

Musky fishing forecast - Northern zone musky season opens May 28, 2005

HAYWARD - The musky season opens May 28 north of U.S. Highway 10 in northern Wisconsin with populations of this king of Wisconsin fish at all-time highs. Northern fish biologists are reporting that many waters have more large muskies than at any other time since anglers hauled in four world records in the 1950s.

Restrictive size limits, a phenomenal catch-and-release ethic, and improvements in musky stocking practices have rebuilt musky populations that a generation ago teetered on collapse because of the frenzied fishing that followed the world-record catches, according to Frank Pratt, a senior fisheries biologist who has managed fisheries in Sawyer and Rusk counties for more than 30 years.

"Big musky never were abundant, and never will be abundant in Wisconsin waters given their size, forage base and fishing pressure," Pratt says. "In waters in my area, though, big musky are now better represented than they have been in probably half a century."

He captured a 59-inch musky last year during a population survey on a well-known Sawyer County musky lake, and in the last six years, has handled at least six other fish over 50 inches. That compares to the three muskies over 50 inches he had handled in the previous 25 years.

Spring 2005 survey results featured below generally indicate that bigger fish are better represented than in recent decades, but fish biologists remind anglers that muskies, like all predators at the top of the food chain, are rarely abundant. Really large muskies are even more rare; Pratt notes that waters that grow big muskies generally have densities of one adult fish for every 5 to 10 acres of surface water or even less.

Muskies live in a variety of waters but seem to thrive best in larger lakes and flowages with an abundance of large forage items. "If a lake doesn't have the forage to produce them, they're never going to grow to trophy size," says Skip Sommerfeldt, a DNR fisheries biologist who manages scores of small lakes in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in Ashland, Bayfield and Sawyer counties. "Each lake is individual: each has a different forage base and different sport fish populations and those both have an effect on the musky fishery."

The small lakes in his area are generally supporting higher densities of muskies relative to past years, but the fish are smaller. He thinks the situation reflects too many musky for the forage base, the result of historic stocking levels that were too high and a phenomenal catch and release ethic.

Sommerfeldt's hopeful that efforts underway to evaluate and adjust the agency's musky management strategies will improve the size structure of fish in lakes capable of producing larger fish.

DNR is mid-way through evaluating alternate stocking rates in light of studies showing that overstocking a lake, and increasing catch and release of musky, can result in higher populations that grow slowly. In addition, biologists are evaluating the results of higher minimum size limits on a variety of lakes, developing a plan to evaluate alternate strains

of musky for stocking, and conducting genetic studies of the broodstock used to produce fish for stocking.

Already, however, the signs are going in the right direction for a return to the "kings" of yesteryear on many waters, based on recent musky population surveys and biologists' observations.

Polk and Barron counties - A recent muskellunge survey completed on Deer Lake in Polk County in 2003-2004, indicated that the number of muskellunge greater than 30 inches decreased since 1993 from 0.9 fish/acre to 0.5 per acre but the size structure of fish over 40 inches has improved considerably. More specifically, the abundance of 40-inch and larger muskellunge in 2004 was 0.10 fish/acre. In other words, for every 10 acres of water a muskellunge over 40 inches roams Deer Lake. This is one of the highest densities of 40-inch and larger muskellunge in the state of Wisconsin. The results were not unexpected, because stocking has been reduced in half over the past decade to live within the forage base. An identical survey is being conducted on Bone Lake in Polk County in 2005-2006. Preliminary data from the 2005 portion of this survey show the same trend as the Deer Lake survey. Overall densities appear to be lower because stocking has been reduced in half when compared to historic levels. A final population estimate will not be available until 2006. However, of the 247 muskellunge greater than 30 inches collected in 2005, 55 or 22 percent were larger than 40 inches. The average number of 40 inch and larger fish in Wisconsin, based on a percentage of fish collected greater than 30 inches is around 10 percent, in the case of Bone Lake in 2005, this number was over twice that level. - Heath Benike, senior fisheries biologist, Barron

