

NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO'S BIG THREE FOR MUSKIE

*LAC SEUL, EAGLE LAKE,
AND LAKE OF THE WOODS*
SET THE STAGE FOR
LUNKER LUNGE ACTION.



STORY AND PHOTOS BY BEN BEATTIE

With overcast skies and light wind, it was a pretty nice day for mid-October on Lac Seul in northwestern Ontario. My boat followed a rocky shoreline at a slow, calculated 2.75 miles per hour. Three big muskie plugs trailed behind.

“Zip, zzzzzip, zzzzzzip!” I was staring at my rod and shouting, willing the clicker to go off.

We were in the middle of a tough stretch, having boated only one small muskie in three days. Fishing with me were fellow guide Greg Marino and OOD columnist Tim Allard. This was the fourth day of a five-day trip and the weather for day five was looking rough.

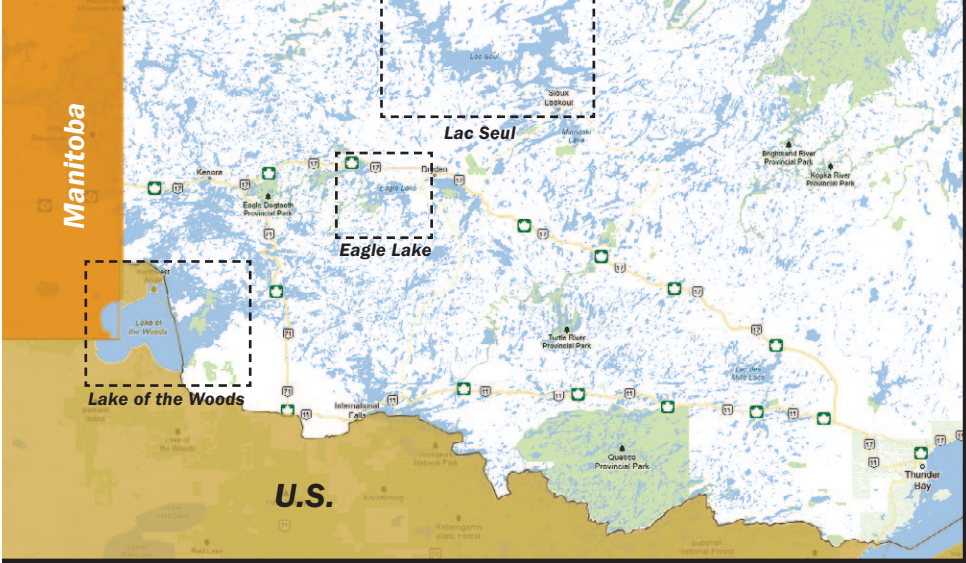
Seconds after I yelled at my rod, I watched it literally fold over and the clicker start screaming.

“You called your fish,” Greg said, as he started clearing the other lines. “That’s crazy!”

Tim grabbed his camera just as the muskie came to the surface 60 feet behind the boat. It dove, my heart raced, and adrenaline filled my body.

The next thing I remember was seeing the muskie surface again 10 feet from the boat. The fish thrashed, sending white water in all directions, my 10-inch Jake sideways in its mouth. I pulled it towards the boat and Greg dipped the oversized net under the fish. The big muskie was in the net!

Ontario is fortunate to be home to trophy muskie fisheries. Only in



northwestern Ontario can you find three such fisheries so close together. Clustered along a stretch of rugged Canadian Shield are the world-class fisheries of Lac Seul, Eagle Lake, and Lake of the Woods.

Fall is the best time of year to catch their giant muskie. Every year, die-hard anglers push the boundaries of what nature can deliver during late-season pursuits of the fish of a lifetime.

★ LAC SEUL

Lac Seul's muskie are less known than its walleye, partly because of their distribution. The lake is huge. Its crescent shape stretches nearly 155 miles from the northeast end to Ear Falls in the west. Most muskie are concentrated in two areas at the southeast and northeast.

