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JULY 2003

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Michigan's Best Bets For Muskie

by Mike Gnatkowski

*Muskie fishing can be very addicting.
Just ask the guys who fish for muskies at these hotspots.*

Muskies are not "abundant" in any lake. *Esox masquinongy* are top-of-the-line predators, and they need space and forage to grow. Seasonal abundances of baitfish can cause a number of muskies to congregate in a relatively small area. Find one of these honeyholes and you might be able to catch more muskies in a single outing than you'll catch in a lifetime. But normally, muskies are few and far between. That's part of the challenge of fishing for them.

Two periods seem to produce a peak in muskie fishing. One is in late spring just after the muskies have spawned. The big fish are hungry then. Water temperatures are still relatively cool and muskies are usually aggressive and on the prowl then. Another peak time is in the fall. Cooler temperatures and the promise of leaner times spur muskies into a late-season feeding binge that muskie fanatics live for.

You'll find muskies in everything from natural lakes and impoundments to large rivers and expansive Great Lakes bays. Many bodies of water where muskies reside aren't capable of producing numbers of trophy muskies, because they lack the amount of soft-rayed forage needed to grow big muskies. But what they lack in size, many muskie waters make up

for in numbers. It's a tough choice between the slim chance of catching one trophy fish or landing one's first muskie or several respectable muskies in a single trip. Most anglers will argue that bigger is better.

When it comes right down to it, a muskie is a muskie wherever you find them, and there are plenty of places in which to find them in Michigan. Following is a list of famous and not-so-famous muskie waters that you'll want to sample this year if you're a muskie addict.

SKEGEMOG LAKE

Kalkaska County's Skegemog Lake is the premier muskie lake in north-west Michigan, according to Central Lake Michigan Management Unit fisheries biologist Mark Tonello.

"The only real muskie lake in our district is Skegemog," said Tonello. "It's not overrun with fish, but it has a pretty respectable population."

Tonello pointed out that muskies can be found throughout the Elk River Chain, which includes Torch, Elk, Intermediate, Bellaire, Clam and several smaller lakes. Some of the biggest muskies in the chain are taken from Elk and Clam lakes.

Most anglers and biologists are under the impression that the muskies in the chain are Great Lakes-strain muskies. The muskies move freely

throughout the system, but Skegemog offers the best habitat and the muskies seem to gravitate to the shallow, weedy confines of the 2,561-acre lake, especially in spring and early summer. Best locations on Skegemog are around the edges of a deep hole just out from the entrance to Elk Lake and in a 15-foot dip just out from the public access site on the lake's south shore.

Later in the summer, muskies retreat to the cooler, deeper sanctuaries of Elk and Torch lakes. Here the muskies suspend beneath schools of herring, whitefish and trout.

Tonello indicated that the muskies in the Elk River Chain are self-sustaining, but there are numerous other locations in the northern Lower Peninsula that have major potential for establishing muskie fisheries. Tonello said that the drowned river-mouth lakes found on the west side of our state are prime candidates, as are several other large inland lakes. Many already have a history of being viable muskie waters.

There are several major hurdles to creating these fisheries, though. Fisheries managers need to find a source for Great Lakes-strain muskies for stocking. Recent netting surveys on Lake St. Clair look promising. Biologists must also convince anglers