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MICHIGAN SPORTSMAN MAGAZINE

JULY 2003

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MichiganSportsmanMag.com

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MICHIGAN SPORTSMAN (ISSN-0539-8908) is published monthly by PRIMEDIA Enthusiast Group, a division of PRIMEDIA, Inc., 2250 Newmarket Parkway, Suite 110, Marietta, Georgia 30067. Periodicals postage paid at Marietta, Georgia, and at additional mailing offices. Yearly subscriptions — \$19.97 for one year (\$28.97 Canadian). POSTMASTER: Send address changes (form 3579) to MICHIGAN SPORTSMAN, PCD, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235 or call 1-877-416-2649. Copyright© 2003 PRIMEDIA Enthusiast Group, a PRIMEDIA Company.

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

Smallmouth bass become one of the dominant predators in the free-flowing parts of the lower river and are also present in good numbers in the impoundments.

The bass begin to mix in with the trout as we near the Mio Dam Impoundment, and while a lot of trout are still stocked below Mio, you will also find good numbers of smallmouths. There is a good stretch of smallmouth water below the Alcona Dam, but after that the amount of free-flowing river between dams is quite limited until the reach between the Foote Dam and Lake Huron. In the lower stretch the smallmouths are joined by good numbers of channel catfish and walleyes.

This is all big water and is much more easily floated than waded. A boat also allows you to drop down into the upper ends of the impoundments where the smallie fishing can be quite good. There is access at each dam, as well as at the road crossings.

MANISTEE RIVER

Like the Au Sable, the Manistee River is a nationally known trout stream in its upper two-thirds, and it receives a large run of steelhead and salmon up to Tippy Dam each year. There are still good numbers of trout just below Tippy due to heavy stocking, but as you move downstream, smallmouth bass take over in a big way.

The reach between High Bridge and the confluence with Bear Creek is especially good. Smallmouths continue to be present in good numbers all the way to Manistee Lake, and they are joined by increasing numbers of walleyes and northern pike as you move downstream. While this is a crowded river during salmon and steelhead seasons, you will have it to yourself in July. You can wade to a limited extent, but a boat is a big plus.

There are only two road crossings below Tippy Dam, but there are a number of public boat launches, with the ones at High Bridge, Blacksmith Bayou, Bear Creek and Rainbow Bend in the prime smallmouth water.

The DNR office in Cadillac keeps close tabs on the Manistee River and the Muskegon River (which follows). They can be reached at (231) 775-9727.



There are some chunky smallmouth bass in the Manistee River. Photo by Jim Bedford.

MUSKEGON RIVER

Even though the Muskegon River starts out as a warmwater stream, it contains relatively few smallmouth bass until the flow quickens between the towns of Evart and Big Rapids. In this reach the rocky habitat and healthy crayfish population are made to order for smallies. The river has cooled down as well here, and brown and rainbow trout are stocked. The smallmouth still predominate, but the trout respond to the same baits, lures and flies and will add variety to your fishing.

The river is wadeable here at normal summer levels, but many anglers float in small boats and canoes because the access points are limited.

A series of large impoundments split the Muskegon's upper smallmouth water from the lower. Stocked browns and rainbows provide the main fishery below the lowest dam at Croton, but by the time you get below Newaygo, the smallies are taking over. The prime smallmouth bass fishing is found below Bridgeton, and this is definitely boating water. Some large smallmouths move up into the river from Muskegon Lake and spice up the action in this section. You can launch at Bridgeton, just up from Maple Island Road, and at the river mouth in Muskegon Lake.

Local Chamber of Commerce contact numbers for the Lower Peninsula rivers include (989) 354-4181 for the

Thunder Bay and Alpena County; (989) 739-7322 for the lower Au Sable; (231) 723-2575 for the lower Manistee River; (231) 734-5555 (Evart) and (231) 796-7649 (Big Rapids) for the upper Muskegon; and (231) 652-3068 (Newaygo) and (231) 722-3751 (Muskegon) for the lower Muskegon.

* * *

Remember that smallmouth bass like a firm substrate with moderate current. An uneven bottom with boulders and submerged logs for cover is perfect. These bass are also fond of holes just below gravel riffles that produce a lot of food in the form of crayfish and large insect nymphs. These fish also feed heavily on minnows.

Light spinning tackle is very well suited for river smallies. Jigs dressed with plastic or marabou, small lures and weighted spinners are all ideal for these fish. You can also turn to the real thing and drift crayfish, crawlers and minnows through the runs and holes.

