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Muskie anglers target Green Bay

By Jim Lee
Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers

Wisconsin is on the verge of regaining its status as a "big muskie" fishery.

The resurgence comes none too soon for many Badger State anglers. Just how far have angling fortunes sunk in this Midwestern enclave that claims the muskie as its state fish while picturesque Boulder Junction in Vilas County proudly bills itself as the nation's "Muskie Capital?"

Consider in 2005, Muskies Inc., the world's largest muskie fishing organization, received reports from its members of 117 muskies caught measuring between 52 and 57 inches, which is considered a trophy by anyone's muskie standards.

Of that total, 59 of the fish were taken from Ontario, Canada, waters and 50 from Minnesota lakes. Wisconsin came in third with just three muskies registered in that size range, putting our much-touted muskie state just ahead of Pennsylvania and Ohio (two each) and Michigan (one).

The poor showing from local waters comes despite the fact there

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are more members of Muskies Inc. from Wisconsin than any other state or province.

It's acknowledged by our state's muskie anglers that — while there still are plenty of action fish in the prime lake country of northern Wisconsin — the best locations for really big muskies are in Canada and Minnesota.

But the tide is turning back in Wisconsin's favor, slowly in some cases, more rapidly in others.

Unlikely as it seemed 56 years ago when Louis Spray boated his recognized world record muskie of 69 pounds, 11 ounces from the Chippewa Flowage in northern Wisconsin's Sawyer County, the state's best chance for producing a muskie topping that mark comes from the waters of central Wisconsin.

The obvious choice is Green Bay, where two anglers — one reportedly fishing for walleye and the other for smallmouth bass — hooked, landed and released muskies of potential world-record proportions in spring 2005, prior to the opening of the state's official muskie fishing season.

Though the fish never were weighed officially, their reported length and girth hinted at record-book dimensions, which is all the more remarkable because 25 years ago there wasn't a muskie to be found in the bay.

The muskie population remains small but is steadily building, the result of a decision by the Department of Natural Resources to restore the so-called Great Lakes (or spotted) muskie strain into lower Green Bay. Fish stocked more than 15 years ago just are beginning to reach their maximum size potential.

The two large fish caught in 2005 received significant media attention and sparked an explosion of interest in muskie fishing circles, while providing a tantalizing hint at what may lie ahead.

The huge bay is on the precipice of becoming a popular muskie fishing destination, a beacon that will attract trophy anglers from throughout the United States, to say nothing of the fever it is beginning to generate within Wisconsin's muskie fraternity.

"We are drawing international attention," said Kevin Kapuscinski, DNR fisheries biologist at Green Bay. "There is definitely more focus on the muskie fishery here ... more interest. The big fish have definitely fueled that."



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The Green Bay muskie population remains small but is steadily building. Fish stocked more than 15 years ago are beginning to reach their maximum size potential. Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers

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Muskie anglers, including Kapuscinski, were hoping to experience a taste of trophy muskie action last fall on the Fox River below the De Pere dam but a hot bite failed to develop, largely the result of a gizzard shad explosion on the bay that gave muskie and walleye an abundant supply of forage.

"The muskies were there," said Kapuscinski, whose crews net and monitor the fall muskie migration into the river. "They just weren't biting."

The shad situation "could make for a tough bite" again this summer, he said.

The DNR has imposed a 50-inch minimum size on muskies taken from the bay and Fox River and expects to extend that size restriction to the Lake Winnebago system where Great Lakes muskies also have been introduced.

While Wisconsin anglers typically favor casting for muskies, the vast waters of Green Bay invite trolling, a tactic that likely is to grow in popularity.

In shallow, weedy areas around Sturgeon Bay and Menominee, as well as in some river and reef areas, casting might prove more effective.

Muskie fishing season on the bay and river doesn't open until May 27 this year. The huge fish caught a year ago preceded the opening date, a situation that might tempt some anglers to seek out muskies under the guise of fishing for bass or walleyes.

Kapuscinski advises against any attempts to fish muskie before the season opener.

"If wardens can make a case that a person is targeting muskie before the season opens, they will make it," he said.

You can bet, however, that more than one angler who traditionally spent the muskie fishing opener on a northern lake will be tempted to launch on Green Bay this year.

That temptation only will continue to grow.

Jim Lee is an outdoor writer for Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers. He may be reached by e-mail at jlee77@charter.net

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