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Great Lakes 4H Fact Sheet – Muskellunge

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

4-H Club Bulletin

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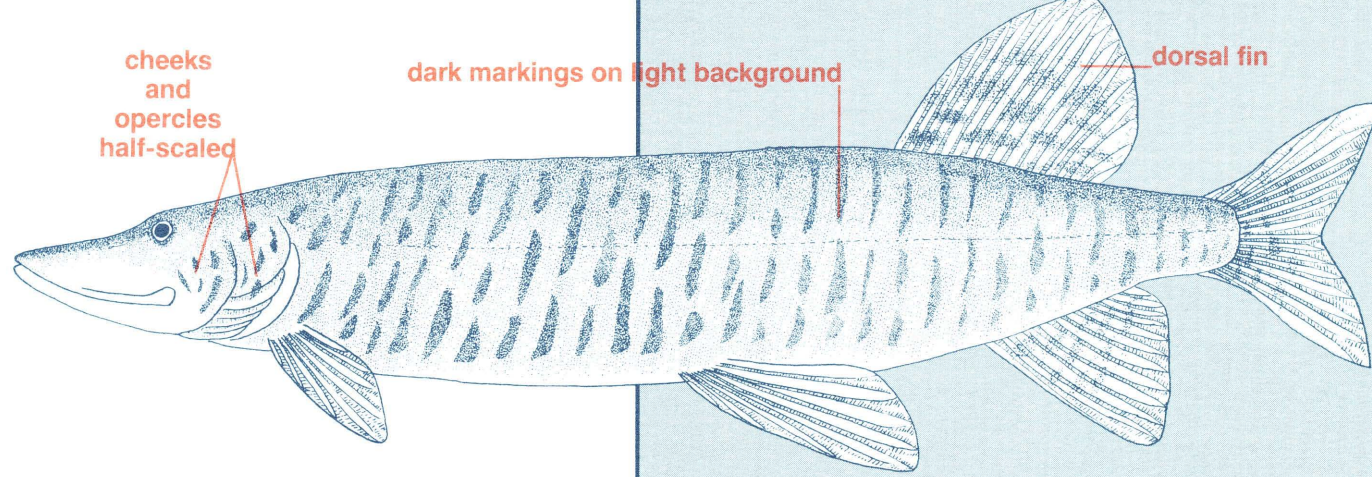
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Muskellunge

Scientific name: *Esox masquinongy*
Common names: Great Lakes muskellunge, muskie (musky), leopard muskellunge, lunge

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Description

The muskellunge is a very large, aggressive and much sought after game fish. Muskies can reach 60 inches in length and weigh up to 70 pounds. However, they usually range from 30 to 46 inches long and weigh 8 to 36 pounds. Some muskies have lived to be 21 years old, but most live between 3 and 15 years.

The muskie has a long cylindrical body that is somewhat flattened vertically. The **dorsal fin** (back fin) is placed far back on the body directly over the **anal fin** (single fin on the underside of the body). The mouth is shaped like a duck bill and contains many fanglike teeth. The top of the muskie's head has no scales, but the upper half of each cheek and **operculum** (gill cover) usually has scales.

The color of the muskellunge varies widely, but it always has dark markings on a light background. The adult muskie's back, head and upper

sides are **iridescent** (rainbow-like) and green-gold to light brown. The belly is white with small brown to gray spots or blotches. The fins are green to red brown with dark spots on them.

The muskie is very similar in shape to the northern pike. Unlike the muskie, however, on the pike each cheek is entirely scaled. Also, the pike has light markings on a dark background.

Life History

Muskies are found in freshwater in eastern North America. They usually live in lakes with **submerged** (underwater) weed beds, although sometimes they are found in clear lakes with no weed cover. They also live in slow-moving medium to large rivers with pools of slow-moving water. The muskie is usually found where the water is less than 15 feet deep and where temperatures range from 33°F to 78°F. The muskie can withstand lower oxygen

levels than most other game fish.

The muskellunge spawns (breeds) in late April to early May when water temperature is between 49°F and 59°F. Spawning occurs in marshes where the water is 15 to 20 inches deep. A male and female pair up and swim over grass-like aquatic plants scattering eggs and sperm randomly. The fertilized eggs drop into the aquatic plants for protection. Females can produce 6,000 to 265,000 eggs, depending on their size. Most females produce around 120,000 eggs.

The eggs hatch in 8 to 14 days at water temperatures between 53°F and 63°F. The young are about ½ inch long and hide among the plants for 10 days. When the **fry** (young fish) has absorbed its yolk, it becomes active and begins to feed.

Young muskies feed on large **zooplankton** (microscopic, free-floating animals) for 1 to 3 weeks. Once the muskies reach 1½ to 2 inches in length, they feed on smaller fishes. As an adult, the muskie eats mostly fishes such as perch, suckers, minnows and sunfishes. However, large muskies will consume ducks, muskrats or any other small animals that happen to swim too near its territory. It has been estimated that muskies consume about 6.5 percent of their own body weight each day. That means a 30-inch, 12-pound muskie would eat about three-quarters of a pound of food daily.

Fishery

There are many lakes and rivers in the Great Lakes region which hold muskellunge.

Wisconsin and Canada have the best known muskie waters. These fish represent millions of dollars of income from **anglers** for stores, hotels and other businesses near muskie waters.

The muskie is a spectacular fighter, twisting and leaping from the water to try to shake out the hook. Sometimes a hooked muskie will head for the bottom and stay still, as though the angler's line is snagged. It is estimated that it takes the average angler 100 hours of challenging fishing to catch a legal-sized muskellunge.

Anglers catch muskies with artificial or natural baits. Artificial baits such as bucktails, spoons or crankbaits are favorites. Natural baits such as perch, suckers and even mice are very effective when fitted to a harness. **Trolling** (pulling a lure slowly behind a boat) is one method used to catch muskies. Most anglers troll with

artificial or natural baits next to aquatic plant beds or near drop-offs.

Casting is another way to fish for muskies. Most anglers cast a surface lure into plant beds or near stumps. Still-fishing is possible, but most muskies don't cruise entire lakes because they have **territories** which they defend against other fish.

Muskies can be caught ice fishing with **tip-ups** or hooks-and-lines. On some lakes it is also legal to spear muskies through the ice. White suckers or large artificial fish lures are used to attract the muskie to the area under a large hole cut in the ice. The angler waits for the muskie to approach the lures and then spears the fish.

There are many special regulations about legal size limits, fishing methods and seasons for muskies. Check fishing regulations, available wherever licenses are sold, before fishing.

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Glossary

Anal fin—the fin located on the underside, between the anus and the tail

Angler—one who fishes

Dorsal fin—a single fin on the back, located near the tail on the muskellunge

Fry—young fish

Iridescent—shifting rainbow-like color

Operculum—gill cover

Submerged—under water

Territory—an area one animal defends against others

Tip-up—ice fishing equipment, used instead of a rod, which "tips up" to display a flag to show that the fish took the bait

Trolling—pulling a lure slowly behind a boat

Zooplankton—microscopic free-floating animals



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