

Mystery of catching more trophy muskies in the fall remains unsolved

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MADISON – The jury is still out on whether the adage that fall is the best time to catch trophy muskies is true, but the old saying does carry enough weight to send scores of musky hunters out and about as autumn winds blow in.

“There is a common perception that fall is the best time to catch trophy muskies,” says Tim Simonson, a Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist. “It’s hard to argue that point, given the fact that two 50-plus pound muskies were caught in Wisconsin waters last November. However, our data indicates that there are no differences in the average size of fish harvested from one month to another.”

This doesn’t necessarily prove that the expression isn’t true, according to Simonson. It just means that the size of fish kept by anglers in surveys doesn’t vary from spring to fall and that there’s a big difference between the size of fish kept and the size of fish caught, especially in recent years.

“It seems that smaller fish are more likely to be kept and thus show up in our creel surveys,” says Simonson. “All in all, 70 percent of muskies kept by anglers over the last 15 years were less than 40 inches in length.”

This means that many large muskies could still be caught by autumn anglers, but they wouldn’t show up in the creel surveys if they weren’t kept.

“One strong trend we have seen over the years is the actual number of fish being kept by anglers,” says Simonson. “From 1991 to 2005, the total number of muskies harvested by anglers and measured by creel clerks each year has declined from 84 to three. These days, we just don’t see enough muskies harvested in our creel surveys to be able to say much about their sizes and we don’t record the sizes of fish that anglers catch and release.”

In 2001, more than one-third of Wisconsin’s 1.4 million anglers reported fishing for muskies, a number that has increased steadily over the years. Additionally, the number of muskies 48 inches and greater reported to Muskies, Inc., a non-profit organization with the goal of improving the sport of musky fishing, has increased steadily over the last 15 years with an all-time high in 2006.

“Musky fever is caught by anglers who want to reel in a large fish,” says Simonson. “Even if you catch a small musky, it’s still a lot bigger than a bass.”

So, while we can neither prove nor disprove the notion that fall is a trophy time for muskies; it should be known that Wisconsin’s 63.5 inch record musky was caught in October. And regardless of your success, fall is still a great time to be on the water.

“A crisp fall day stirs a musky hunter’s heart,” says Simonson. “The Jet Skis are put away, the vacationers are back in school and the hunters are in the woods. Northern lakes are about as quiet as they get and the blazing fall colors provide a great backdrop for that trophy musky you catch, photograph, and release!”

More information on [fishing for musky](#) can be found on the DNR Web site.

Use of “quick strike” rigs encouraged with live suckers as bait

Fall is the most popular time for musky anglers to use live suckers as bait, and fish managers encourage anglers to use “quick strike” rigs to avoid killing the fish they release.

A recent Department of Natural Resources study found a very high proportion of deeply hooked muskies died after being released, despite minimizing handling time and cutting the line without trying to remove the hook, according to Tim Simonson, the DNR fish biologist who leads the DNR’s musky team.

“The study found that single hook rigs, even though people released the fish, resulted in 83 percent delayed mortality,” Simonson says. “So we’re encouraging people to use quick strike rigs for live bait rather than single hook rigs.”

Next spring, in fact, DNR will ask anglers and others attending the Spring Fish and Wildlife Hearings to approve a regulation requiring musky anglers to use quick strike rigs.

Musky anglers statewide are also reminded that emergency rules to help prevent the spread of [viral hemorrhagic septicemia](#), a new, deadly fish disease, require that live bait fish be purchased only from a registered Wisconsin bait dealer. Anglers who are fishing waters where VHS has been detected in fish or is suspected of being present must kill any live fish – bait fish included – before leaving the water.

Find these and more [rules to help prevent the spread of the VHS disease](#) on the DNR Web site.

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