

# When Dumb

By Spencer Berman, Field Editor

**H**ave you ever heard someone talk about the “glory years” of a fishery? How it used to be so easy to rack up big numbers of big muskies on a certain lake. Nearly every lake has had such a heyday sometime.

Knowing this, you have to ask why the big bite ended. What changed? Occasionally it's due to stocking or a shift in the lake's ecosystem, but the vast majority of these changes are due to fishing pressure on the lake. Although others may have different opinions, I think the decline in catching is most often linked to the education of the fish by being caught over and over again by anglers. As muskies become accustomed to fishing lures and our techniques, we need to adapt to succeed.

## The Rush

In most cases in the musky world, new lakes are developed due to DNR stocking. During the beginning of this stocking, muskies are planted into a new system year after year. In the beginning, no one fishes this system because few want to fish a lake containing only small fish. The new lake is normally completely ignored, meaning the first several stocking classes are allowed to grow to their maximum length without seeing much, if any, fishing pressure.

It's once the first several year classes reach their full potential when the lake attracts the attention of musky anglers. The success of the first musky hunters to visit the lake is virtually guaranteed and many try to keep a “lid on it” for as long as they can. However, this seldom lasts long and before you know it the word gets out and the lake's popularity is established seemingly overnight.

Depending on the size of the fishery, peak fishing normally stays in place for a year or two until the majority of the fish get caught and, thus, “educated.” Each time these muskies get caught it becomes slightly tougher to catch them the next time, especially quickly thereafter. Before you know it, we have pushed past the peak and the production starts to drop.

All lakes are different in how they handle fishing pressure,

as well as other factors like a stoppage in stocking or the addition of weed killer. These can all have a major impact on the lake's output. In most cases, however, once these fish get educated the lake tends to settle out somewhere around half of what it produced at its peak.

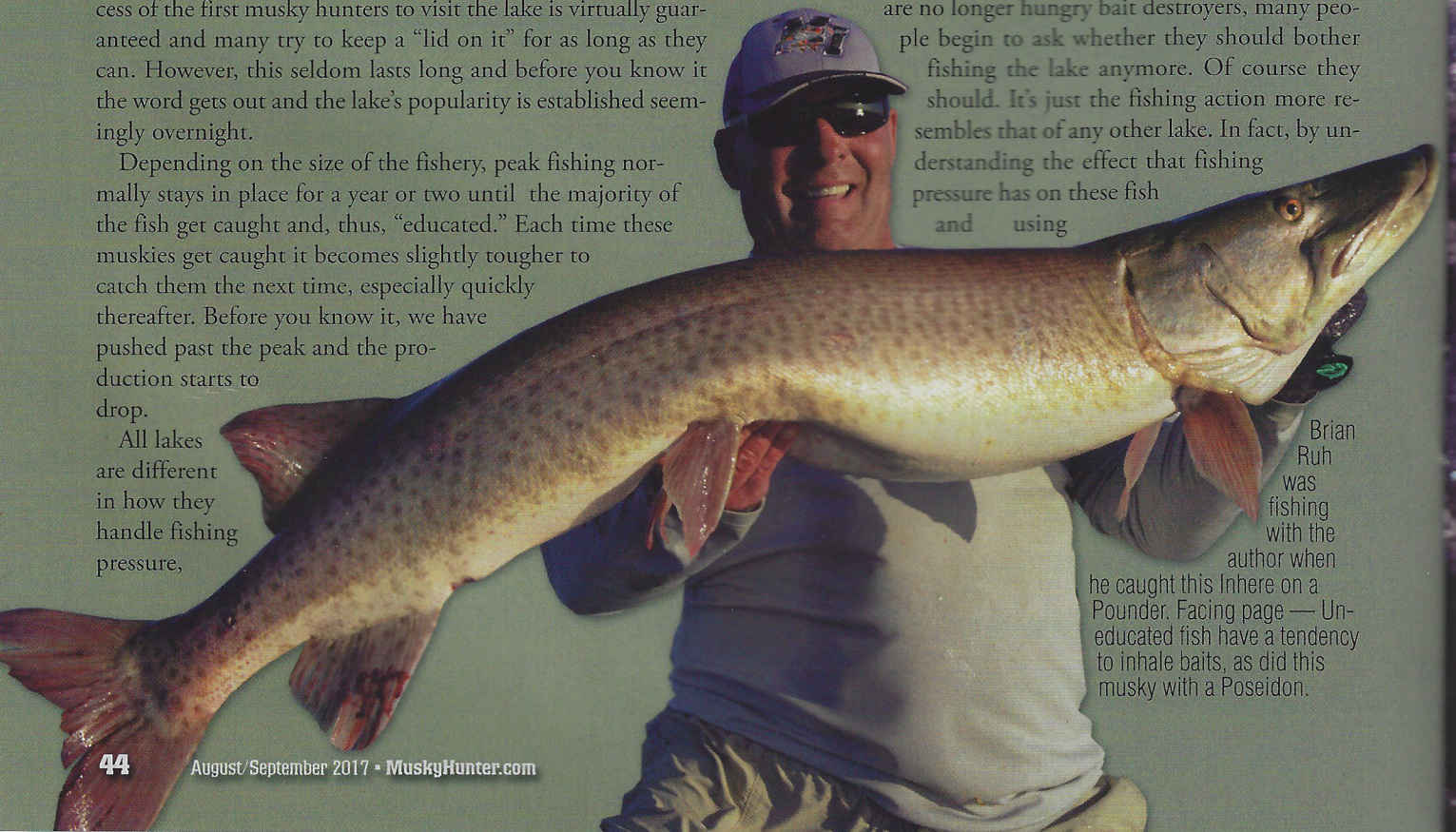
Natural fisheries generally follow the same progression when the musky world discovers a lake that has been overlooked.

