve principles, there are a few other things you can do to alter your lure's running depth. The first and most basic is to count it down — when the lure hits the water, rather than engaging the reel and starting to retrieve the bait, you instead count the bait down a few seconds before starting the retrieve. Depending on your lure's sink rate, which you can test easily at the side of the boat, you can count your lure down to any depth.

Although this concept can be very effective when done properly, I have also found it to be very problematic. The main problem with this concept is an angler's attention span. For example, when I see on my electronics the fish seem to be pushing down in the water column, I often tell my clients to start doing five-second countdowns every cast. For the first couple casts, everything is done properly. Then someone in the boat starts telling an entertaining story or makes a joke, and before you know it we have fished the next half-hour without anyone, including me, doing the proper countdown. The other problem with countdowns is when they actually work and someone catches a fish, it is very common for the lucky angler to be unsure how far he had counted the bait down. Or, if he was trying different countdowns with each cast, he is not sure which one actually worked.

Considering these downfalls, I normally tell anglers to simply be honest with themselves. If you had been up all night the



Rubber Bait Run-down

An understanding of each bait's qualities will help you choose the right one for the situation

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

Author Spencer Berman relies heavily on soft plastic, or "rubber" baits, to catch giants like this throughout the season.



Rubber Bait Rundown

night before you went fishing and are running on fumes, don't try to remember to count down every cast. If, however, you are sharp, alert and not prone to distractions, then countdowns can be very effective.

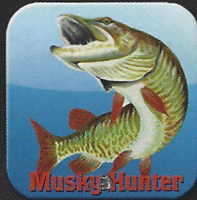
Two other options you can use to increase depth is using a weighted leader by Stealth Tackle, or a Musky Innovations Heavy Head. Both of these prod-

ucts are nice for two reasons. First, they don't require any extra thought by the angler, therefore ensuring the same running depth every cast. Now you always know where your lure is in the water column so you can present it properly and know at what depth you're having success. These two additions also change the running angle of the bait. Think about it like this — if you cut a Magnum Bull-

Dawg apart and added one ounce of lead to the front of the harness and one ounce to the back, the lures would run about 25 percent deeper. However, this also means the bait is 25 percent heavier and 25 percent harder to use. Fatigue comes faster. Heavy Heads and weighted leaders, however, can add up to 25 percent more depth without adding very much additional weight. This is accomplished by adding the weight both below and in the front of the bait. By doing this the lure will now fall with more of a nose-first action, causing it to work deeper on each pull, and getting you the added depth you want without much added weight and effort.

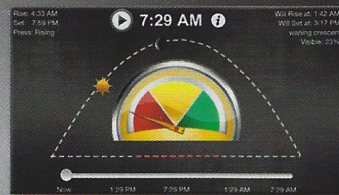
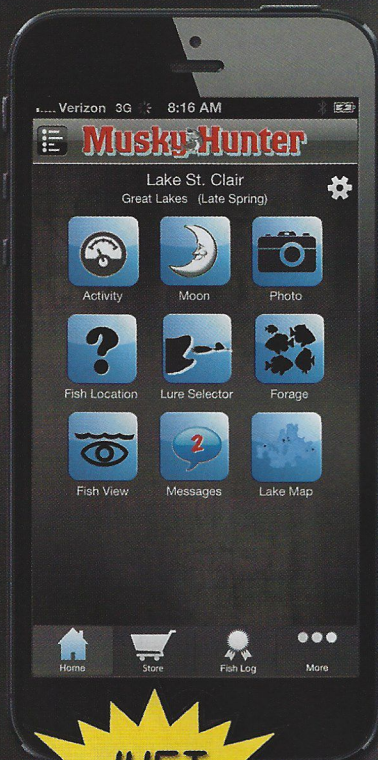
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Water Displacement

The final factor to consider when determining which rubber bait you should use is water displacement. Though this is one of the primary reasons rubber baits are so effective, water displacement varies from bait to bait. Look at the profile of the bait and the surface area of its tail(s). Although it would be easy to say the more tails a bait has the more water it moves, nothing could be further from the truth.

It is true that if you had two baits with equal-sized tails, and one bait has two tails while the second has one, the bait with two tails will move twice as much water. However, if the tail on the single-tailed bait is 2½ times as big as each of the tails on the bait with two tails, then the single-tailed bait would move more water. For that reason, the easiest way to determine the amount of water a rubber lure's tail(s) moves is to look at its surface area. The more surface area of the tail(s), the more water contacted and displaced.

The other factor when determining a lure's water displacement is the profile of the lure, which is determined by looking at the shape of the lure's body. If the lure has a more narrow and cylindrical body, then the lure will displace less water as it is pulled. Conversely, if the body of the lure is more round and/or larger, then it is going to move more water. For example, the body of a Pounder BullDawg will move more water than the body of a Magnum BullDawg.

Another easy way to determine the amount of water displacement is to put these lures in the water. By casting out and retrieving different baits, you will see a variance in the difficulty of pulling them through the water. Since water creates a nearly-weightless environment, the lure's overall weight plays nearly no role in how hard it is to work the lures. In fact, nearly all of the lures' resistance is created by the water it displaces on each pull. The more water displaced the harder it will be for you to pull the lure.

Once you have determined water displacement for each of your rubber baits, you need to figure out how this will factor into choosing the right bait for the situation. As a general rule, when you think the muskies are going to be more aggressive, whether it is due to warm water, stable conditions or current fishing reports, choose lures that move more water. The added water displacement will make more muskies aware of your lure and therefore draw more strikes. And, the larger profile that normally goes along with these baits will be a more appealing meal for highly-active fish.

The next thing to consider is the number of baitfish in the area. If you are fishing areas where baitfish are plentiful, it is a good idea to choose lures that move more water, which draws the muskies' attention. Conversely, when you are fishing areas without a lot of food around, a subtler action often gets the best re-



The author's client, Mike Ruchalski, with a 40-pound monster caught on a Musky Innovations Pro Dawg from Lake St. Clair.

sponse.

Finally, you must consider time of year. In general, you want to start the season with smaller baits since the fish tend to be less aggressive following the spawn. As the season goes on, their aggressiveness ramps up as well as their desire for larger meals. For this reason, use larger-profile baits that move more water as the season progresses.

We can look at the many sizes in the rubber bait world as either confusing and overcrowded, or as a diverse group

of baits that can be tailored to any fishing application. By having a good understanding of how each of these baits works and by what factors you should select them, you can ensure you always make the right choice.

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



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