



ANGLER PROFILES

by Art Michaels

Howard Wagner, Musky Man

Beaver Countian Howard Wagner, 58, has been a musky angler for some 40 years, after a friend introduced him to this specialized kind of fishing in the Freeport area of the Allegheny River. The size and power of these fish lured him into the sport, and ever since, he's fished for them all over western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, New York and Canada. He's discovered a few good spots in those 40 years, and he's developed techniques for consistent success.

"Today, the Allegheny River is one of my favorite musky spots," Howard says. "Tamarack Lake is a great lake today for numbers of muskies, not the biggest ones, and Conneaut Lake is good. I still like some of the smaller lakes



Musky expert Howard Wagner has specific ideas on musky tackle. He uses 80-pound braided polyester lines for both casting and trolling. "I like a longer rod for trolling, about 9 feet, 6 inches, and shorter rods for casting," says Howard. "I also use custom rods because they have more guides added for strength, and you can use blanks that are a little thicker than commercially available rods." When it comes to casting, I like a 6-foot rod for fishing jerkbaits and a 7-footer for working crankbaits."

when I get a chance to fish them in the summer, like Lake LeBeouf and Edinboro Lake. I also like Lake Erie."

Howard also likes a more specialized kind of musky fishing. "I've been doing a lot of kayak fishing for muskies in the smaller creeks like Cussewago Creek, which runs in at Meadville, French Creek and Conewango near Warren, and the Clarion from the mouth a few miles up, and even in the mouth of Red Vine Creek. I am thinking about trying Buffalo Creek and a couple of other ones because I am sure that muskies are spreading out from the main rivers into most of these creeks, and they will probably have some nice muskies."

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Howard uses level-wind reels with line counter features for trolling, which allow precise lure placement. "Anybody who's serious about trolling for muskies, or any other fish, knows exactly how deep their lures run with each amount of line out," Howard says.

Howard fishes year-round for muskies, but he prefers two seasons—May and June, and around November. "I like the end of May to about the middle of June if I'm just having a lot of fun or going after a lot of fish, not necessarily a really big musky," Howard says. At that time, Howard says, muskies are finished spawning and getting their appetites back, and they're still in shallow water and easy to find. Howard says he finds muskies then right in vegetation or at the edge of vegetation where the bottom drops into deeper water.

"If I'm after a big musky, I look for females that have stored fat for the winter from a summer of feeding well and eggs starting to develop. I've caught my heaviest fish in November."

Howard likes to fish for muskies mainly during two periods. "Two times seem to be the best," he says. "First, somewhere between 10 and 11 in the morning when the first wind starts to put a chop or a ripple on the water. That seems to trigger muskies to feed. Two things seem to happen then. If the day is bright, the breeze diffuses the light that comes down through the water, so I think they come out of their thick cover and start looking for food. The breeze also seems to oxygenate the water."

Howard also says that some of the biggest muskies seem to come out right at sundown, just as the sun gets behind the tops of the trees.

“Those really big ones seem to know when the boat motor pressure and the sound dies down after about 5 p.m. and people are going in for dinner and the lake quiets down. That’s when you see those giants come out looking around. The sun’s off the water then, too,” Howard says.

Howard fishes from shore and from boats. “In the wintertime, I prefer shore fishing, but sometimes I use a boat to get to a certain spot on the shore, or a kayak. In the summer, I mostly prefer going to lakes.

Howard doesn’t tempt muskies with bait. “I started with it, but the trouble with bait is that it seems like you have to wait for a musky to come to you and you’re never sure if there is a musky around,” he says. “With lures you can move around and cover a lot more ground.”

“I use many hand-crafted lures made by individuals who own small bait companies,” Howard says. “For trolling, I like a Wiley Lure, made by Dell Wiley; a Legend Lure, made by Brian Boyer; and a Warner Lure, made by Steve Warner. All are Pennsylvanians.” Howard likes their quality and says they always run straight, a mark of quality workmanship. These lures are about 8 to 11 inches long.

“For casting, I like a Ferris Lure, made by Jim Ferris, and a Minter Lure, made by Jerry Minter, both of whom are Pennsylvanians,” Howard says.

Howard likes trolling his lures at 5 to 8 mph and anywhere from 10 feet to 100 feet behind his boat. “It’s not uncommon to catch muskies while you’re trolling 5 to 7 mph and as close as 10 feet behind your boat,” he says. Howard says that the shallower the water, the closer you want the lure, the deeper the water, the farther back you want it.

“I like a stop-and-go casting retrieve to make a lure appear to be struggling,” Howard says.

Howard says he has no preference these days over lake fishing or river fishing because both lakes and rivers have big muskies. And he’s definitely no stranger to big muskies. “I got a 55-inch musky trolling on Lake Erie about four years ago, and I was casting at a stream mouth nearby and caught a 54.5-inch musky during the winter.”

Howard carries a net with him, “the biggest you can buy,” and long-nose pliers to remove hooks, stressing safety considerations for a musky’s daunting dental work. □



Photos-courtesy of Howard Wagner

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