Ministry of Natural Resources Biologist Michelle Robinson explains that although there's no specific information explaining the distribution of muskie in Lac Seul, the assumption is it's due to the preferred habitat in the southeast and northeast. "The western

portion of the lake tends to be deeper, with primarily bedrock substrate; conversely, the eastern portion has more shallow weedy bays, narrow channels, and current," he said.

Sioux Lookout serves as the starting point for muskie fishing on Lac Seul. The Deception Bay boat launch, 15 minutes from town, puts you squarely in the southeast's muskie water. Access to the northeast is via the same launch, but requires a 37-mile boat ride.

I live in Sioux Lookout, so Lac Seul is my home water. Since moving here in fall 2008, I've been fortunate to work with and learn the lake from longtime local guides Colin Gosse, Marino, and Bryon Cole. No one used to fish for muskie on the southeast end before these guys started putting big fish in their nets nearly 20 years ago.

Transition Timing

Fall comes early in northwestern Ontario. By September, there's a smattering of yellow on the birch and aspens, water temperatures are cooling, and aquatic vegetation is dying, triggering a change in muskie behaviour.

"During summer, cabbage weeds are the name of the game for muskie on Lac Seul," said Gosse. "By mid-September, they're moving out of the shallow weedy areas and utilizing rock structure more. They move to reefs and prominent points close to their summer habitat and to deeper water."

During the early fall transition, running and gunning and casting are most effective. On a trip late last September, this pattern proved itself for fishing partner Mike Owen and me. We were making our way up the lake from Deception Bay and decided to try a small section of rock shoreline adjacent to deep water, with shallow bays on each side of it.

I started casting a magnum Bull Dawg, a large soft-plastic bait. On my tenth cast, the lure smacked the water close to shore and I gave it a pull, reeled up slack, and went to pull it again, but the bait didn't move. I leaned into the rod and drove in the hooks. After the most intense fight I've ever had from a muskie, Mike netted a chunky 49-incher for me.

As fall progresses, we mix in more and more trolling to catch fish. By mid- to late October, Lac Seul is a troller's paradise until freeze-up in mid-November. Cover ground and fish rocky shorelines and points with deep water or current nearby.

Lady Muskie

Linda Rice, owner of Moosehorn Lodge, is no stranger to long days of late-season trolling on Lac Seul. Rice, also known as Muskie Mamma, is well respected in the muskie community for her collection of big fish, including

Snapshots from Lac Seul. Below, Linda Rice of Moosehorn Lodge.



a record (woman's catch and release) 57-inch giant she caught in 2005.

Rice caught the muskie bug after buying Moosehorn in 2003. No one has spent more time trolling during the fall on Lac Seul than Rice and Moosehorn guide Marino. They've dialed in the areas and tactics needed to succeed.

Marino is the brain of the operation, with detailed knowledge of shoreline structure, equipment, baits, and boat control. He has a keen sense for being at the right place at the right time. Rice is the heart and soul of it, a truly funny lady with an upbeat spirit and the encouraging attitude to push through the slow times.

Rice and I spent time together in my boat late last October. It was a nice day for so late in the season. We played a game where the person's rod that goes off first gets that fish. Afterwards, it's the other person's turn, no matter whose rod the fish is on.

I was hauling my favourite white 10-inch Jake and Rice was trolling a custom Headlock bait 25 feet behind the boat. We circled an island in a main-lake channel and, just as the trail on the GPS was about to reach our starting point, my rod went off. I landed a small muskie and released it boatside. It wasn't the size we were hoping for, but being the optimist, Rice commented, "You can't catch two until you've got one. Let's go get a big one now."

Later that afternoon, we were working a trolling run I call "misery," after a series of past heartbreaks. Suddenly, my rod buckled in the holder and instinctively I went to grab it, but quickly remembered it was Linda's turn. She pulled it from the holder and set into a good fish.

