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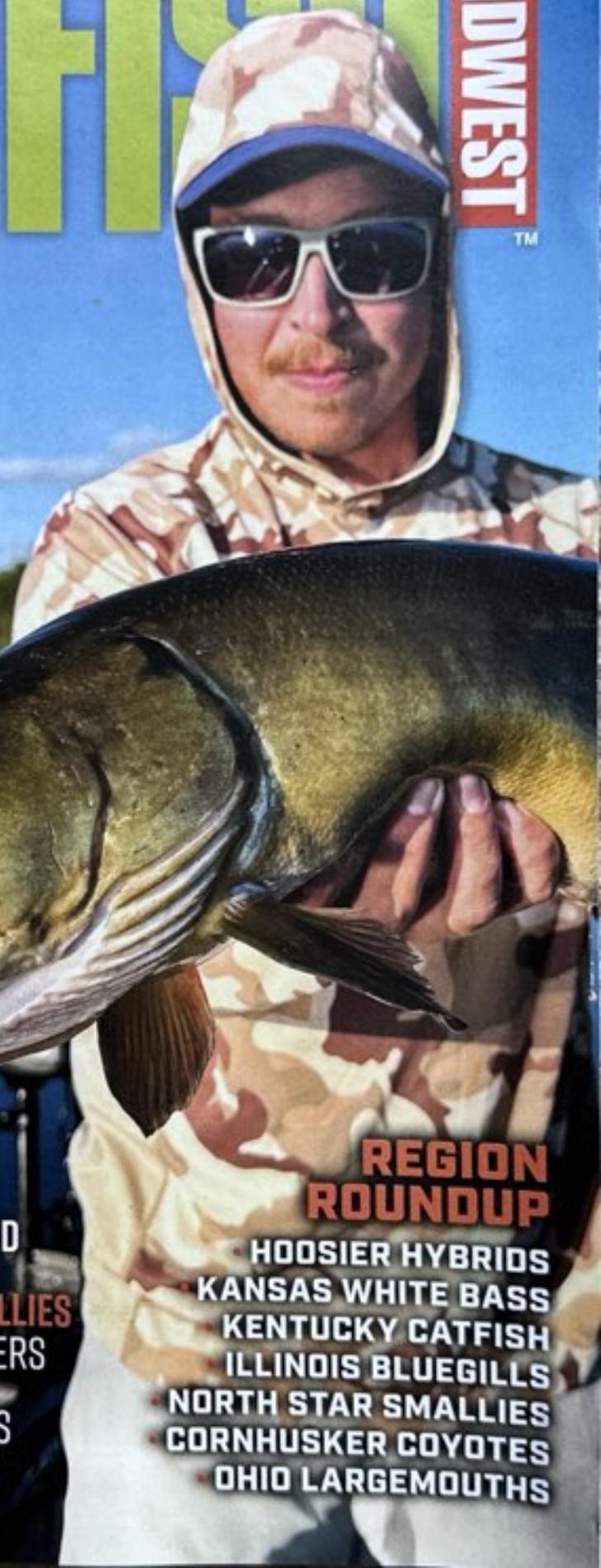
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YOU DON'T NEED TO VENTURE FAR NORTH FOR SOLID MUSKY ACTION. MIDWEST ANGLERS CAN FIND STELLAR FISHING IN THE BUCKEYE STATE, TOO.

By Anietra Hamper



Ohio muskies may run a bit smaller than their northern cousins, but many lakes offer good numbers, and large fish are certainly possible.

The Buckeye State may be an overlooked musky destination compared to places like Wisconsin's Chippewa Flowage and Minnesota's Lake Mille Lacs that are renowned for producing giant, 50-plus-inch fish. However, Ohio is no slouch in the musky department, especially in recent years.

Muskellunge are native to Ohio waters, but wild fish numbers have diminished over the years due to habitat loss, pollution and overfishing. However, a robust

stocking program by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' (ODNR) Division of Wildlife (DOW), known as the Ohio Muskellunge Program, has turned the state into a prime musky destination.

"Anglers from across the United States come to fish for muskellunge in Ohio," says Kevin Page, an ODNR DOW fisheries biologist. "The goal of the Ohio Muskellunge Program is to provide trophy fisheries in reservoirs, with high numbers of fish over 40 inches and some exceeding 50 inches."

What Ohio lacks in fish size compared to other musky waters it makes up for in numbers. To attain this, the DOW stocks advanced fingerlings (10 to 12 inches), which have better survival rates. It also tracks catches through the Ohio Muskie Angler Log, which helps biologists monitor the status of fisheries and adjust stocking programs as needed. According to Page, results show that anglers catch thousands of muskies from Ohio lakes each year with an average size of 33 to 37 inches, though many exceed 40 inches.



