



Illini Muskies Alliance

Illinois 50" Muskies

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According to various sources, a total of 41 muskies that measured 50" or larger have been verified as being caught out of 11 Illinois lakes.

Those lakes are: Lake Shelbyville-9, Lake Storey-6, Evergreen Lake-5, Lake McMaster-5, Kinkaid Lake-5, Fox Chain O' Lakes-4, Otter Lake-3, Carlton Lake-1, Lake Carroll-1, Shabbona Lake-1 and Windsor Lake-1.

Let's take a closer look at the top lakes on the list to see what each one has to offer. Based on the information available, the top lakes for 50" muskies in Illinois are:

Lake Shelbyville

Shelbyville has produced nine of the fish on the 50" or larger list (the most of any lake) and the past couple of state records, including the 50.75", 38#, 8 ounce fish caught on April 20, 2002 by Matt Carmean of Mattoon below the dam. (shown at right) This muskie fishery is still coming into its own.

In the mid 1970s, when the Chicagoland Muskie Hunters Chapter of Muskies, Inc.'s, Project Illini was just beginning to raise funds to re-introduce muskies into Illinois public waters, Shelbyville was the target lake. Due to its mid-state location, this flowage offered a long growing season, ample size (11,100 acres) abundant shad forage and varied structural elements to produce muskies of true trophy proportions. However, its size was a major impediment to a small volunteer effort to raise donated monies to buy expensive fingerlings.

Originally stocked in 1978, Shelbyville has had inconsistent stockings over the years, dependent on available fingerlings. Stockings have included fish from Iowa, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and fingerlings up to 19" long. Recent stockings have been more consistent at about ½ fish per acre, per year. Despite the lack of a barrier net, Shelbyville's 48" size limit helps to maintain the trophy fishery. This lake will most likely be the most consistent trophy producer for years to come.



In 2007 however, an extended spawning season and/or other undetermined reasons, caused an extensive muskie kill (mostly below the spillway), resulting in the loss of hundreds of muskie. Spillway fishing has been very slow the past couple of years. Only time will tell how extensive the die-off was. However, in 2009 a 48.5" muskie was captured below the dam.

Lake Storey

Lake Storey has a long history of producing both tiger and natural trophies. Originally a tiger muskie lake, Storey first received fingerlings in 1976. Although a small number of naturals were stocked in 1988, Storey was not converted to a natural only lake until 1993. From 1993 to 1995 and again in 2006, Storey received Leech lake strain fish donated by the Mississippi Valley Chapter of Muskies Inc. Additionally, Storey has received some Iowa and Missouri fish. Despite heavy annual fishing pressure, estimated at 400-800 hours/acre for all species, and a minimum size limit of only 42", this 133 acre lake has the potential to produce 30+# muskies.

The management goal for muskie at Lake Storey is to maintain a population density of 1 to 3 fish/acre that will produce a trophy fishery of healthy fish. Illinois Department of Natural Resources spring trap net data for 2009 at Lake Storey revealed a favorable muskie catch rate of 1.53 fish/net night (down from the historic high in 2006 of 4.78 fish/net night). Water conditions at time of survey are speculated to have had a negative effect on the current catch rate. Data from the pit tagged muskie that were recaptured in the April Illinois Department of Natural Resources survey revealed that the average female growth was 2.59" and 1.79 #/year. The average male growth was 1.13" and 0.94 #/year. Muskie anglers in 2010 can expect a satisfactory rate of catch with individual fish up to the 50" trophy size.

To date, Storey has placed six muskie on the list. A trolling motor only regulation helps reduce pressure on this small body of water. Properly managed, Storey should continue to produce occasional trophies.

Evergreen Lake

Evergreen has produced five fish on our list between 1999 and 2005. First stocked with muskie in 1990, this 886 acre impoundment has received fingerlings regularly from various sources. Fingerlings have either been purchased or traded from Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin stocks. In 1998 and 1999 the South Side Muskie Hawks chapter of Muskies, Inc. donated Leech Lake and Wisconsin strain fingerlings up to 20" in length, in an effort to jump start the fishery.

The lake has an excellent fishery and contains the best saugeye fishery in the state. Growing large muskies at Evergreen is not a problem. The lake has ample structure and a shad forage base. Keeping muskies in the lake does present a huge challenge. The local community that maintains Evergreen as a water supply has refused to consider installation of a barrier net to prevent escapement during periods of high water. The McLean Co. Parks and Recreation Department has worked with the former Central Muskie Hunters Chapter of Muskies, Inc. and other local anglers to erect a barrier below the spillway to lower the escapement potential of muskie downstream. When needed, muskie are collected below the lake and returned to the lake. In 2007, approximately 225 muskies were collected and put back in the lake. In an average year, there may be 30 to 40 muskies returned to the lake. However, heavy fall rains completely destroyed the barrier in 2009. Plans are underway to install a new barrier. With the installation of the new barrier net below the spillway and with continuing efforts from the

dedicated groups mentioned, Evergreen may be able to produce trophy specimen on a more consistent basis.

