

Muskies

I thought about the effect of big fish on impressionable little people recently when a boy and his father watched me catch a muskellunge up at Eagle Lake in Ontario. It was the day of the full moon and as I ran the boat down Vermilion Bay at dawn the moon's bone white disk was setting over the lake's West Arm beyond the starboard bow and the rising sun was beginning to light up the forest behind my left shoulder. The world responds to these celestial events in countless ways, with joyous birdsong or with fierce predation, from the smallest creatures to the largest, and I was out early to be part of it all. Without a plan, following the cues of the weather and the light as usual, I knew I must find a good place to fish immediately, since the lunar cycle was, in those moments, at its monthly climax.

Fortunately, good places to fish are everywhere on that spectacular lake and a particularly famous one was right in front of me. In 1940 Edward Walden was fishing out of a new musky camp on Eagle Lake called Andy Myers Lodge. Just the year before, Andy himself had cut the winding road in through the forest and ancient boulders of the Canadian Shield to a high, rocky point beside what would become Myers Bay. His camp fronted on the endless islands, reefs and weedbeds of an untouched fishing paradise. It is the same camp and the same lake I fish today. Walden had traveled a little over 2 miles out of camp to a spot where a series of shallow, weedy bays studded with big, underwater rocks culminates in a long reef running out to form a major navigational corner in the lake. It is a critical stopping place for big fish and Walden caught a 61.9 pound musky that set the Ontario record and gave the name Musky Point to the whole complex structure.

This historic spot is where I stopped at moonset, shutting off the engine and controlling the 18-foot boat through a foot-pedal-operated electric trolling motor. I worked the boat along the reef casting a homemade bucktail lure with two big, smoke colored blades and a black mylar skirt. The blades spin and vibrate through the water, flaring out the trailing skirt and undulating it in their wake to make something that looks and sounds indisputably alive in the water, even if it is awfully hard to say what living thing it resembles.

A great pleasure of fishing alone is the silence. I could hear the water drip from the bucktail when I lifted it above the water and then the soft purr of the casting reel and the splash when the lure landed amidst the sunken rocks of

the reef. A nearby loon was looking at me, occasionally talking to other loons with its lonely cry that simply sounds like the north woods.

Alone I can also really accentuate the various fetishes that distinguish musky fishing from any other kind of angling. Muskies are the top predators in these lakes and rivers. Fearing nothing, they will readily follow a lure right to the side of the boat, just to see what it is, or terrify it, out of pure cussedness or curiosity. What the fisherman sees is a huge head and body the precise color of the weeds, either immediately behind the lure or, perhaps, deep behind it and arriving several seconds later, or emerging suddenly from under the boat. These following fish can sometimes be induced to strike by changing the direction and speed of the lure to make it seem as if the prey is escaping. But every musky fisherman has had the disheartening experience of lifting the bait from seemingly empty water only to see, a second later, an enormous fish swoop in looking aggressively for the lure that had been there a moment before. Returning the lure to the water essentially never works. The fish pause for an instant to let you see what you missed before disappearing.

This behavior is distinctive of muskies. No other fish does it, including the great northern pike, the smaller, more prolific and durable fish who evolved from muskies and are still so closely related that the two interbreed to produce the sterile and beautiful tiger musky hybrid. Usually, when fish are so close to the boat, they are on the line, defeated and facing death with impenetrable resignation, and that is why this trait of muskies is so compelling. Really, there is no other case where we witness a top predator freely chasing its prey at such close range.

French philosopher Blaise Pascal observed 350 years ago that man would do well to wager that God exists and live accordingly, since, if he is correct, he will win everything, and, if he is wrong, he will lose nothing. It is a little like that with betting that a musky is following each cast. Experienced musky fishermen complete every cast by drawing the lure in a great oval or figure eight at the boatside, watching for a late arriving fish before taking the lure out of the water. If a fish is there, the angler tries mightily to provoke it into striking through a spontaneous, creative dance performed in response to the fish's mood and posture. Sometimes, a suicide fish will charge in and eat the lure halfway through the first oval, in what you might call the 2 o'clock position; but I have caught muskies that followed the bait for eight full turns before striking, and have had still others chase lures for many more knee-buckling turns than that before gradually losing interest and drifting down out of sight. I

have gone head first into the water, arms and rod fully extended downward to keep the bait moving in front of fish heading back to the abyss and have even hooked them that way, though making the lure stick in a mouth of bones and teeth with that kind of hookset is another matter.