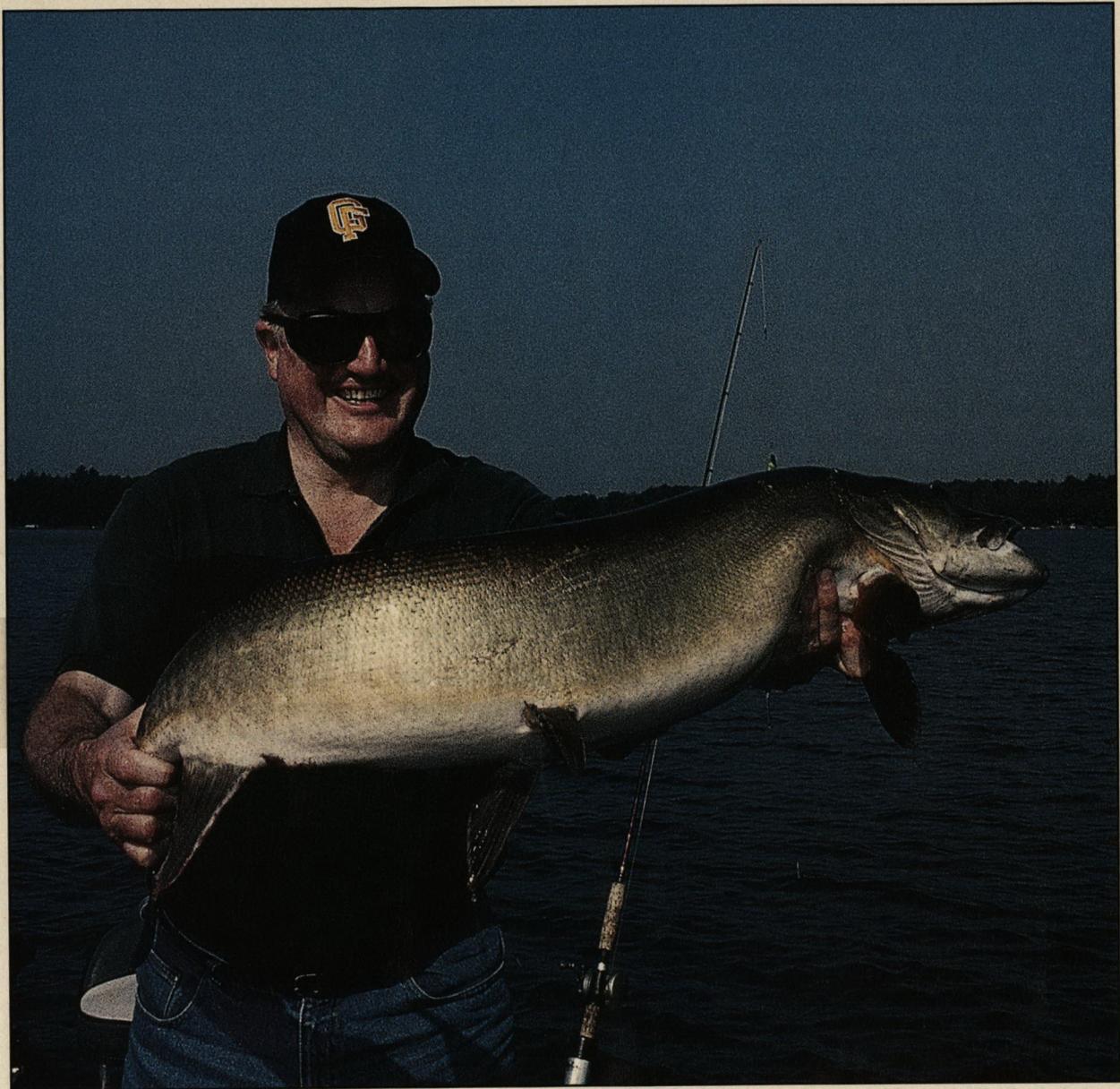
Smallmouth bass are also an excellent fly-rod fish. They live in broad, open rivers that provide a lot of casting room. Often they will rise to poppers and deer-hair bugs even when there isn't a hatch. These bronze-colored bass attack crayfish- and minnow-imitating streamers anytime, and these flies are especially effective when the water is low and clear.