## The Evolution

As fishing pressure is applied to a lake, you will see several changes taking place other than just a drop in catches. One of the first things you will see change is an increase in following muskies. In most virgin fisheries it is common to see almost no follows; rather, the fish simply eat baits on the cast, and when they do so it is not a timid, quick hit — often, they inhale the baits without hesitation. As the fish become more educated you start to see many of the same fish — which a year or two ago would have eaten immediately — chasing in hot to the boat. Now you need to trigger them at the boat.

Additionally, you will see many more muskies nipping rather than inhaling the whole bait. These changes combine to change a forgiving fishery, where nearly anyone could catch a big fish, into a place where you need to be dialed in to score. You need to know what the fish want and how they want it presented.

Once these fisheries receive fishing pressure and the muskies are no longer hungry bait destroyers, many people begin to ask whether they should bother fishing the lake anymore. Of course they should. It's just the fishing action more resembles that of any other lake. In fact, by understanding the effect that fishing pressure has on these fish and using



Brian Ruh was fishing with the author when he caught this Inhere on a Pounder. Facing page — Uneducated fish have a tendency to inhale baits, as did this musky with a Poseidon.

# Fish Wise Up

*When word of a hot fishery spreads to the masses, uneducated muskies don't stay that way long. Here's how to adjust to the new 'normal'*



## When Dumb Fish Wise Up

three basic adaptations, you can largely offset fishing pressure and continue your success.

### Triggering Strikes

As these fish become more pressured, they will more likely follow than eat. By understanding this transition is happening, you can alter your presentation to trigger these fish. The first key to triggering followers is the figure-8, a maneuver that **FLAT OUT WORKS!**

When done properly, a figure-8 employs three key triggering concepts: increase in speed, a change of direction, and a change in depth. For a discussion of the figure-8 technique with soft plastics, see my article, "Boatside Breakdown," in the August/September 2016 issue of *Musky Hunter*. Other discussions of and tips for figure-8's have appeared in nearly every issue of *Musky Hunter*.

### Windows

No matter which lake you are fishing, feeding windows play a role when muskies choose to move and become catchable. However, as fishing pressure increases, we begin to see such feeding windows become more and more important. As the fish become more educated we begin to see a reduction in the amount of musky activity that takes place outside of the windows.

This often means that your success for these pressured fish will come down to one or two 20-minute windows throughout the day. It therefore becomes doubly important to always know when the majors, minors, sunrise, sunset and

any major weather shift will be taking place. Make sure to not only identify these time periods but to make a game plan for these times using the highest percentage pattern you have that day. By doing this you will be able to take full advantage of these narrow times when educated fish are vulnerable.