On Eagle Lake perhaps eight out of ten muskies caught follow the bait this way rather than simply striking it out on the cast like any normal fish. They only feed during small windows of time, like the moonset. Largely, the forces that move them are beyond our ken. If they really wanted to eat, with their explosive, ambush-predator speed, it would be nearly impossible to keep the bait away from them. So, muskies lollygagging behind the lure clearly need convincing. On some days dozens of fish will follow the bait without a single one actually biting it, and thus coaxing an indifferent musky into striking is an art whose great practitioners are justly celebrated throughout the small fraternity of musky fishermen. And it is these boatside maneuvers, this weird dance, that I dance freely, if not well, alone in the boat without onlookers, relieved from the inevitable incantation of “Oh, keep it going, it’s a big one... she’s still there...she’s gonna eat...no, no, she’s leaving...where did she go?” When a big fish suddenly appears in the water beside my boat all I hear is the wind, the ducks, the waves, and my heart beating in my mouth.

So, I fished in silence as the moon set. The underwater reef at Musky Point ends in a big rock that emerges above the water and wears two improvised hazard markers in the form of milk jugs on stumps of rebar. This adornment is fortunate, since boats use it as the inside corner of a travel route. A friend who is an expert fisherman recently destroyed the lower unit of his engine when he hit a little-known reef in an eerily treacherous part of Eagle Lake. Going back to chart the area as a service to himself and others, he found reefs he named “day-ender,” “week-ender,” and “life-ender.” The rock at Musky Point would surely be a life-ender if you were unlucky enough to hit it at cruising speed in an early morning fog, or a white squall, or while running for home in the dark after fishing the late evening somewhere far from camp.

In a boat set up to fish from the port side, like mine, one generally fishes left to right out from the shore along the northern side of the reef, around this prominent rock, and then back toward shore on the southern side of the reef. This may not apply on days when the wind is roaring, dictating through its own raw power where it is possible to fish and how each spot must be approached. Controlling the boat while fishing in rough weather is another of the minor

dark arts of musky fishing; but this calm morning required little aside from keeping my path a cast length from the edge of the reef.

The muskies can be anywhere along the circuit around Musky Point, though one really wants to pay attention at the outer end near the rock, so I threw the bucktail out repeatedly to weave over the rocks and cover the drop-off into deeper water. As each retrieve neared the boat I shifted my weight to the left and began a large, counterclockwise oval with the tip of the long rod by drawing it to the left and down into the water while gradually accelerating the lure. These actions would make any following fish change speed and direction, becoming more aggressive without even realizing it. As the lure came up within two feet of the rod tip, I stopped reeling and continued the oval by sweeping the rod and lure left to right across the gunnel of the boat in front of me and several feet underwater, searching hard for any sign of a fish. Then, extended to the right, I made a graceful turn outward and upward to bring the lure into the outside of the turn, away from the boat and moving rapidly right to left now just beneath the surface. That first outward turn is the likeliest place for an excited fish to strike, and it is perfect because the angler can clearly see the action and set the hook by driving the rod back and down toward the fish's tail. Extended again to the left, I started the turn once more, searched for a fish, lifted the lure and threw the next cast up on the reef, adjusting the speed and direction of the trolling motor with my foot during the cast.

Muskies are romantically and hyperbolically called the *fish of 10,000 casts*. It isn't always that hard. I've caught them on successive casts and, on another occasion, two within five casts and had a third nearly eat the bait in between. I've boated two trophy-size muskies and raised a third in the first half hour of a very special day, but that third fish was the last I saw until dark. Even for a skilled fisherman on prime water, they can easily be the fish of 500 or even 1,000 casts. For consolation, one has only the sun and moon, fast moving boreal storms, the immensity and maze-like intimacy of the lake, eagles taloning walleyes to their nestlings high in a snag, bear cubs swimming the deep far from shore, bawling after the sow who was weaning them, and the howling of a wolf from a swamp in the forest.

You would think it would be easy to see a monstrous fish swimming at your feet, except the early morning light was creating a perfect silvery sheen on the water and there was visibility beneath the surface only at very limited angles. The sun can do this early and late in the day, algae blooms can coat the surface in opaque green, and storms can throw a blue glare across the surface

that is impenetrable. One evening, in a pounding rainstorm, a huge fish breached like a whale inches from the boat just to show me and a companion that it was there, because we surely couldn't see it in the deluge. Musky lakes are often stained the color of tea by cedar swamps, and minerals create a fine flock that further reduces visibility. We complain, though the hardest thing of all is fishing in clear water for creatures that may not show themselves for long hours and hundreds of casts. Musky lures are often heavy to throw and many of them, like the bucktail I was fishing, reel in very hard. It becomes disheartening to throw out a cast in clear water and see with certainty from the very beginning that the bait is shimmying to no audience at all in the blank water. Better to have lousy visibility and imagine a fish behind every cast.

