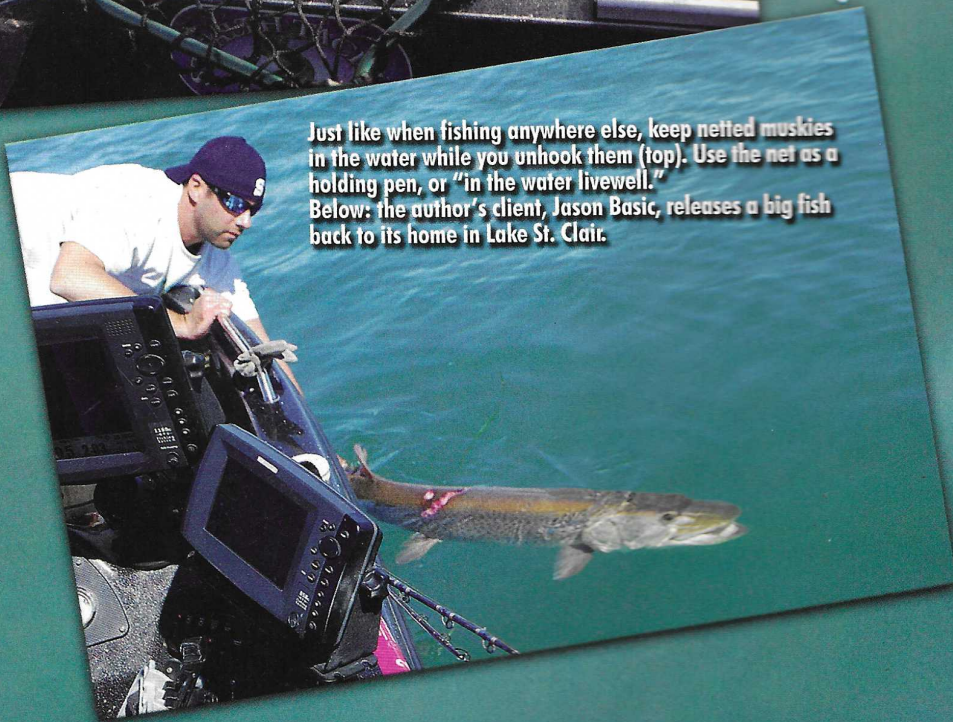
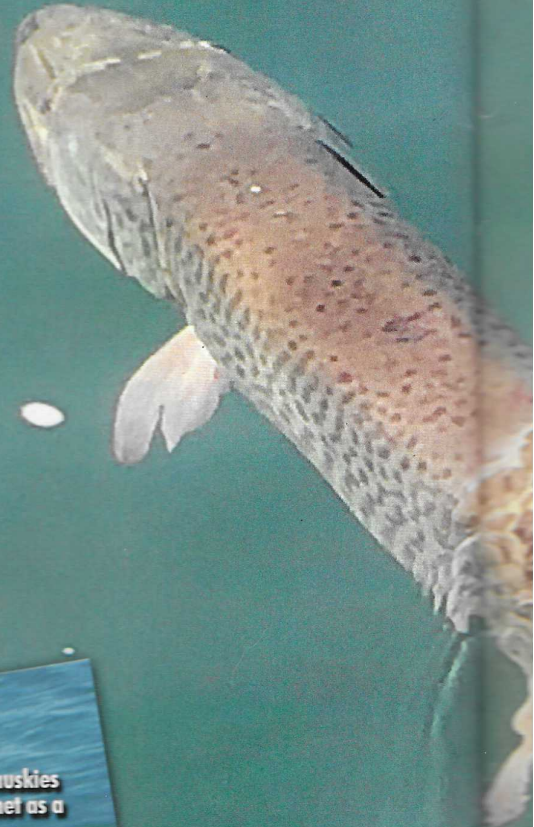
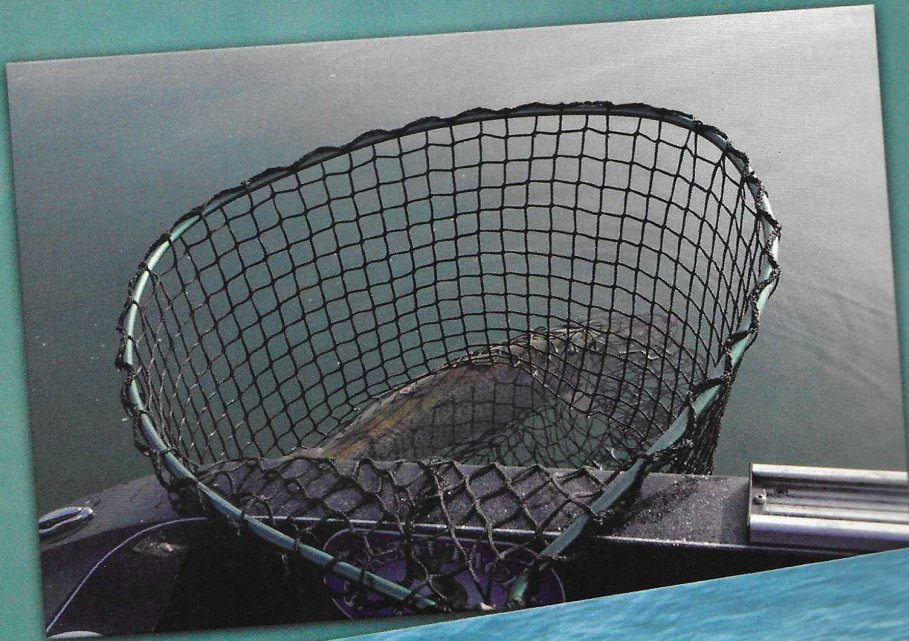


