

# Shad vs. Ciscoes

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

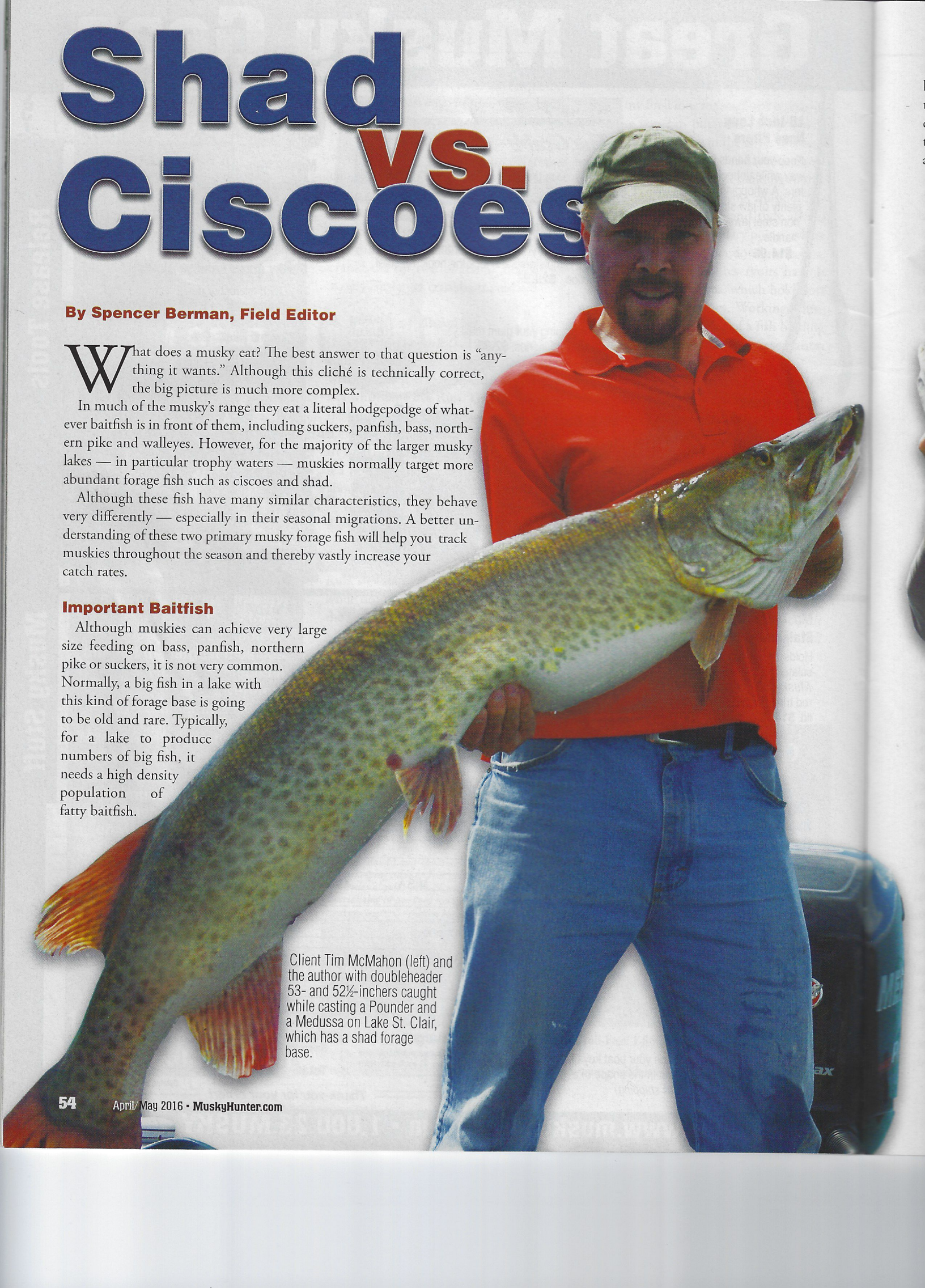
What does a musky eat? The best answer to that question is “anything it wants.” Although this cliché is technically correct, the big picture is much more complex.