I reached for the net, but before I could turn around, the fish came off. Disappointment settled in again. That's part of muskie fishing – high highs and low lows.



EAGLE LAKE

I packed up from moose camp and hit the dirt road before sunup. It was the third week in October and our group had just been through a cold and windy week, with no moose for our efforts.

I headed to Jeff Moreau's house. He's a longtime Eagle Lake guide and tackle maker who lives just a stone's throw from famous Eagle Lake.

As I pulled into the driveway, Moreau greeted me with a cup of hot coffee. Talk immediately turned to muskie, as we readied gear and headed through the yard to his boat at the dock.

We started casting around a group of islands and reefs, his house still visible in the background.

Moreau explained his strategy for fall fishing is based on his roamers-versus-homers theory. "Some muskie are roamers that continually roam big basin areas, while some are homers that have a few key spots they hang out at," explained Moreau.

"I cast for homers in spots where I know they hang out (confidence areas) and troll for roamers. I cast most of the time, as to me this is the art and beauty of the game. I do a little trolling in fall, mostly in controlled areas like narrows or any channel with depth on each side. I also troll open-water basin areas. Although you've got to be prepared to put in some time, the payoff is usually big."

Moreau started casting a 9-inch Grandma crankbait and recommended

I go with a Bull Dawg. Given my recent success with it, I was interested to see if it would produce on Eagle.

Moreau worked the trolling motor and suggested I cast away from the reef. My lure splashed down and I got a couple cranks into my retrieve when it stopped. I set the hook into my first Eagle Lake muskie. Moreau soon netted the fish, not a big one by Eagle's standards, but we were on the board on the first spot.

We continued casting around the islands and raised five more muskie, including a thick one in the 50-inch class. Moreau told me he's caught multiple fish over 50 inches within sight of his house. I was impressed.

We spent the rest of the day travelling around Eagle and sticking to Moreau's programme of casting crankbaits, bucktails, and big rubber baits to reefs, islands, and points with deep-water access nearby.

On the second day, we ventured to Osbourne Bay. It reminded me more of Lac Seul, with tea-stained water and narrow channels with shallower water and soft-bottomed weedy areas. The water was cooler here, too, with the graph showing 42.5°C. I raised a mid-40s fish on a bucktail, but that was the only one we saw.

We trolled across some basin structure on the way back to Moreau's house as the sun set. Night fishing is prohibited on Eagle, so we pulled lines.

In total, we raised a dozen fish and caught one – not bad by muskie-fishing standards. We both agreed we were bitten by the curse of the "early fish."

Moving On

I said goodbye to Moreau and made the short drive west on the Trans-Canada

Left, Jeff Moreau with a nice Eagle Lake fish. Below, rigging large suckers on quick-strike rigs.



to Andy Meyer's Lodge on Eagle Lake, near the town of Vermilion Bay. Owner Steve Herbeck built its reputation as one of the best muskie destinations in northwestern Ontario. His record of trophy fish speaks for itself.

I was invited to stay and fish with good friend and longtime muskie enthusiast Tony Hernandez. We settled into a cabin and talked muskie strategy before going to bed early. Hernandez fishes sunup to sundown.

On the lake, we ran a programme similar to Moreau's, casting crankbaits to rock structure with deep water close by. One major difference was that we incorporated large suckers on quick-strike rigs. With three anglers in the boat, an effective method is to have two casting and the other with a sucker rig out the back.

"The casters should throw big slow-moving baits to invoke follows and bring fish to the boat," said Hernandez. "This pulls fish off structure and brings them to the live bait. Sometimes the sucker sweeps up the followers that otherwise wouldn't have hit."

Hernandez, his cousin Johnny, and I took turns minding the sucker rod, while the other two casted. In two days, we raised several fish, some big ones, too, but other than one pick-up on the sucker that dropped the bait, we didn't boat any fish. This reality is proof of the challenges of targeting fall muskie, even with live bait.

