

the mysterious



By Clifford L. Brown and Kevin Yokum

The missile shot out from under the log and attacked the lure with blistering speed. The forceful impact nearly threw me out of the boat. Having clearly missed the strike, I watched in amazement as the bold fish followed my lure to the boat again and again with no sign of intimidation or fear, and yet it was too smart to strike the sharp-hooked lure again.

Muskellunge, usually called musky, are like that — fickle in nature and yet brazen seemingly to the point of insanity at times. But understanding these mysterious creatures may lie in knowing that they sit at the top of the freshwater food chain. When a musky prepares to attack, aquatic inhabitants of all shapes and sizes better be alert.

Despite the interest generated from musky anglers and even the general public, much is still unknown about this gigantic fish. Muskies are spring spawners, usually becoming more active in April when water temperatures reach 50 degrees. Muskies in West Virginia's streams and rivers spawn in shallow, slow-moving water, usually in the upper or lower reaches of pools. In reservoirs, these fish will spawn in a few feet of water along the shoreline over areas with dead vegetation or other cover along the lake bottom. Females will drop up to 200,000 eggs. Males fertilize the eggs, and then swim away. The eggs, about 1/8-inch in diameter, fall to the bottom. There is no nesting or parental care.

If all goes well, hatching takes place in eight to

14 days. At this point, the newly hatched musky is little more than two eyes and a wiggle. After the yolk is absorbed, the fry begin feeding upon zooplankton, eventually switching to prey on other tiny fish.

Survival of these young muskies depends on a variety of factors including water temperature, oxygen levels, available forage and predation.

Low water temperature reduces the availability of zooplankton and other foods for the young muskies, and a low oxygen level could result in suffocation and death. Predators of young muskies include aquatic insects, fish, birds and even other muskies.

Armed with a mouth full of sharp teeth, muskies are formidable predators. Suckers, minnows, chubs, bluegills, perch, crappie and rock bass, which are predators of musky eggs and fry, soon become a growing musky's prey. While a musky will eat just about anything it can catch, it prefers soft-rayed fishes such as chubs and suckers.

The musky can be a highly migratory fish, with documented reports of individuals swimming 20 miles or more in a 24-hour period. Usually these migrations are timed with a spawning run, searching for food sources, or establishing a home range.

Most of the time, however, muskies remain creatures of habit, often inhabiting the same section of stream as long as plenty of food and cover remain available. DNR fisheries biologists have documented numerous Buckhannon River muskies that live within a defined 400-meter section of river for several years, seldom vacating that stretch of river. Anglers have reported catching the same fish in the same pool, sometimes only days apart.

Probably the primary reason anglers are so intrigued by the musky is its size. Muskies are huge fish, and even an average one, say 30 to 35 inches, could be the largest fish an angler has ever caught. Take a jumbo 50-incher, of which West Virginia offers an impressive number, and you have the fish of a lifetime.



A young musky born in the spring caught by DNR personnel during fall sampling.

Muskies spawn in the spring. Eggs are usually deposited indiscriminantly over several hundred yards of shoreline. There is no parental care. Adult spawners return to the same spawning ground in consecutive years.

Musky exhibit sexual dimorphism, which in this case means females grow faster and larger than males. Females mature at four to five years of age and typically run 26 to 30 inches in length. Males reach maturity around 25 to 28 inches and may be three or four years old. A 50-inch musky in West Virginia is likely a female at least 10 years old.

Prior to 1974, muskies over 26 inches could be legally caught and kept. In later years the minimum length limit was changed twice to the current length limit of 30 inches. Based on years of research, these changes were designed to permit at least one year of

natural reproduction before a musky could be legally harvested. The daily creel limit for musky in West Virginia is two and the possession limit is four. Many die-hard musky anglers, however, release most, if not all, of the muskies they catch.

In addition to these size and creel limits, there are several areas in the state with special regulations specifically for musky. Jennings Randolph Lake features a minimum length limit of 36 inches, while North Bend Lake and a mile downstream of the Lake dam on North Fork of Hughes River prohibit musky harvest for fish under 40 inches. A six-mile section of Middle Island Creek in Tyler County and a 6.5-mile section of the Buckhannon River in Upshur County have been



Above: Kevin Yokum holds large muskie caught during sampling by DNR personnel. Right: DNR fisheries biologists place muskie in holding tank to identify if it had previously been caught and tagged with PIT tag.

DNR Photos



designated as special catch-and-release areas where no harvest is allowed.

As mentioned previously, West Virginia does have its share of lunker muskies. Stonecoal Lake in Lewis County holds the notable distinction of holding both the current length and weight records for musky in West Virginia. The length record of 52.7 inches was set in 2003 by Glen Boyd, while the weight record was set by Anna Marsh in 1997 with a 49.75-pound monster.

These fish were remarkable, because prior to 1997, Lester Hayes' Elk River fish held both records at 52.5 inches and 43 pounds for more than 40 years. The longest musky measured in West Virginia, however, was found dead in Burnsville Lake in 1996. This 55-inch behemoth died from unknown causes, perhaps old age.

If you think all the big ones are gone, then think again. The magical 50-inch mark is regularly surpassed by muskies caught from waters across the state.

Recently, three fish from Stonewall Jackson Lake were

caught and released by die-hard musky anglers, all of which would likely have broken the state length record.

Anglers in West Virginia are fortunate to have thriving native populations of muskellunge as well as a successful stocking program in waters not containing native fish. Some of the more popular waters for musky fishing in West Virginia include the Buckhannon River, Burnsville Lake, Elk River, Hughes River, Little Kanawha River, Middle Island Creek, Mud River, North Bend Lake, Stonecoal Lake, Stonewall Jackson Lake and Tygart River.

Muskies are mysterious creatures which instill fear in the aquatic realm, intrigue in the angling world, and curiosity for nearly everyone else. In any case, these giant fish remain a fixture among West Virginia's waters and should continue to be so for years to come. The next record musky in West Virginia will come from...well that's a mystery too!

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