So if you find yourself in Michigan's trout country and the summer's heat and bright sunshine have turned off the browns and brookies, give these rivers a try for smallmouth bass. These bass seem to turn on in midsummer when other fish, including bass in lakes, are hard to catch. Smallies are great game fish in any environment, but they really show their stuff in our northern rivers. □

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PETE MAINA

that muskie populations won't wipe out more desirable species, like walleyes and panfish. Tonello points to the fact that both Minnesota and Wisconsin have viable muskie programs, and fishing for other species continues to thrive.

"Muskie do not eat walleyes," said Tonello. "They love white suckers."

The biggest problem with increasing muskie production is personnel and hatchery limitations.

"There's the potential to do a lot more, but we're limited," declared Tonello.

Michigan's hatcheries are more geared toward producing "coldwater" species, and not walleyes, pike and muskies.

"The Wolf Lake facility produces a small number of muskies each year, but the success rate is poor and does-

n't produce nearly enough to plant all of the bodies of water that have muskie potential," claimed Tonello.

Biologists and fisheries managers have been pushing for years to get a "coolwater" hatchery facility.

For more information on muskies in the Elk River system, contact the Central Lake Michigan Management Unit at (231) 775-9727. For information on lodging and other amenities near Skegemog Lake, contact the Elk Rapids Chamber of Commerce at (231) 264-8202 or on the Web at www.elkrapidschamber.org.

BLACK LAKE

Northern Michigan's Black, Burt and Mullet lakes have several things in common. All are sizable lakes that are fed by first-class trout streams. All three have excellent fishing for a variety of species, and all of them

have a respectable population of big muskies in them.

"We basically take a hands-off approach with regard to muskies in Black, Burt and Mullet lakes," said Gaylord fisheries biologist Tim Cwalinski. "We know that there is a population of muskies in those lakes and they are sustained mostly by natural reproduction. There's enough peripheral habitat for spawning to sustain the fishery."

Most people would agree that there is a small but stable population of some very large muskies in the lakes, especially Burt and Black. Fifty-inch-plus fish are taken every year.

At 10,130 acres, Black Lake is the smallest of the three lakes but is the most consistent producer of muskies. Look for muskies on the north end, especially during late fall. The majority

of the muskies, though, are caught in the lower reaches of the Black and Cheboygan rivers in late spring. Trolling with giant crankbaits, casting big bucktails or soaking oversized suckers all take the occasional leviathan that will top 50 inches and 30 pounds.

Anglers can access Black Lake via Black Lake State Forest Campground on the northeast side of the lake or via Onaway State Park. For information on guides and fishing activity, contact the Black Lake Hotel at (231) 625-2625. Information on amenities and lodging in the area is available by contacting the Onaway Chamber of Commerce at (231) 733-2874.

LAKE ST. CLAIR

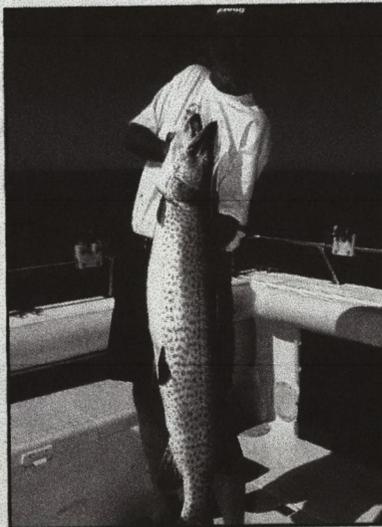
Lake St. Clair continues to be Michigan's premier muskie destination. There are probably more Great Lakes muskies per acre in 250,000-acre Lake St. Clair than in any other lake in the world.

"Lake St. Clair muskie numbers are at a very high level," said Mike Thomas of the Great Lakes Fisheries Research Station at Mt. Clemens. "The fishing has been consistent for the last 8 to 10 years. It's difficult monitoring muskie abundance, though. Most of the information we get is from catch rates provided by anglers."

While anglers are thrilled with the abundance of muskies in the lake, biologists fear that high densities of muskies can lead to the spread of disease. Lake St. Clair muskies may also hold the key to Michigan's muskie future.

"We got some eggs and milt this past spring by accident," said Thomas. "Most of it went to Wisconsin for a study they are doing to see if the Great Lakes-strain of muskies is a viable source for future plants."