Back at the cabin, Herbeck explained some of the finer points of sucker fishing. He's a pioneer of fishing modern quick-strike rigs and developed the first true break-away rig 20 years ago. Called the Herbie, it revolutionized live-bait fishing for muskie.

"A lot of people think of it as just soaking a sucker under a bobber, but there's so much more to it," said Herbeck. "Doing it right is an art and a lot goes into it to do it right. It's the way to fool a huge fish conditioned by being around baits for 25 years."

The Herbie breaks free from the live bait on the hook-set, so it can slide in the fish's mouth, allowing the hooks to penetrate. "When a muskie grabs a sucker and sinks its teeth in, the sucker is not going to move on the hook-set, so the rig has to break free from the sucker to get the hooks set," said Herbeck.



Ryan Marlowe and Jim McLeod with a LOTW muskie.



He says top live-bait times are the nasty, windy cold-front days of fall. "The best time is when water temps are between 36 and 45° C," he explained. "If it's bright, sunny, warm fall weather, I don't even bother with live bait. It can actually be non-beneficial if the fish are really aggressive and the water temps are warmer. If that's the case, you're better off to be moving faster and covering more ground casting artificials. To properly fish live bait, I only hit 8 to 10 spots a day, thoroughly and methodically covering them. When casting, I can fish 20-plus spots a day."

When deploying a sucker rig, Herbeck recommends leaving the spool disengaged with the clicker on. "I just feed it line and let the sucker go naturally," he said. "I like my baits free-swimming 60 to 120 feet out behind the boat."

Once a fish hits, Herbeck says to quickly gather up line and get to within 30 feet of the fish, even if this means moving the boat towards it. "You want the fish to be moving away from you, either straight away or at a minimum

45-degree angle, so when you set the hook it gets driven into the corner of the mouth," he said. "If it's facing you, you will just pull it out of its mouth."

Herbeck says bait size isn't as important as strength and vitality. "You want an active sucker; 14 to 20 inches is best," he said.

As for the naysayers who believe live-bait fishing for muskie is harmful, Herbeck has never seen one killed on a quick-strike rig. "More fish die from artificial baits with multiple treble hooks that get in their gills," he said.

★ LAKE OF THE WOODS

My next trip was to Kenora to fish renowned Lake of the Woods with Ryan Marlowe. The Winnipeg native moved to Kenora and opened Figure 8 Baits on the waterfront in 2010. He's muskie obsessed and has a vast knowledge of the lake and its fishery.

He urged me to plan my trip as late in the season as possible. "Colder water temperatures before ice-up really get

these fish feeding,” he said. We planned for the first week in November, knowing full well the risks of bad weather.

I met Marlowe at his shop and we headed out with one of his friends, Derek Stannard. The weather was terrible, with high winds and temperatures just above freezing. We fished close to Kenora, staying protected from the wind amongst a maze of islands.

Marlowe’s late-season approach of trolling plugs was similar to what I was used to on Lac Seul, with a couple of differences. He trolled faster, between 3 and 4 miles per hour, and ran deeper-diving baits. His preference was 10- to 16-inch custom lures like Hose Baits, Franky Baits, and Bluewater Baits.

Weather-wise, day two was much the same, except the wind was blowing harder and it snowed on and off. Stannard opted to head back to Winnipeg, so it was just Marlowe and me. We travelled farther and fished different areas, but the end result was the same as the first day, no muskie boated. I knew our luck was bound to change.

The Fish Are There

MNR Biologist for Lake of the Woods Tom Mosindy says its muskie fishery is in the best it’s been for decades. He attributes this to an increased catch-and-release ethic, a decrease in commercial netting, and changes to angling regulations that have seen the minimum size for muskie

raised to 54 inches.