In much of the musky’s range they eat a literal hodgepodge of whatever baitfish is in front of them, including suckers, panfish, bass, northern pike and walleyes. However, for the majority of the larger musky lakes — in particular trophy waters — muskies normally target more abundant forage fish such as ciscoes and shad.

Although these fish have many similar characteristics, they behave very differently — especially in their seasonal migrations. A better understanding of these two primary musky forage fish will help you track muskies throughout the season and thereby vastly increase your catch rates.

## Important Baitfish

Although muskies can achieve very large size feeding on bass, panfish, northern pike or suckers, it is very common. Normally, a big fish in a lake with this kind of forage base is going to be old and rare. Typically, for a lake to produce numbers of big fish, it needs a high density population of fatty baitfish.

A man wearing a green baseball cap, a red polo shirt, and blue jeans is holding a large musky fish. The fish is held horizontally across his chest, with its head to the right and tail to the left. The fish has a greenish-brown back with dark spots and a white belly. The man is smiling slightly. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Client Tim McMahon (left) and the author with doubleheader 53- and 52½-inchers caught while casting a Pounder and a Medussa on Lake St. Clair, which has a shad forage base.



The biology behind this is simple — if the muskies are eating bass, panfish, northern pike or suckers, they are going to have to work too hard to catch their next meal and burn too many calories. It is the human equivalent of jogging a few miles down the road to get the ingredients for a salad. On the flip side, shad and cisco numbers are off the charts. Schools of 10,000 fish or

more are common, and smaller pods of them are nearly everywhere. Therefore, not only are they everywhere and easy to get, they are super-rich in oils which are extremely fattening. This would be the human equiv-

alent of having a McDonald's in your living room.

### Similarities


Shad and ciscoes share a number of similarities. They boast super-high reproduction rates and tend to exist in high numbers where they are found. Shad, for example, spawn in their second year of life and produce as many as 380,000 eggs each year. This is the primary reason that we see shad populations explode so quickly whenever they are introduced into a lake. This normally impacts both musky size and behavior only five to seven years after the shad introduction. Cisco reproduction rates are fairly similar.

Both of these forage fish have round body shapes and no spines in their fins, and are extremely rich in oils, making them an easy-to-swallow, fattening meal. Next, they both spend the majority of their time suspended over deep water in very large schools. They both use this open water environment to feed on micro particles in the water, either as filter feeders such as shad or on zooplankton in the case of a cisco. As a result, they are not relying on minnow populations to subsist but rather the overall fertility of the lake, and can thus achieve population densities way beyond that perch or bluegills, which eat minnows and bugs.

This is pretty much where the similarities end. Their seasonal migrations could not be more different.

### Shad

The shad is a warm water fish. In the Midwest, we see large shad die-offs during cold winters simply because their bodies cannot handle long periods of time under the ice. These warm water tendencies, as well as the spawning period, dictate their sea-



**Understand these important baitfish and you will be on your way to catching more giant muskies**



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sonal migrations and therefore tell us where the muskies targeting them will be.

Under the ice, shad will normally be located either around warm water discharges if they exist or in deep water. The deeper water areas of a lake will hold onto the heat better than the shallows when the air is cold simply because of the larger volume. Once the ice goes out shad will start to gradually move toward the

breakline areas, which are simply steep drop-offs into deep water. On balmy days you will see shad pushing up onto the shallow shelf in order to use the warming shallow water to warm themselves. Needless to say, when this happens the muskies are never far behind and the warming water will boost their metabolic rates, turning them into shad-killing machines.

This breakline-to-shallow-water movement continues all spring, with the muskies nearby except when they are spawning in water temperatures of 53 to 58 degrees. As soon as the spawn ends muskies return to following the shad and feeding.

Shad will spawn when the water reaches the mid-60s. Unlike most fish, shad spawn near the surface and let their eggs sink to the bottom, normally over five to 15 feet of water. This period is an absolute bonanza for post-spawn muskies and musky fishermen.

As the year progresses, shad move out deeper in search of cooler water. Although they are a "warm water" fish, they prefer water temperatures in the 66- to 70-degree range. In midsummer, as the shallows exceed this temperature, shad will push out to deeper water, typically around the main river channel areas. In lakes they tend to group up in the deeper basin areas. Despite this positioning over deep water, shad tend to suspend fairly high in the water column — normally in the top third. Lucky for us that means that the muskies will normally be suspended right under them and will still be within catchable range.