Thomas said there is support to establish a comprehensive muskie management plan in Michigan. One of the questions is "Do we really need it?" said Thomas. Thomas said there are variables such as hatchery limitations, finding a consistent source of fish that are genetically different, and getting a handle on the bacterial disease that is showing up in Lake St. Clair muskies. Only then can Michigan jump in with both feet in establishing a bona fide



If you really want to catch a trophy muskie, go trolling on Lake St. Clair. Photo by Mike Gnatkowski.

muskie program.

In the meantime, Lake St. Clair continues to produce a fantastic muskie fishery.

"There are muskies in U.S. waters all year long," said Thomas, "but generally the muskies move to Canadian waters during the summer and early fall."

Thomas pointed out that Canadian waters make up two-thirds of the lake. Some contend that there are two distinct populations of muskies in the lake. One spawns in the shallow confines of Anchor Bay. The other population spawns in Canadian waters. The Anchor Bay fish are available through June, but clear water, floating vegetation and boating traffic on the U.S. side of the lake make catching them difficult.

From the mouth of the Clinton River south is usually a hotspot. Speed-trolling to cover water with Believers, Terminators and other giant lures behind planer boards and rods spotted near the prop wash draw ferocious strikes. The idea is to cover water, change plugs and clean weeds.

For muskie tackle, baits, fishing reports and lake maps, contact Lakeside Fishing Shop at (586) 777-7003 or check them out on the Web at www.lakesidefishingshop.com. To book a charter for Lake St. Clair muskies, contact Capt. Don Miller at Miller's Sport Fishing at (734) 429-9551 or on the Web at [\[sportfishing.com\]\(http://sportfishing.com\).](http://www.millers-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

BUDD & SANFORD LAKES

"The two best muskies lakes in our district are Sanford and Budd lakes," said Southern Lake Huron Management Unit fisheries biologist Jim Baker. "We've planted muskies in the Tittabawassee River system for years, but Sanford is the only place where they really took off."

Baker said that each impoundment is planted every four or five years.

"It may not seem like much, but that enough to establish a fishery," claimed Baker. "These fish are fall fingerlings that average 10 inches and they are very 'street smart.' Survival is good."

These plants are supplemented with fingerlings raised in marshes adjacent to Smallwood and Sanford lakes. The fish grow quickly on a healthy diet of suckers and panfish.

Hotspots for muskies are anywhere creeks enter the lake and along the old river channel. Muskies take up residence along the sloping dropoffs there and in remnant stumps to ambush prey. Trolling with big crankbaits and plugs produces the best results.

"Budd Lake has been a steady muskie producer for years," claimed Baker.

The 175-acre Clare County lake has a sizable population of lake chubs and suckers that make for perfect muskie fodder. Regular plants help to sustain muskie populations in the lake.

Because of the lake's size, finding muskies in Budd Lake isn't difficult; catching them sometimes is. The best tactic is to cover water by trolling at a fairly good clip while pulling big Bombers, Rapalas and Believers in frog, shad and perch finishes. Fish come from both the north and south ends in 10 to 25 feet of water. A ban on spearing helps protect valuable muskies.

For more information on muskies in Sanford and Budd lakes, contact the Saginaw Bay Management Unit of the DNR at (989) 684-9141.

THORNAPPLE & HUDSON LAKES

"Thornapple and Hudson lakes are unique in that they're brood-stock lakes," said Southern Lake Michigan Management Unit fisheries biologist

Jay Wesley. That means that they are protected with special regulations, that prohibit spearing, no ice-fishing is allowed, there are minimum size limits, and they get plants every year. It's no wonder the muskie fishing is so good.

Thornapple Lake, at 409 acres, is located in Barry County near Hastings. It is formed by the Thornapple River and offers ideal muskie habitat. The northern muskies there grow fat on a diet of suckers, crappies and small carp. Hotspots for muskies are on the east end of the lake where the Thornapple River enters, off High Bank Creek and Howard's Point, and on the west end off the public boat ramp at Charleton Park. Muskie fanatics troll giant crankbaits, throw Suicks and other jerkbaits or soak jumbo suckers under a beach-ball-sized bobber. All methods take their share of Thornapple muskies.

Lenawee County's 500-acre Lake Hudson is another brood-stock lake that produces big muskies.

"A new state-record muskie that weighed 49 pounds (and 12 ounces, caught by John Gemi) and was 51 inches was caught from Lake Hudson in 2000," said fisheries biologist Jay Wesley. "The word is out about the big fish in the lake."

Fishing pressure has increased dramatically since the monster was caught, prompting the DNR to place a special 50-inch size limit on muskies from Hudson.

