

Fishing Forecast – 2002 Northern zone musky season opens May 25 (May 21, 2002)

MADISON – The May 25, 2002 opening day of Wisconsin's northern zone musky season finds healthy populations of this famed fighter being pursued by an ever-growing number of anglers.

The northern musky zone encompasses all inland waters north of Highway 10, excluding Minnesota/Wisconsin boundary waters. Open season in the northern zone runs from May 25 through Nov. 30. Statewide, the minimum length limit is 34 inches with a daily bag of one, but check the [current] Guide to Wisconsin Hook and Line Fishing Regulations for special length and bag limits on specific waters.

“Numbers-wise we’re in really good shape for musky,” says Steve AveLallemant, Department of Natural Resources fish expert for northern Wisconsin. “We were probably at a low point in the 1970s, but the increasing popularity of catch and release and our ongoing stocking program has been responsible for bringing abundance up pretty good.”

Musky, or muskellunge, occur in 711 lakes and 83 river segments, 90 percent of which are in northern Wisconsin and in the northern musky zone, according to “Muskellunge Management Update,” a May 2002 DNR report prepared by Tim Simonson, a DNR fish biologist and avid musky angler. Of the lakes with musky, fully half of them – 356 waters – are Class A waters, the top of three classes categorized according to their relative abundance of musky and the quality of the fishery.

Pressure on those waters is increasing. The number of musky anglers has grown to an estimated 360,000, three times the 107,000 in 1958 and nearly double the number in 1980, according to the update. Normally, such a significant increase in pressure could harm a fishery, particularly of a fish with low natural reproduction levels and low densities, Simonson says. Because of their large size and predatory nature, muskellunge are usually present at low densities, with most waters generally containing less than one adult per acre.

But the growing interest in musky has both helped increase fishing opportunities and sustain the fishery to the point DNR can reduce its reliance on stocking in some waters because so many musky hunters now practice catch and release, Simonson says. Currently, 220 musky waters are stocked.

The pace at which anglers are catching fish has significantly increased; anglers used to spend an average of 50 hours per musky caught; in 2000, that average had dropped to 23 hours per musky caught on Class A waters, the 2002 update reports.

At the same time the overall catch rate has increased, the number of fish actually harvested has dropped dramatically. In 1957, for example, total musky harvest on all waters was estimated at 47,700. In 2000, the total harvest was 1,984 on Class A waters, according to the 2002 update.

AveLallemant finds the trend encouraging, but encourages anglers to consider releasing even the large musky. “Even though overall harvest rates have declined, if you’re not of a mind to put a musky on the wall, it would be good to let the fish go even though it’s of legal size,” he says. “We still have some concerns about the number of big fish in our population. Muskies are slow-growing fish. With most of the size limits in place, a fish has to live many years beyond when it reaches legal size to be really big.”

The muskellunge grows most rapidly during the first three to five years of life. Males reach maturity at four to five years, when they are 28 to 31 inches long; females mature at five to seven years, at 30 to 36 inches. Most muskellunge live to be about 18 or 19 years old, but some fish up to 30 years old have been caught.

The Muskellunge Management Update, along with a variety of other information about muskellunge and musky fishing, can be found online in our [musky fishing pages](#).

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