When you are targeting shad-hunting muskies, use your graph to determine their depth in the water column, as well as that of the shad. Tools like side imaging and Humminbird's 360 imaging make this very easy. If the shad schools are between eight and 12 feet down, and the muskies are right under them, then treat it as if you were fishing 20 or so feet of water and forget that you might be over 100 feet of water. Putting your lures down around 10 to 12 feet will typically work just fine in spite of the super-deep water.

Often in this open water situation, you will see shad suspended in water that is difficult to fish. Ethics also come into play because a musky caught from extremely deep water may be harder to release. However, throughout the day you will see feeding windows in which muskies will push shad to the surface and use that natural barrier to corral them. When this happens you definitely want to be in the middle of it. Keep in mind

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that shad and muskies normally rise during the morning and evening prime times, so do not be afraid to go back on some deep shad schools right at dark and try to stick some of those muskies.

As the water cools in fall, shad do one of two things depending on where you are fishing. If there is natural flow to the lakes or inflowing rivers, shad swim upstream and into the typically-warmer, inflowing water. On the other hand, if you have still water, shad stack up on the breaklines and deep weed edges in early fall, and as it gets colder they slide out deeper where the water's volume holds heat and stays a little warmer. Both scenarios are prime time to target shad-eating muskies.

### Ciscoes

Ciscoes, on the other hand, prefer cold water. Another major difference is they spawn in the fall when the water is extremely cold, normally around 40 degrees. Despite all the similarities that shad and ciscoes share, and all of their similar positive qualities as musky forage, their seasonal movements are vastly different.

Since ciscoes inhabit the northern end of the musky's range where seasons are closed to protect spawning fish, ice-out musky fishing is not an option. When the seasons open, the water temperature is normally in the upper 50s to mid-60s, and ciscoes will normally be suspended over large, deep basin areas. Once the water temperature climbs into the mid-60s to low 70s, good numbers of post-spawn muskies push out to open water to feed on the ciscoes. At this time ciscoes normally suspend about a third of the way down in the water column.

It is important to remember that unlike shad, which are filter feeders, ciscoes feed mostly on zooplankton and other small invertebrates. Therefore, in summer when there are large bug hatches, ciscoes will rise to the surface chasing the bug larvae, especially in the morning and evening. This is a prime time to catch the monsters that are following the ciscoes.

During the day, most anglers primarily cast to weedlines and rock bars, which is probably their best bet given the ciscoes

and suspended muskies are very deep. However, once evening comes, the ciscoes will be feeding and the muskies will push them up, making the predators very catchable. So even if you have fished weedlines or rock bars all day and maybe even saw or caught some fish, do not be afraid to go out to open water and target muskies there at last light. The biggest fish in a lake is almost always going to be concentrated around the most abundant and fatty forage fish — ciscoes.

In the fall, as the water starts to decrease in temperature, cisco populations move shallower, both in the water column and in depth of water. When the water falls below 50 degrees they'll bring the open water monster muskies shallow enough to be targeted. Ciscoes will stack up on steep breaklines next to large sand or rock bars where they will spawn. Once this process begins, ciscoes move into the shallows at night. It is during this time of year that the large, cisco-based lakes like Mille Lacs and Vermilion in Minnesota, and North Twin in Wisconsin (as well as many others) produce their biggest

muskies of the year.

As musky fishermen, we need to understand what muskies will be doing in order to catch them consistently. Never forget that muskies have a brain about the size of a pea. They are not smart enough to have a hobby, they are simply programmed to do two things in life — reproduce and eat. For two weeks out of the year in the spring they will be focused on the spawn, but the rest of the season they will focus on eating.

There is no better baitfish than ciscoes and shad. By having a better understanding of these baitfish and their migrations, as well as the reasons they move when they do, you will be better equipped to target the giant muskies that feed on them.

*Field Editor Spencer Berman guides on Lake St. Clair. For more about him, visit [www.spencersanglingadv.com](http://www.spencersanglingadv.com)*



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