Sawyer and Rusk counties - The number of muskellunge that I have handled in 31 years is a very impressive number, definitely higher than 10,000 and maybe even 20,000. Up to 1998, I had seen exactly three muskellunge in excess of 50 inches – one out of Round Lake in Sawyer County in the early 1990s and two out of Shell Lake in Washburn County in the late 1970s. From 1999 on I have handled three out of Lac Courte Oreilles, two out of Grindstone Lake, one out of the Chippewa Flowage, one or more out of Lake Hayward, and several others out of small lakes that I wouldn't want to put a bullseye on. My suspicion is that the number of 45 to 49-inch fish are through the roof. In 1997 on Lake Hayward we shocked a feeding pack of six to eight muskies that were all in the high 40-inch range. Nothing, anywhere in my previous experience, prepared me for that one. Even "slow-growth" lakes like Spider, Tiger Cat, and Lost Lake have produced 50+ inch fish in the creel/catch charts the last two to three years. - Frank Pratt, senior fisheries biologist, Hayward

Oneida County - A musky survey was conducted on Lake Tomahawk in Oneida County this spring. With the cold weather, the catch just trickled in, but we ended up marking 76 muskies with fin clips. We'll be back next spring for the recapture portion of the survey to generate a mark-recapture population estimate. Fish ranged in size from 23 to 47 inches, with 18 percent of the fish larger than 40 and 4 percent larger than 45 inches. The largest musky we handled was 46.8 inches and weighed 35.0 pounds. Three nights of netting in 1978 found 18 muskies, including 1 fish (5.5 percent) larger than 40 inches. Data from April 30, 1956, indicated 34 muskies, including 40, 40, 45 and 56-inch fish, but similar data from 1948, 53, 54 and 57 list just 13 muskies, all 34 inches or smaller. - John Kubisiak, fisheries biologist, Rhinelander

Ashland, Sawyer and Price counties - Surveys on small and medium-size waters (75 to 600 acres) within the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (Ashland, Sawyer, Price counties) show generally high musky abundance but relatively poor size structure. In other words - a lot of musky - but they are not attaining trophy size in many of these relatively forage-poor environments. Several of these waters have a 28-inch minimum-size limit intended to encourage harvest of these abundant and slow-growing muskies. A few of those waters include Day Lake Flowage and Spider Moquah Lake, in Ashland County, and Black Lake in Sawyer County. Other lakes with high abundance of musky in the 28- to 36-inch size that would benefit from an increase in musky harvest include English Lake and Mineral Lake in Ashland County; and Lower Clam Lake and Ghost Lake in Sawyer County. - Skip Sommerfeldt, fisheries biologist, Park Falls

Bayfield and Douglas counties - Upper Eau Claire Lake in Bayfield County completed a musky survey this year. Preliminary calculations show a low-density muskellunge population (0.13 adults/acre) and a good average size. A 50.5 inch, 39 pound musky was caught in the fyke nets this spring. The lake can be tough to fish for musky because of clear water and steep drop-offs from shore. Namekagon Lake in Bayfield County had a survey in 2002-2003 which indicated a low density but high average size population. Good bet to find a trophy fish here but don't expect to catch many fish. In Douglas County, Amnicon Lake has a high density of muskellunge and is known locally for catching a number of muskies in a day. The size range is smaller than on some other area musky lakes but occasionally a 40- to 48-inch fish is caught. I personally caught a 42-inch fish through the ice a couple of years ago. - Scott Toshner, fisheries biologist, Brule

Vilas County - Preliminary findings are not available for the spring musky surveys we did, but I decided to take a look at the registration numbers from the Vilas County Musky Marathon to get some information on the status of the musky fishery in this county as well as sociological changes in musky fishing over time. The contest, which goes all season, has been running since 1964, and the rules have changed little: Individuals wanting to register a musky need to fill out a registration form, have it witnessed and send it in. In the early days of the contest, well over 1,000 muskies were registered each year. 1987 was the first year that the percentage of released fish (59 %) was greater than kept (41 %). Since 1996, when detailed information was available, 1,980 fish 34 inches or longer have been registered across all age and other divisions. The numbers of fish registered jumps up once you reach 40 inches, indicating this may be the length people view as a trophy and so are willing to take the time to register fish. From 1996-2004, anglers registered 138 fish 50 inches or greater, including 17 in 2004. The largest released fish in 2004 was 55.5 inches long and was from Manitowish Lake, which oddly enough, is the same date that the largest fish by weight was caught and kept 40 years earlier, a 51 pounder from Flambeau Lake. It appears that September 21 is a good day to plan a musky fishing trip in Vilas County! - Steve Gilbert, fisheries biologist, Woodruff