

BURNING *Muskellunge*



photo-Braden Eisenhower

by Braden Eisenhower

Muskellunge are fickle creatures. While its appearance and status atop the freshwater food chain bears a ferocious nature, Muskellunge are rarely aggressive. Seldom does an angler's presence on the water overlap a period of positive fish activity. As such, it is often necessary to entice neutral or inactive Muskellunge.

"Burning," retrieving a lure at blistering speeds, is a great tactic for catching these fish.

A Muskellunge's response is fight or flight, and it often favors the former. Even a dormant fish may find it difficult to resist a lure zipping over its head.

Consider burning anytime you find Muskellunge residing in shallow water. It is often best during the spring after the spawn and again in late summer. In either scenario, the water is warm, between 60- and 80-degrees F.

Lure options

Most straight-running lures



Jerkbait



Spinnerbait

perform well with the burning technique. This opens the possibilities to many lure styles such as crankbaits, spinnerbaits and inline spinners (a.k.a. bucktails). Prop-style topwater lures and soft plastic swimbaits can be implemented as well.

It is also a good idea to downsize your offering. Smaller lures create minimal water resistance, which means faster retrieves and less angler fatigue. Also, smaller lures better represent seasonal forage. Lastly, Muskellunge choose smaller quarry when inactive.

photos-Rob Dietrick, Bass Pro Shops

How it is done

What does it take to burn Muskellunge lures? Reel like mad. It is a simple concept. However, there are a few refinements.

First, point the rod tip at the lure during the retrieve. This subtle trick places the lure's resistance on the reel. Otherwise, you would fight the rod buckling under the lure's strain.

Next, aim the rod tip down, toward the water. This aids in depth control, which is a major consideration when burning. As a rule, the faster the retrieve, the higher a lure runs in the water column. A low rod tip position prevents the bait from blowing out of the water, ruining the retrieve.

With that in mind, it is wise to use the surface to your advantage. Predatory fish will utilize the surface as a feeding edge to corral prey. Reel the lure just below the surface, so it creates a ripple on the surface. This is known as a "bulging." Bulging can also be done at slow speeds by holding the rod in the 10 o'clock position to keep the lure just below the surface.

For the most part, I maintain a consistent tempo throughout the retrieve.

Converting follows

Muskellunge are known to track a lure to the boat. It is an adrenaline rush when you spot the long silhouette racing behind your lure. But, your heart sinks when you cannot get it to bite. The glaring downside of rapid, straight-running retrieves is it encourages these follows.

The most effective way of triggering following fish is by adding a burst of speed. This tactic may sound obscure given that you are already reeling at an above average pace. However, that abrupt speed change imitates a fleeing forage and ignites the spark to feed.

The "figure-eight" maneuver is also critical when burning. This maneuver is used to nab followers at boatside. You must be calm and collected. Furthermore, you must move the lure through the figure-eight pattern, so it remains in contact with the lure. Go too tight, and the fish will lose the bait and may become disinterested. The first turn is most important, because it is the first time the lure changes direction—anticipate the trailing Muskellunge to strike then.



Paul Jennings, Aliquippa, caught this Muskellunge while fishing with a friend on Lake Arthur, Butler County.

photo-courtesy of Paul Jennings

Equipment

Specialized equipment improves one's ability to burn Muskellunge lures. High-speed reels—those recovering 30- to 40-inches of line with each revolution of the reel handle—make a world of difference.

High-speed reels facilitate staggering speeds while keeping angler fatigue to a minimum. Low- and mid-speed counterparts require the angler to exert greater effort to achieve similar lure speeds. With low- and mid-speed reels, it is difficult to maintain quick retrieves for an extended period. High-speed models make burning comfortable and feasible.

If the reel does not come with one, consider upgrading to a power handle. Power handles are longer than traditional reel handles to allow a mechanical advantage. In short, this reduces the effort needed to reel high-resistance lures. A reel's handle length will not directly impact its speed. However, it will certainly make the experience more tolerable, keeping you in the game.

Give burning a try when targeting lethargic Muskellunge in shallow water. Trust me, you cannot move your lure faster than a willing Muskellunge is able to travel. ☐



photo-Rob Derrick, Bass Pro Shops

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