



Pennsylvania Musky Mania

by Darl Black

photos by the author

Muskellunge fishing has a long history in Pennsylvania. Going back 95 years to 1924, Lewis Walker Jr. landed a 54-pound, 3-ounce Muskellunge from Conneaut Lake, Crawford County, to establish a Pennsylvania State Record that still stands today.

Muskellunge are equal opportunists. These fish may be caught by hardcore anglers whose main focus is the pursuit of Muskellunge. They are also caught incidentally by anglers fishing for other fish species. It is impossible to say who is more thrilled with hooking and landing Pennsylvania's premier fish predator—a Muskellunge addict or an unsuspecting angler making a random cast.

Fishing buddy, Dave Lehman's Muskellunge catches are in the incidental group. "While fishing for Walleyes, bass and panfish, I sometimes catch Muskellunge. A crankbait or jig accounts for most of these toothy fish. It is pandemonium when I hook one on light tackle. This past year, I caught a 46-inch Muskellunge from Conneaut Lake, while my biggest Muskellunge ever was 47-inches from the Allegheny River a few years back," said Lehman.

On the other hand, my friend Woody Knis is a serious Muskellunge chaser. Knis trolls large, handcrafted plugs made by western Pennsylvania lure makers specifically for these large fish. Although rigged with 65-pound-test braided line and a 4-foot, 50-pound fluorocarbon leader on 10-foot rods, you will not find a wire leader on his line. Knis is adamant that wire leaders reduce the number of strikes.

"In the spring and fall, we troll along the shoreline and shallow structure," said Knis. "During the summer, the game switches to offshore humps and river channels. My biggest Muskellunge so far was 50-inches long, caught from Pymatuning Reservoir," said Knis.

Under natural conditions, only about 34 percent of Muskellunge eggs are fertilized, and recruitment is low. Therefore, the only way to achieve a strong population of adult Muskellunge to sustain angler interest is through stocking.

After failed attempts in the 1890s, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) rebooted their Muskellunge propagation in 1953. With increases in knowledge and innovations in the hatchery process including holding fingerlings until 12- to 14-inches, Pennsylvania's Muskellunge propagation is a great success story.



Hatchery personnel extracting eggs from a female Muskellunge.



Milt being extracted from a male Muskellunge.

Jared Sayers, PFBC Hatchery Manager at Linesville State Fish Hatchery, Crawford County, details the current process of spawning and raising purebred Muskellunge.

“In April, when water temperature climbs towards 50 degrees F, we set trap nets to collect adult Muskellunge. For each ripe female taken to the hatchery, we take along two males. When we have 6 to 12 females in the tanks, we do a spawn,” said Sayers.

Artificial spawning of Muskellunge involves extracting eggs from the female and milt from the male, which are then carefully mixed together in a quart jar.

“Fertilized eggs are transferred to large incubator jars for 14 days at 53 degrees F at which point eggs hatch. Fry are held in special tanks until the yoke sack is absorbed, in about 10 days,” said Sayers.

“The following week is critical as we begin training fry to eat dry food. We start off with a mixture of live brine shrimp and dry food. After six days, we move fry from hatching tanks into deeper round tanks with a slight current. The fry are on a strict, dry food diet for 45 days to complete the conversion process,” said Sayers.

Conversion to a dry food diet is necessary due to the high cost of live minnows. Typically, about 80 percent of the fry survive the conversion, at which time fish are moved to larger tanks to grow. In early July, these Muskellunge are 4- to 5-inches long and must be moved outside to larger raceways.

Approaching 10-inches long by fall, fish are graded with larger fingerlings being held over the winter to fill stocking requests of Area Fisheries Managers. Surplus fish are immediately stocked in waters that need a little extra boost.

During the winter, fingerlings do not put on much weight. However, as the water temperatures in the raceways approach the mid-60s in the spring, hatchery personnel begin a feeding routine to rapidly increase growth of the Muskellunge yearlings. The fish feed aggressively in the warming spring water and easily eat twice as many pounds of dry food per day as before winter. Hatchery staff also begin supplementing the Muskellunge’s feeding with live minnows to boost growth.

“By feeding the Muskellunge an increased rate of dry food per day and supplementing minnows, the fish reach 12- to 14-inches in a healthy and aggressive state for stocking in June,” said Sayers. Sayers praises area Muskellunge clubs that donate money to help defray the added cost of minnows.

“At one time, Muskellunge were referred to as the ‘fish of 10,000 casts.’ However, with our latest approach to raising and stocking Muskellunge, we are looking to provide more anglers with a Muskellunge encounter. Whether it is having a huge Muskellunge follow a bait, battling a Muskellunge or eventually landing one of these fish, we want people to get excited about Muskellunge fishing in Pennsylvania,” said Sayers. □



Fertilized eggs in incubating jars, waiting to hatch.

More Muskellunge

Linesville State Fish Hatchery is the only Pennsylvania fish hatchery to spawn purebred Muskellunge. Tiger Muskellunge (hybrid cross between Muskellunge and Northern Pike) are spawned at Union City State Fish Hatchery, Erie County. Tiger muskellunge are easier to raise and grow faster than purebred Muskellunge. However, tiger muskellunge do not grow as large.

Visit www.fishandboat.com for a list of Pennsylvania’s Best Fishing Waters for Muskellunge. For more detailed information on Muskellunge propagation and the stocking program in Pennsylvania, check out the Pennsylvania Muskellunge Management Plan, also available at www.fishandboat.com.