And yet, we continue because every so often we throw the right cast in front of the right fish. The loon, who had been floating nearby, suddenly cried out a warning that the eagle was flying lower and nearer than before. Disappearing underwater, the loon finally surfaced much farther out in the lake and flew off. A cormorant I had seen on an islet drying its outspread wings in the first sunlight, like some dinosaur experiment in bird design, took to the air, and the gulls and terns that surrounded it on the rock were now hovering excitedly over a school of baitfish in the water. The tidal pull of the moon and sun was stirring the blood of the lake and all its creatures.

I felt it as I circled the end of the reef, throwing each cast now with deep intent, expecting a fish. Setting up the boat to follow the line of the bar off toward Sunset Island in the distance changed the angle of the light and I was heartened to see clearly into the water again, until suddenly, on a cast no more auspicious than any of the others, there was a feeling of weight in the water behind the bait, a presence, a green ghost closing fast over the last few feet to the boat. Electricity flared in my brain, but the endless practice allowed me to gracefully bring the lure into the first oval with the accelerating fish. Without my doing anything, her mouth opened and her gills flared to engulf the lure in the perfect part of the outward turn, and the fish began ferociously shaking her head. Big muskies on the line are brutally powerful and violent, but only for a short time. These aren't open water, pelagic endurance athletes, but fish that live by stealth and rare, deadly explosions of speed. It is a good thing that it doesn't take long to land one. Their bony, toothy mouths resist hooks and they roll up in the line, cutting it on sharp gill plates, leap up in the angler's face three feet from the boat shaking their huge heads, dive into sunken logs and weedbeds, dart under the boat breaking rods, or simply swim straight toward the boat, mouth open, pulling side to side until they break free.

Other fish are challenging to land. Giant trevally and bonefish on the hook run off at ocean speedster pace, far beyond what a musky or any freshwater fish can manage. The line audibly sizzles through the water until it snags on a coral head, parting the leader. However powerful and fast the fish are, though, the breakoff seems to be the result of the simple impulse to flee. What distinguishes the fight of a musky is the apparent *intent* of the fish to shed the hooks and the variety of ways they accomplish that end. In this, perhaps, they are a little like marlin who sometimes make actual eye contact with the fisherman during a leap, seeming in that moment to comprehend both their predicament and the responsible party. Immediately after, I have had them tail-walk across great distances directly at me in the back of the boat, crashing into the water close enough to cover me in spray. I do not believe that all the instances when anglers are gored by leaping marlin are accidents. In any case, mentioning muskies in the august company of giant trevally and marlin gives a sense of the overall thrill of bringing a big one to the boat.

The fisherman wielding the net is often as important as the person holding the rod in landing a musky that has nearly shaken the hooks. At Musky Point I hadn't a net man in the boat with me. Reaching back and grabbing the big, awkward net with one hand and then trying, with just one hand on the rod and one on the net, to slide a big fish into that fearful mesh where it does not want to go is one of the chanciest parts of the whole solo-fishing endeavor. I did not accomplish the job with much style this time, but it worked. There was an angry fish in the net beside the boat. I could breathe again.

Over the years, actually landing the fish has become less and less important, though even as a child the primordial bass this tale is supposed to be about changed my life without ever being caught. I really don't know why I care at all, since I am going to let the fish go as gently as possible anyway. I think I am recording these stories to see if I can make sense of some paradoxes that I would never tolerate in any other part of my life. Why, for example, when I love the fish as truly as anything I know, would I ardently practice something that a friend memorably described as, "playing with a wounded animal on a string?" It is a mystery, a mystery that deepens when you consider that real fishermen are born that way—it seems to me innate and largely choice-less—and the more they love the water and the fish, the more expert they are. I used to console myself with a glib answer to the effect that, if we were a tribe of hunter gatherers, then I would be the one who went down to the river to catch dinner. It certainly seems that primal. But that amounts to a mere shrug of an answer

and implies that fishing ought to be about killing and eating the fish; yet when I hold a musky in my hands in the water and feel the vigor come back into it before it swims away, I know that killing it would not have made the whole act somehow right.