In 2008, approximately 92% of the muskies captured in the Illinois Department of Natural Resources survey were longer than 30", 24% were longer than 38" and 5% were longer than 42". The spring 2008 survey produced a 52", 41# muskie. Muskie exhibited ideal weights at all sizes. Muskie have now been in Evergreen Lake long enough to allow them to reach a large size. The muskie population in this lake is developing nicely and starting to show its true potential. Muskies were collected over the current state record during Illinois Department of Natural Resources spring netting surveys in 2006, 2007 and 2008. A 45" muskie was the largest angler captured fish reported from Evergreen in the Illinois Voluntary Muskie Creel Survey in 2009.

McMaster Lake

McMaster (formerly Snakeden Hollow Lake) has produced five fish on the 50" and larger list, including the largest ever reported in Illinois (Todd Clanin's 54", pictured at right). Although only stocked since 1991, this 160 acre lake has benefitted from early stockings of Leech lake strain fingerlings up to 16 inches in size, provided by the Mississippi Valley Chapter of Muskies, Inc. McMaster also contains stocks of Missouri and Iowa naturals.

Varied structural elements, a 100 percent natural shoreline and depths of over 60', makes for a unique fishery, for such a small body of water. Although the minimum size limit is only 42", most anglers fishing specifically for muskie, release their catches to grow larger. While not sufficiently sized to produce numbers of trophy fish, McMaster, if properly managed, can and will produce occasional trophies.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources spring trap net data for 2009 revealed a low catch rate of 0.50 muskie/net night (down from a 2008 catch rate of 1.87 muskie/net night and a historic high in 2006 of 2.96 muskie/net night). Water conditions at time of survey are speculated to have had a negative effect on the catch rate. Data from pit tagged muskie that were recaptured in the Illinois Department of Natural Resources April survey revealed that the average female growth was 1.55" and 1.31 #/year. The average male growth was 1.13" and 0.63 #/year. The management goal for muskie at this lake is to maintain a population density of 1 to 3 fish/acre that will produce a trophy fishery of healthy fish.



Lake Kinkaid

This lake was built in 1972 and first stocked with muskie in 1985. Muskie habitat at Kinkaid is abundant with high water clarity, good depth, and 82 shoreline miles of necks, bays, and points. Weed beds can be found in certain shoreline areas. Besides shad, large numbers of spotted suckers are available and preferred as forage. Growth rates and conditions are exceptional. A spillway barrier net was installed in the fall of 1998 at this 2,750 acre lake. No muskies have been observed below the spillway since the net was installed. In fact, the average muskie collected at Kinkaid has increased in size the last few years.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources spring 2009 trap netting resulted in the collection of 230 muskies with the largest fish measuring 47" and the heaviest fish weighing 28#. The 2009 Illinois Department of Natural Resources spring trap netting was the best on record in terms of catch per unit effort. There are a "tremendous number of muskie in the 30-40" range" at Kinkaid. This lake produced a 50.5" and the largest muskie in the Illini Muskies Alliance contest (51") in 2009. To date, the largest muskie reported from Kinkaid in 2010 was 49 7/8".

Fox Chain O' Lakes

One of the few Illinois bodies of water that once had native populations of muskies; the Fox Chain of Lakes has developed into an outstanding muskie fishery, thanks in part to the donation of larger than normal size Leech Lake strain fingerlings provided by the South of the Border chapter of Muskies, Inc. Since 1995, proportions of muskie larger than 36" and 42" have been increasing, due in part to the 48" minimum size limit. The chain has a stocking history that began in 1981. Fingerlings have been purchased or secured from Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin stocks, including fingerlings in excess of 20".

The last few years this 6,500 acre body of water has received about one half muskie per acre because a concern was expressed that the predator density might be too high. Indeed, at that time, only one verified 50"+ muskie had made the list. Recently the South of the Border chapter has questioned the stocking of the Leech lake strain, since efforts of producing numbers of larger fish have not been rewarded by their stocking strategy. The Leech lake strain has produced numerous 50# fish in several Minnesota waters, so the lack of numerous trophies is probably not related to the strain.

At the annual Illini Muskies Alliance/ Illinois Department of Natural Resources meeting, other possible causes have been discussed. Overharvest, harvest of undersized fish and the panfish forage base are more likely culprits. A lake survey may be conducted along with results from the Green Gene study to determine the best stocking procedure. In 2007, 56% of the muskies collected exceeded 36" and 9 percent exceeded 42". The largest muskie ever collected in the spring samples by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to date was 49.5", and exceeded 36# in 2007.