### Wind

Another often-overlooked key to getting strikes from educated muskies is the wind. The presence of wind and wave action provides us with several key advantages that will work to trigger musky feeding. First, the turning over of the water allows the waves to roll a variety of different baitfish foods into the water column including bug larvae, plankton and other particles. This will serve to get the smaller baitfish that feed on these up into the water column, making them much more vulnerable for muskies. Additionally, wave action cuts down on the amount of light penetration in the water, making muskies much more likely to feed. Lastly, as the waves roll the water over they add huge amounts of dissolved oxygen into the water. This sudden increase in oxygen helps to increase all fish activity, including both baitfish and muskies.

For these reasons it is always important to key on windward spots when possible. Additionally, you should keep in mind the direction that the wind has been blowing the past several days. If, for example, the wind was blowing from the south for the last three days and only hours ago switched to the west, the most wind-driven areas will be the areas with

southern exposure, and not westward exposure ... yet.

In addition to targeting windward areas you need to embrace the days when the wind is blowing. All too often anglers pass up some of the best fishing days simply because they don't want to work too hard on the trolling motor. Frequently, however, windy days make for some of the best fishing for those of us who are willing to battle the wind and fish the wind-blown spots.

Wind gets muskies moving and they have nothing but a positive reaction to the wind. It is only anglers who have issues with the wind.

The bottom line is muskies will eat on windy days. The question is will you be there to catch them?

### Structure

When you are fishing a lake that receives very little fishing pressure, picking out spots is relatively simple. You look at the map and choose the spots that seem to incorporate as many key pieces of structure as possible. However, on pressured water you have another major factor to consider — the spots that look great to you normally look great to everyone else for the same reasons!

The question now becomes whether you should such "community spots" knowing the muskies that use them are going to be educated. While I am getting to know a lake, I choose to fish these spots only under prime conditions. By stacking the deck and fishing such spots only during prime feeding windows and, preferably, with the wind blowing into them, you will put the odds in your favor of catching the educated fish that are there.

I would spend the rest of my time focusing on areas that receive less fishing pressure, spots that don't stand out on the map such as secondary points, long weedbeds, reefs without buoy markers, and shoreline structure. Although these spots normally hold fewer muskies than the community spots, the fish that use them receive less fishing pressure and are therefore more catchable.

As you invest time looking for and locating these secondary structures, you

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will find fantastic spots others overlook. Often you will come to realize that many of these prime secondary structures have just as many muskies on them as the community spots, and with the vast reduction in pressure the fish are far more catchable. By gaining a good working knowledge of prime secondary structures you will be able to spend less time fishing the community spots, only "cherry-picking" them when conditions are absolutely perfect.

### Lure Selection

A common angler response to pressured waters is to cast something he thinks the fish haven't seen before. This concept makes sense in theory, but its success rate is questionable or nonexistent. If you are on a fishery that sees lots of fishing pressure and no one else is using your so-called "magic" lure, and said lure isn't brand new, then chances are the reason it's not being used is it doesn't work! If it did work, someone else would have figured it out by now.

My opinion is to go the opposite direction and "shrink" your tackle box. No matter where you are in the musky world there seems to be two styles of baits that continually produce muskies no matter how much use they receive — big rubber and bucktails. The first major reason for this success is the vibration these baits give off. Although neither looks anything like a real baitfish, I believe the vibration they put out is exceedingly hard for a musky to differentiate from a real fish. This makes it very hard for muskies to get educated or "burned out" by these baits no matter how many times they have eaten them.

The other reason these baits are so successful is their ability to trigger strikes. As mentioned earlier, triggering strikes is extremely important with pressured fish. Therefore, it should be no surprise that baits which have fantastic triggering ability will be top producers. When it comes to rubber baits I am talking about either BullDawgs by Musky Innovations or Medussas by Chaos Tackle, both of which are normally worked with a pull-and-pause retrieve. Their up/down, stopping/starting, er-

atic action provides them with amazing triggering effect.

Bucktails, whether they are double-tails like the standard Musky Mayhem Cowgirl or smaller baits such as the Musky Mayhem Showgirl, are fantastic at triggering pressured muskies through the boatside figure-8's. Bucktails score a lot of educated muskies because their lifelike vibration draws fish in and the figure-8 entices the strike.

Although it is always fun to be on the cutting edge of the hot bites in musky fishing, it is a luxury that doesn't last

long. By understanding how fishing pressure affects muskies' behavior, you can adapt to account for fishing pressure. By focusing on triggering strikes, picking the right structure, and the proper lure selection, you will assure yourself continued big fish catches no matter how much pressure a lake receives.

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



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