Lake Hudson is an impoundment of Bear Creek, a tributary of the Raisin River. It tends to be on the turbid side because of the lake's clay bottom. The hard pan prevents extensive weed growth, and locating the scattered weeds adjacent to deep water is a key to finding muskies in Lake Hudson. Most anglers cast giant spinnerbaits, plugs and bucktails.

For more information on Thornapple Lake muskies, contact the Southern Lake Michigan Management Unit at (616) 685-6851. The Lake Erie Management Unit of the DNR (734-953-0241) manages Lake Hudson.

ST. MARYS RIVER, TAHQUEMENON AND MORE

There are more muskie waters in the eastern U.P. than you think.

"Everyone tends to think about the

St. Marys River system and the Tahquamenon River system when you talk about muskies in this neck of the woods, but we actually have quite a few muskie waters in our district," claimed fisheries biologist Jim Waybrant. "Probably the best chance of catching a muskie is on the Tahquamenon River. It probably won't be a keeper, but the chances of catching a muskie are good."

Waybrant said that the river contains both Great Lakes and northern muskies. Most will be in the 30- to 40-inch range. The best area is from McPhee's Landing to the falls, some 30 miles of remote, picturesque water. Casting with brightly colored jerkbaits, spinnerbaits and bucktails in the tannic-stained water works best. A key area is off the Sage and Hendrie rivers.

At the other end of the spectrum is the St. Marys River system, which includes Munuscong Bay, Raber Bay, Neebish Island, Lake Nicolet, Lake George and Potagannissing Bay. In the vast, expansive and immense St. Marys River much of the water is ideal muskie habitat and the fish can be widely scattered.

"Key to finding muskies on the St. Marys is finding baitfish," said muskie guide Bert Rimer. "The fish move with the baitfish. Generally, that's in the shallower, warmer water."

Trolling is the only option when you're searching wide expanses for muskies. Rimer uses long rods, outriggers and speed-trolling to cover water. Lure color changes daily. Best times are during late May and early June, and in the fall.

To try your luck at landing a St. Marys River muskie, contact Bert Rimer at (906) 647-2024 or on the Web at www.muskyguideresort.com. For information on lodging and accommodations, contact the Sault Convention & Visitors Bureau at (906) 632-3301 or on the Web at www.saultsternmarie.com.

Waybrant indicated that the St. Marys and Tahquamenon aren't the only muskie waters in the eastern U.P. He suggested trying 4,230-acre Brevoort Lake and South Manistique Lake in Mackinac County, and Kingston Lake in Alger County. Both Grassy and McKeever lakes in western Schoolcraft County have good

populations of muskies. Another lake to consider is 130-acre Cusino Lake. Waybrant said Cusino's muskies are slow-growing, but the lake contains legal fish.

For more information on muskie lakes in the eastern U.P., contact the DNR's Newberry office at (906) 293-5131.

WESTERN U.P.

Muskies have quite a following in the western U.P. Because the western U.P. is so close to Wisconsin, where the muskie is king, there are a lot of non-resident anglers plying the waters in the region in search of trophy fish. Others are Michigan anglers who are just muskie addicts. Both will find plenty of locations in which to ply their trade.

"I would have to rate Lac La Belle as one of the U.P.'s better muskie lakes," said Vern Nurenburg, fisheries biologist at the Baraga District field office.

Lac La Belle's muskie population has been on a slow upward trend. The lake's rocky shoals and scattered weedbeds combined with an abundant sucker population make for an ideal muskie environment. The 1,146-acre lake is located in northeast Keweenaw County. Try near the town of Lac La Belle and near the narrows on the east end of the lake.

The Bond Falls Flowage is another muskie water Nurenburg recommended. Nurenburg said that Bonds Falls has a population of naturally reproducing northern muskies. Located east of Paulding, the flowage is formed by the Middle Branch of the Ontonagon River. The lake features stumps, weedlines and islands that provide perfect muskie lairs, plus plenty of rough fish for forage.

For information on these and other western U.P. muskie waters, contact the DNR's Baraga field office at (906) 353-6651. Information on lodging and accommodations is available by contacting the Upper Peninsula Travel & Recreation Association at 1-800-562-7134 or on the Web at www.uptravel.com.

* * *

They say that muskies are "the fish of 10,000 casts." You'll up your odds by trying these waters. Just ask the muskie addicts when you get there. □