The South of the Border chapter research project (Esocid Task Group) reports that they haven't collected spotted muskie proportionate to their stocking numbers but survival and success is occurring with this program. In fact, the Esocid Task Group research shows 12 fish of 50" or greater (all Leech Lake strain) reported in 2009. (Note, this study is not confirmed, since very few of these fish are registered on any club records or reported in the Illinois Voluntary Muskie Creel Survey. In fact, only one 50.5" muskie was reported in either record in 2009.) Catch rates have exceeded management objectives established by the Esocid Task Group for several years. The objective is 0.3 fish per trap net night, catches have hovered around 2.3 muskie per trap net night overall with catch rates up to 2.6 fish per trap net night at peak catches. The average Fox Chain muskie is about 36" long (from survey data) with males averaging 32.4" long and 9.6# and females averaging 39.3" long and 16.7#. Tagged fish have been reported from all lakes in the Fox Chain and in the Fox River as far south as Yorkville and north into Wisconsin. The longest a floy tagged fish swam at large before being recaptured was 8 years. Most fish grow approximately 2" per year until they reach 36" to 38" then male growth rates slow dramatically and females continue to grow at just under 2" per year. A cleithra collected from a 47" dead muskie (in 2006) was estimated at 12 years old. Generally speaking, male muskie in

the Fox Chain only occasionally exceed 40" but females easily grow beyond 40" and make up almost all fish over 42".

Otter Lake

Otter Lake is a muskie fishery that has seen its ups and downs. First stocked in 1981, Otter has been stocked with fingerlings from Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin. Otter achieved early fame by yielding a state record. The lake has produced three fish on our list. Over the years, the lake and fishery has changed. Originally Otter contained scattered coontail weeds. Chemical run off from adjacent farm fields eliminated most of these weeds, however, recent fertilizer run off has promoted weed growth once again.

Most people catching muskie at Otter are new to the sport and the deep, near weedless body of water is a difficult nut for most of the anglers to crack. A few years ago, a spoon pluggers club from the Chicago area enjoyed great success with Otter muskies. (Unknown to most Illinois muskie anglers.) Otter usually produces short, girthy fish. After several years of sampling, the local biologist was concerned that Otter's muskies were not as girthy as usual. This concern led to reduced stockings. Now it seems as if the reduced muskie body weight was most likely due to the lack of forage. This 765 acre lake is periodically stocked with threadfin shad to supplement the gizzard shad forage base. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources has also been stocking adult spotted suckers in an effort to establish a self sustaining population to supplement the sporadic shad reproduction.

Due to the 100 year flood event that occurred in 2002, the 2003 surveys showed a 32% drop in overall muskie numbers at this lake. Of the 39 muskies captured, 13% were over 40". The Illinois Department of Natural Resources has reinstated an annual stocking policy.

Information gathered from the 2009 Illinois Department of Natural Resources spring netting evaluation hinted that muskie numbers increased significantly from the 2008 survey (23 muskie). Forty seven fish were captured in March of 2009, which is more than two fold compared to 2008. These individuals measured 24.3" to 41.9", and weighed 3.6# to 22.8# in total weight. Once again, in discussing muskie management with local anglers, and the Otter Lake Water Commission, this fishery is steadily improving since the floods. Local fishermen are very happy with the population in place. These anglers have caught, and seen many year classes of muskie swimming in this impoundment. As usual, anglers have noted the excellent condition of these fish. With more stable water levels over time, this population should rebuild, and create improved fishing opportunities into the future.

Other contenders

In addition to the lakes noted, there have been a couple of fish reported of 50" from unspecified lakes and muskies of 50" or larger, or (in the case of State record fish) near 50" fish have been reported (but not confirmed, since no dates, angler names, witnesses, photos or exact sizes given have been verified) from the following private Illinois lakes:

Frye-Three 50" muskies have been reported.

Holiday-In June of 1994 a 50" hybrid was found floating dead. The largest natural muskie reported from this lake was 51".

Summerset- State record hybrid muskies were taken from this lake in 1988, 1989 and 2002.

Will has produced a the current State record hybrid on 8/6/04 (31#-3 ounces).

As can be deducted from this brief glimpse of Illinois' current trophy muskie lakes, the fishery is constantly evolving. The best lake this year may be replaced by another hot lake next year. One positive aspect is that with our long growing season, aggressive stocking program, involvement of concerned groups like the Illini Muskies Alliance's member organizations and a Department of Natural Resources that leads the muskie world with research and proactive involvement, new bodies of water will be joining the current list of trophy lakes on a consistent basis.

Other lakes are ready to be added to this list. Most of these lakes have generally been stocked eight or more years ago, have an ample forage base of gizzard shad and relatively light fishing pressure. (Some have even produced muskies of 30# to over 40# in Illinois Department of Natural Resources surveys.) Watch for the following contenders to appear in future updates:

Lake George, Spring Lake North, Banner Marsh lakes (Johnson, Shovel & Wheel), Prairie Lake, Pierce Lake, Lake Sule, Mill Creek, Canton Lake and Johnson-Sauk Trail.