With Ohio's nine musky reservoirs all found near interstate corridors, anglers have relatively easy access to productive waters. Muskies are caught year-round in Ohio, though summer is the most productive in terms of angler-reported fish numbers. That said, summer musky fishing does have its challenges. Let's examine some of the Buckeye State's top musky fisheries, productive fishing strategies and a few of the difficulties associated with pursuing muskies during the summer months.

LEESVILLE LAKE

Located about 60 miles south of Akron, Leesville Lake is a premier musky fishery where anglers consistently catch high numbers of fish, including many over 40 inches. Chad Harmon, president of the Ohio Huskie Muskie Club and owner of the Ohio Muskie Guide Service (ohiomuskie.com), has fished Leesville Lake for more than 30 years. In that time, he's noticed some significant changes.

"Back when we started, we did not have the numbers of muskies that we have

now, so it was a lot tougher," Harmon says. "We might be happy if we saw a couple follows in a weekend. Now, we can count on catching four to five muskies over the course of a week."

The 1,011-acre reservoir has a 10-horsepower limit, which reduces boat traffic and makes for quiet fishing. Popular areas to target vary based on the time of year, with the deciding factor being where shad are schooling as the water temperature changes. In spring, Harmon says shad start working shallower, hanging around the first drops, weed edges and even back in the weeds. When things get hotter in summer, he says shad usually school up around the thermocline in deeper water. The pattern then reverses in the fall, with shad moving shallow again.

WEST BRANCH RESERVOIR

West Branch Reservoir (aka Michael J. Kirwan Reservoir) in Ravenna, also produces large numbers of muskies each year. Angler reporting shows an average of 771 muskies are caught annually on this 2,729-acre lake. Many anglers like West Branch Reservoir because both casting and trolling work well.

Bob Basic, president of the Cleveland chapter of Muskies, Inc., highlights West Branch's great structure all along the shoreline. He says baitfish hide in the lake's ample weed beds, which begin growing in late spring, and adds that muskies frequently roam the reservoir's sunken islands and flats.

Angler Chris DePaola, who's been a member of Muskies, Inc. for 45 years, chases muskies in several states, as well as Ontario. However, he says some of his best catches have come from West Branch Reservoir. He thinks the single biggest advantage Ohio waters have over other locations is the forage base, which largely comprises gizzard shad, a plankton feeder that suspends near the surface. Muskies usually aren't far behind.

Anglers who frequent West Branch Reservoir say it consistently holds fish on both ends of the lake throughout the year and in both the shallow- and deep-water basins. Summertime anglers should consider targeting the lake's deeper waters in the morning before pleasure boaters arrive. Once they do, anglers can stick to no-wake zones to avoid them. These waters are a bit



Anglers who prefer casting should use stout baitcasting gear capable of making long casts and retrieving lures quickly.

Beyond the above three lakes, anglers should also strongly consider C.J. Brown Reservoir (known for numbers), Clearfork Reservoir (and downstream in Pleasant Hill Lake) and Alum Creek Lake (and the spillway below the Alum Creek Lake dam). Other options include Salt Fork Lake, Piedmont Lake, Lake Milton and Pymatuning Lake.

MOVES FOR MUSKIES

While DOW reporting shows anglers catch more muskies in summer than in spring, fall or winter, fishing isn't always easy or even recommended. As water temperatures warm, fish increasingly endure more stress. Anglers must monitor water temps, minimize handling and avoid placing undue stress on muskies. In fact, most serious musky anglers won't even fish when the water approaches 80 degrees, as studies have shown repeatedly that unhealthy releases and delayed mortality become more common. When water temps are safer, anglers still must find muskies, which often follow baitfish out into open water.

DePaola says trolling tactics can prove more consistent when this happens. There are two basic approaches to trolling deeper water in summer: Anglers

shallower, but fish still cruise them, especially near areas that drop off into the basin or a creek channel.

CAESAR CREEK LAKE

Caesar Creek Lake, roughly 30 miles from Dayton, is a challenging fishery known for larger muskies. The 2,806-acre lake has a higher proportion of catches over 40 inches but fewer fish overall compared to other Ohio musky lakes.

Bob Sisson, president of the Central Ohio chapter of Muskies, Inc., calls Caesar Creek the "toughest and most intriguing lake in Ohio" due to its much deeper water and steep drop-offs. However, he says boating a big Caesar Creek musky is worth it.

Sisson suggests anglers focus on creek-fed bays with standing timber where many larger fish hide. Casting to shoreline timber or trolling along points and drop-offs can also net larger muskies. He says he and his cohorts have landed muskies in the mid-40-inch range the past few seasons, but he's confident bigger fish are present, which keeps him coming back.



Trolling crankbaits along weed edges or just above the thermocline works well in summer. Adjust speed based on the mood of fish.