“We’ve also seen increased spawning success and recruitment of stronger-than-average year classes of fish that correspond to the warmer and longer spring-summer-fall seasons that we’ve been experiencing in recent years,” said Mosindy.

Persistence Pays

On the third day, we caught a break. The sun shone and the wind died. The forecast high was only 4 °C, but it felt much warmer.

Marlowe wanted to up our odds of catching a muskie by adding another line, so he invited fishing pal Jim McLeod. Marlowe suggested we try new water, so we travelled 20 minutes from Kenora to an area where he said cisco and whitefish spawn in fall.

Whether it was the change in location, the change in weather, or a combination of both, I will never know for sure, but we started catching fish.

McLeod put the first muskie in the net, a smaller feisty fish that chomped his 12-inch Triple D as we trolled alongside an island. “I was really ripping on my bait hard when it hit,” he said.

This technique, known as jerk trolling, adds a lot of action to baits that otherwise have a steady, consistent wobble with rods in holders. We stuck to the area and within a few hours McLeod boated two more muskie. Nothing was over 40 inches, but we were happy to be on the board.

For the rest of the afternoon, we travelled to other areas in the hopes of finding a bigger fish. Again, the rods went silent.

Around nightfall, we headed back to where we caught the three muskie earlier. As we trolled along a reef jutting out from a point, my rod loaded up and the clicker screamed.

The guys cleared their lines, as I battled my first Lake of the Woods muskie. The fish stayed down and I felt powerful headshakes. When it came head first to the net, Marlowe scooped it up, my lucky 10-inch white Jake sideways in its mouth.

The next morning, Marlowe headed right back to where we caught the fish the night before. He explained that when you find an area with fish, keep on them.

We covered it thoroughly, this time casting crankbaits and Bull Dawgs. We raised two fish right away, including a nice one on the same spot where I caught my fish hours earlier. It didn’t hit on the cast, but we knew it was there.

Marlowe suggested trolling over the spot with big baits that would grind the rocks. As we made our pass, his bait hung up on bottom. He released tension in his line and the bait floated free. I watched him re-engage the reel and immediately the rod folded over again.

“This is a fish!” yelled Marlowe.

I grabbed my camera and started shooting photos of the fight and of McLeod netting the fish. In less than 24 hours, we’d boated two big Lake of the Woods muskie from the same spot.

We fished the rest of the day without any more action, though. After nightfall, we headed for home, weaving through the islands with the boat pointed towards the lights of Kenora.

Chasing late-season muskie isn’t for the faint of heart. Cold, rain, snow, wind, and fishless days are often a reality then.

For those willing to face the elements, though, northwestern Ontario’s Lac Seul, Eagle Lake, and Lake of the Woods provide world-class muskie opportunities. ●

Outfitters

Many camps and operators close up before the end of the fall muskie season. The outfitters and guides listed here remain open.

LAKE OF THE WOODS

Ryan Marlowe
Figure 8 Baits
1-807-468-3762

Jeff Gustafson
1-807-543-3741
www.gussyoutdoors.com

Dave Bennett
1-807-466-2140
www.davebennettoutdoors.com

Crawford’s Camp
Sioux narrows
1-888-266-3474
www.crawfordscamp.com

EAGLE LAKE

Jeff Moreau
Fishtales Guide Service
1-807-755-5672

Andy Myer’s Lodge
1-888-727-5865
www.andymyerslodge.com

Cedar Point Lodge
1-888-722-4610
www.cedarpointlodge.com

Eagle Lake Lodge
1-888-755-3245
www.eaglelakelodge.com

LAC SEUL

Moosehorn Lodge
1-800-682-6123
www.canadafish.com

Colin Gosse
Lac Seul Guide Service
1-807-738-0873
www.lacseulguide.com

Abram Lake Park
1-807-737-1247
www.abramlake.ca

Tourist Organizations

Northern Ontario Tourism
www.oto.ca

Patricia Regional Tourist Council
www.freemap.ca