



*Owen Bierer displays a short, but fat Allegheny River musky. This fish hit a tube jig pitched back in the protected area below a large gravel bar.*



*Tube jigs produce a lot of fall river muskies for regular contributor Jeff Knapp. This 40-incher ate a tube jig fished in the quiet water below a mid-river island.*



*Keeping your lures in the vicinity of baitfish schools will increase your chances of trolling up fall muskies. Sometimes the bait is so thick that baitfish become impaled on the razor sharp*

# Fall Musky Tactics

*By Jeff Knapp photos by author*

From a national point of view, Pennsylvania is a sleeper state, musky-wise. The musky is the official fish of Wisconsin, a state rich in small to medium-sized natural lakes with significant populations of 'lunge. Closer to home, New York's Chautauqua Lake has enjoyed a solid musky fishery for decades. Our state might not have a strong musky reputation, but it has quality musky waters. Fall is one of the best times to seize the opportunity.

By this fall, the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's enhanced musky management package will be well into its third year. The increase of the minimum length limit from 30- to 40-inches will have had time to fish into this more desirable size range. In fall, fewer anglers are on the water, with some put off by the cold. But that same cold weather tends to stimulate feeding activity in the musky population.

## Bass baits on medium size rivers

The higher river flows of fall, coupled with cooling water, pushes muskys into calmer areas protected by shoreline points, rockbars and islands. A tube jig, like the 4-inch flippin' versions marketed for bass fishing, is a good musky bait.

When targeting muskys with bass-sized tubes, some modifications are in order. I like the same insert-style

head used for presenting tubes to bass, but upgrade to a jighead with a superior quality hook. Jigheads in the 1/4- to 1/2-ounce size cover most situations.

It also makes sense to use an abrasive resistant leader. In fashion my own leaders from fluorocarbon leader material of either 60- or 80-pound test. A high quality ball bearing swivel connects the leader with the main line. The jighead is tied directly to the leader. Foot-long leaders provide plenty of protection from bite offs. I also use the same tackle I do for pitching bass jigs: a 7-foot heavy action bass casting rod and a low profile reel loaded with 20-pound-test fluorocarbon line.

When you have a visual target to cast to, such as a sunken tree trunk, aim your cast right at the spot. Retrieves back to the boat should consist of a dragging or light jigging motion. Once the lure is out of the shallow zone—the edge habitat—crank it back to the boat for the next cast.

## The fall troll on shad lakes

Many of our better musky fishing reservoirs, like Lake Arthur and Pymatuning, have strong populations of pelagic baitfish such as gizzard shad and alewife. During the fall, a high percentage of such baitfish will move out of main lake basin areas in favor of creek arms. Finding muskys keying in on this food source favors trolling tactics. This is



*The tantalizing side to side action of a jerkbait can trigger strikes from river muskies even in cold water. This 40-plus-inch Allegheny River musky caught and released by Doug Pavick is proof.*

a scenario where having electronics and basic trolling gear is an advantage.

In the cooling water of fall baitfish tend to ball up. A GPS unit with the ability to drop icons or markers allows an angler to keep track of baitfish locations. The trail feature of a unit will paint a picture of the water you've covered, information necessary to fish new water, or to re-fish an area where you've just had success.

Choosing the correct trolling lure is a matter of matching it to the waters being fished. Most creek arms are relatively shallow, so it's not wise to have a plug that digs down deep. And since baitfish schools are suspended, muskys are accustomed to rising up to eat. Another consideration is how the lure tracks when trolled at a fast clip, as muskies will strike a lure clipping along at 4- to 5-miles an hour.

Size and profile are somewhat a matter of personal preference and confidence. I've had good success with the 6-inch version of the Tuff Shad in the walleye pattern. Long trolling rods with line counter reels enable you to keep track of the amount of let-out, and make it easy to duplicate a productive setup. While you can hand-hold a rod, it's more sensible to place it in a rod holder. Keep the drag tight enough that it doesn't slip due to the pull of the lure, but light enough that there's some give when a musky strikes or you pull into a snag. And keep the hooks sticky-

sharp, so they are set simply from the forward momentum of the boat.

## **Casting musky spots on larger rivers**

On larger river sections, such as the 70-miles of the lower (impounded) Allegheny River, there is ample opportunity to put the casting muscles to the test.

River sections with the best blend of habitat tend to hold the most muskys. This includes island areas, incoming creeks, mid-river humps, weedbeds, laydowns and steep dropping shorelines. Such a mixture provides muskys with the diversity they need to deal with varying river levels and ensures that baitfish will be nearby.

To hit a moving lure, like crankbait or jerkbait, a musky relies on its sense of sight. The best conditions call for fairly clear water. The best water color is slightly stained, which allows fish to clearly see the lure, but not you.

While a variety of lures will produce on big rivers in the fall, two consistent musky catchers are jerkbaits and minnow-shaped crankbaits.

Musky fishing is a game of efficiency. Even in the best waters their numbers are relatively low. As you develop a list of fishing spots, visit them several times per outing. ☐