Big Water



Just like when fishing anywhere else, keep netted muskies in the water while you unhook them (top). Use the net as a holding pen, or "in the water livewell."
Below: the author's client, Jason Basic, releases a big fish back to its home in Lake St. Clair.

Release

BIG WATERS GROW HUGE MUSKIES, BUT THE ABILITY TO RELEASE THEM SUCCESSFULLY CAN BE COMPLICATED

By Spencer Berman

Over the last two decades we have seen the focus of musky fishing move toward big water fisheries. State agencies around the Great Lakes are stocking and promoting their Great Lakes fisheries while also stocking larger waters in many inland areas. Thus, big water is the trend.

These waters provide a lot of new challenges such as boat control, bigger waves, and more water to cover to succeed. However, one such challenge that is rarely talked about is the added difficulty we have releasing fish back into big water lakes, particularly on rough days. In order to make sure we have as close to a 100 percent release rate as possible, there are several things to keep in mind while handling muskies on large waters.

Big Wind & Waves

The greatest difference when fishing big water is the presence of wind and waves that will always be moving your boat and the water around you. Unlike smaller lakes which are typically calm, big water is rarely calm and almost always seems to have a chop, which means your boat and the water are always moving. This movement poses several major problems when handling fish.

Muskies are like most fish in the way their gills work, meaning they pull water through the front of their mouths over the gills to breathe. This process works best with the water moving from front to back.

Be Prepared

This concept of only allowing water to travel through a musky's mouth from front to back is rather easy in calm water. If the fish is simply sitting in the water when the water is not moving the fish will use its gills to do that all by itself. Therefore, when you are fishing a normal-sized inland lake and you net a fish, typically you set the net yoke on the gunnel of your boat and allow the large bag of the net to be like a cage in the water, which allows the fish to stay in the water and breathe while you get pliers, gloves, camera, etc.,

Big Water Release

ready to unhook and release the fish.

In addition, you can catch your breath and make sure you are in the right frame of mind to handle a fragile musky. If all of this takes you a bit of time, it's not a big deal because the fish is breathing in the water naturally. But when you are in moving water, things are quite a bit different. When you net the fish you should still keep the net over the side of the boat. If, however, the boat is moving you will need to be aware of how the water is moving over the fish.