I have a recurring dream of a truly gigantic, godlike musky, the spirit of the lake, really, that suddenly appears and eats my tiny lure. It is far beyond the capacity of my gear or my body or boat to catch it and yet it suffers me to bring it close where it will impart deep, old secrets to me. I am aware in the dream that this will end my fishing life and likely my mortal life as well, so I always awake before learning what the fish will say. In our encounters thus far I have had the sense that I am accepted as part of the system, if one who still doesn't understand his role. Perhaps recounting these stories will help me intuit more of this spirit's wisdom without the luck of a terrifying audience someday out on a lonely part of the lake.

Releasing a big musky is thrilling. Sometimes they crash right out of your hands and soak you with a thrashing of their tail. Other times they lie quiescent in the water, the thick muscle gradually quickening over seconds or minutes until they are ready to swim off. One big fish seemed to enjoy having me lightly support her in the water and stayed there in my hands long after she was fully recovered. Despite having just unhooked her, I imagined it was a rare moment of gentleness in a rough and tumble life.

Fishermen, even experienced guides, sometimes stand up after this transforming experience and run their boats right up on reefs where they could normally map every rock. I did something similar after releasing the Musky Point fish. Intending to motor over to a nearby rock bar while the moon was still stirring the lake, I got disoriented and found myself about two islands away from where I meant to be. By the time I came to my senses, the magic was clearly out of the air. The birds again looked like decoys sitting motionless on the rocks and a hot, still, cloudless day was unfolding. For anybody who missed dawn on the lake, the fishing was going to be difficult. Each cast would have to be handled with extra attention because chances at fish were going to be rare and it wouldn't do to be sleeping when one came. All day, I saw just three more fish and they were slow and far behind the bait and could not be interested at the boat, dance with the lure as I would. I went back to camp early to eat my dinner, hoping that conditions would change as the evening deepened.

Heading out after a quick meal, I was delighted to realize that the sun was setting in the west and the rising moon beginning to light up a patch of trees on the eastern skyline, the exact reverse of the morning's alignment. Long summer days at northern latitudes can encompass much of the moon's full circuit. This time, I had in mind a small weedbed that extended from the south end of an island three miles down the lake. Big fish had been using the spot and I had an instinct that made me turn the tiller in that direction. I approached from the western side of the island so the weeds would be off my casting side and had made just two throws when another boat arrived from the eastern edge, obviously intending to fish the weeds as well. It was a man and his young son. When they saw me, they politely pulled off, but started to fish further offshore, using very light gear for perch.

The long wavelength light of the setting sun lit orange lichen on the rocks at the water's edge, made the old growth pines warm against the sky, and picked out the tops of the cabbage weed ruffling the surface of the lake. The fishermen in the other boat were quiet and peaceful, mostly just sitting and holding their rods while slowly trolling, and I'm abashed to admit that my fishing was in sharp contrast to that meditative approach. Tobacco weeds readily snag any lure except explicitly weedless varieties. I again had on an easy-snagging bucktail and was reeling it like a madman to keep it up out of the bodies of the weeds and steering it between the plants with sweeps of my rod. Speed had been provoking the muskies, so my turns at the ends of the casts were also fast and athletic. Occasionally I noticed that the father and son in the other boat were watching me, probably wondering what on earth I was doing and why I was scaring away all the fish. Since the father told me later, I know they were watching me when a nice musky emerged from the weeds, ate my bait at the boatside, and immediately leaped and began thrashing on the surface in a fight that seemed wildly violent against the backdrop of the peaceful evening. Even in the net, the fish heaved water into my face, further emphasizing its size and power.

When I finally stood to get my camera after unhooking the musky I saw that the pair in the other boat had abandoned all pretense of disinterest and were looking on from just a few yards away. The little boy's eyes were absolutely enormous. "Is that a musky?" the father asked. I told him it was. "Have you ever caught one before?" His question and the tone of his voice conveyed the shocking impact the fish was having on them. I asked the little boy, who never spoke during the encounter, if he would please take a picture of me with the fish and he nodded his head; but the dad was closer and took the camera I

handed across the water. The photo he shot indelibly conjures up the moment for me.



Moonrise, sunset fish

Father and son watched intently as I returned the fish to the water, where I held it until it was ready swim off with a few stately strokes of its tail across the surface and then a banked dive down between the weeds. Returning the camera, the man thanked me for letting them have a close look at the fish while I thanked him for taking the photo, but I was concentrating on the boy. He seemed deep in thought and as they motored off I wondered what effect the encounter would have on him. He obviously didn't know that there were fish like that in the lake and he might be alarmed, might even give up fishing. Or, if he was a little boy like I had been, he might be laying plans for how he was going to catch an even bigger one.