In an ideal world you would get the fish pointing into the current so that the water is pushed through its mouth naturally, but this can be difficult depending on the size of your net and the musky. Even in the biggest net, muskies are going to struggle to keep themselves upright and facing the right direction since the net bag will interfere with their fins. It is also important to note that even if your boat has a spot lock feature on the trolling motor that will keep the

boat in place, it doesn't stop the water around you from moving, which will have the same negative effect. For this reason, when you net a musky in moving water you need to look at it as if a clock is running. It is imperative to have all of your release tools and camera ready at all times. This will allow you to get the fish unhooked, photographed, measured and back in the water as fast as possible.

The Release

When you release the fish in big moving water, it is critical to have its head pointing into the current so that water will flow through his gills in the proper direction. This, however, can be very tricky given that we normally hold onto the fish's tail and its body will move around with the current. In this situation you need to use your other hand to push/position the fish so it stays straight. Another option is to move your hand across the fish's head to keep it pointed in the right direction. When I

do this, I usually keep my thumb and pinky just inside the top of the gill flaps (without going into the actual gill rakers) to get a good hold. Just don't pop the gills from opening and closing naturally.

When all else fails, the last option to accomplish this is to employ a BogaGrip on the bottom jaw of the musky to drag it head-first through the water, which will pull water over its gills naturally. If the fish starts to spin upside down, lightly grab the revolving part of the Boga to stop it from spinning and keep the fish upright. If the musky starts to thrash, let go of the revolving part so the fish can naturally spin over and not hurt itself.

Let Them Go Early

When releasing muskies in big water I prefer to let them go a little earlier than normal and then "babysit" until they swim down in the water column. I like to release them as soon as they can hold themselves upright in the water.

FISH THE BEST WATERS AT THE BEST TIMES
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The water in these systems is super-rich with oxygen due to the constant rolling motion of the water, and by letting them go early you allow them to move naturally and ensure they won't be pulled backward through the water at any point. These fish may stay on the surface for awhile while they recover. It is a good idea to keep an eye on them from a close distance to ensure no pleasure boater runs them over, or a meat-fisherman decides your musky will fill his freezer. Don't be concerned if it takes the fish five, 10 or even 30 minutes to swim down. As long as they are upright they are recovering.

Livewell

The last important tool when it comes to releasing fish in big water is your livewell, but there are a lot of different factors to consider. First and foremost, this is an option I only use when I have a fish that is really struggling. Keep in mind there is a size limit to be considered, and putting a sub-legal fish in your

livewell is against the law. However, when it is used to save the life of a fish there are many shades of gray that are normally taken into account.

On Lake St. Clair, charter captains use livewells when trolling to revive fish regardless of size. The DNR and MNR officers on the lake know this is a daily practice that is critical to the longevity of the fishery. Although it is technically not legal to put a fish under 44 inches in the livewell, I have never personally heard of anyone having an issue with it. In fact, the use of livewells to revive fish is considered a huge factor in the fishery's recent success.

On other fisheries where this practice is less common, it is always very important to do your homework beforehand. Wardens on Green Bay have allowed anglers to livewell struggling fish that are undersize as long as the angler calls beforehand and reports the situation. It is always a good idea to check with your local warden(s) and ask them in advance what they recommend. Remember a

conservation officer's title has the word "conservation" in it for a reason.

One of the best uses for a livewell in big water is to move a musky a short distance to get the fish to calmer water. Often this is as simple as going around an island or point, and can be the difference between life and death for that fish. If you are not able to get to calm water easily you can put the fish in your well (with consideration of local laws, etc.) and let the fish recover there. In this situation, slowly run your boat so the water in the well is moving perpendicular to the length of the fish so there won't be any negative impact on its breathing.

By understanding the biology of a breathing musky and all the tricks for taking care of a fish in big water, you will put the odds in your favor to have the best release rate possible.

Contact: spencersanglingadv.com



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