Illinois' muskie creel study demonstrates that good science and first-class partnerships can yield great trophy angling.

Illinois Muskies

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Muskie—the very name of the fish inspires both awe and the very highest regard among anglers. Many consider it a form of finned royalty. Indeed, an early naturalist hailed it as "the king of the fishes in western waters."

But it generally is not a fish for the casual angler. To catch a muskie means making a serious commitment to the sport—the willingness to devote time, energy and enormous strategy to outwit this wily giant. But muskie anglers are a special lot.

Terms like "dedicated" and "focused" might apply to a host of anglers who specialize in other species. But the muskie angler is almost a breed apart. The descriptors "passionate" and "resolute" probably come closer to capturing what the muskie angler is all about.

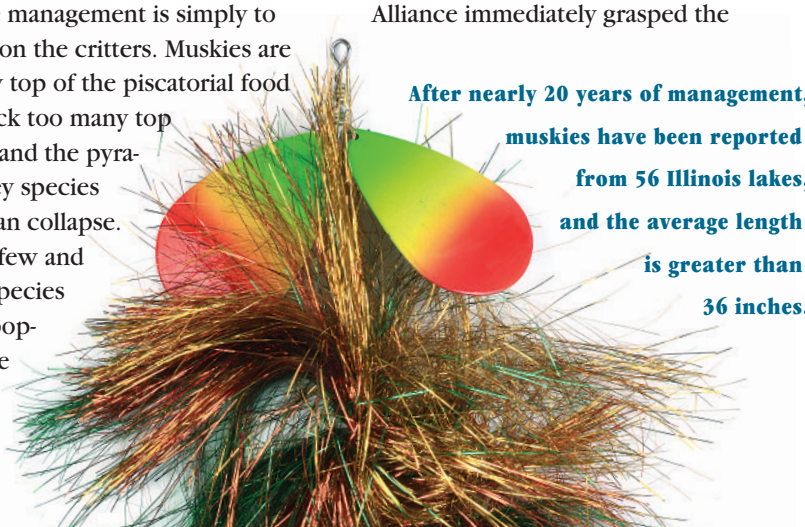
And that's why, when the Department of Natural Resources decided years ago to improve and expand the Prairie State's limited muskie fishery, it knew it had a daunting challenge.

One of the biggest tasks for successful muskie management is simply to keep tabs on the critters. Muskies are at the very top of the piscatorial food chain. Stock too many top predators and the pyramid of prey species beneath can collapse. Stock too few and the prey species can over-populate a lake and produce great throngs of stunted fish.

But, fortunately for DNR, muskies had some avid friends and potential partners—the muskie anglers themselves.

In the mid-1980s, a DNR district fisheries manager designed and started up a voluntary creel survey with muskie anglers at Pierce (Rock Cut State Park, Winnebago County) and Shabbona lakes (Shabbona Lake State Recreation Area, DeKalb County). The Illini Muskie Alliance immediately grasped the

After nearly 20 years of management, muskies have been reported from 56 Illinois lakes, and the average length is greater than 36 inches.



Partners and funding

DNR acknowledges significant gratitude to its longtime resource partner, IMA, for their committed support to, and participation in, the creel study project. And a nod of appreciation also goes to the Sport Fish Restoration Fund, those dollars derived from the special excise tax monies collected on fishing tackle and motorboat fuel. These are the funds provided by anglers and boaters whenever they purchase the equipment and fuel essential to their outdoor pursuits.

importance and value of the undertaking and gave it their support.

The creel survey project was so successful that DNR and IMA implemented the program on a statewide basis in 1987. Over the years, IMA has provided funding for a range of endeavors, including printing of creel census cards and purchase of barrier nets for state hatcheries and lakes and aeration pumps for Jake Wolf Fish Hatchery in Mason County.

The 1987-2006 muskie creel project report reveals some fascinating—and encouraging—developments in the state's expanding muskie fisheries. Originally focusing on only 27 lakes, the scope of the study widened to include 56 waters from which muskie anglers reported catch data.

One particularly encouraging sign after 20 years: The muskie catch is on the upswing. More than 9,000 muskie catch reports were logged, and the data shows a clear up-tick in the numbers with each passing year.

Another indicator of overall program success: Bigger muskies. The average length of fish caught increased from 29 inches to greater than 36 inches by 2006.

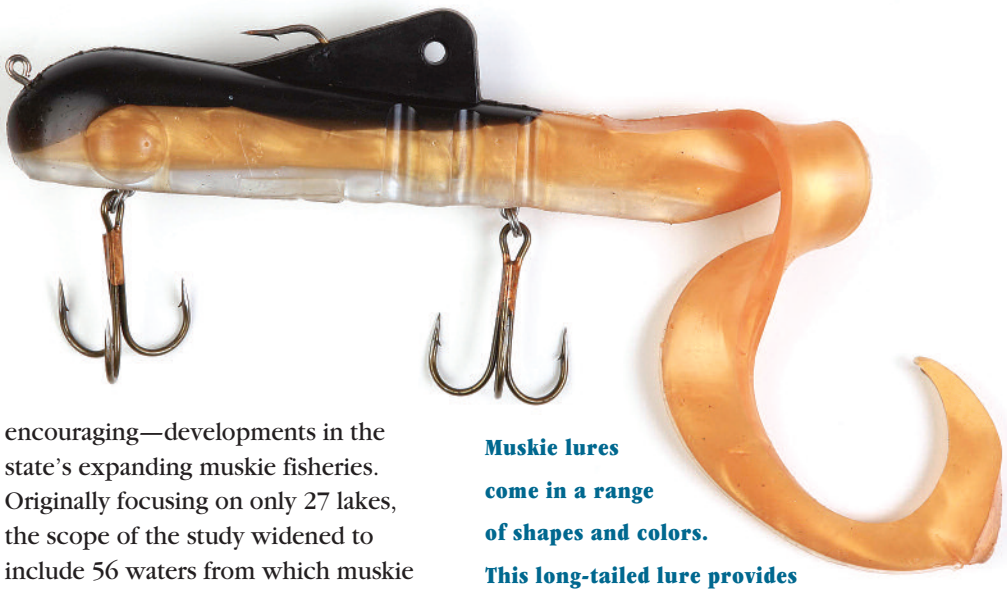
The creel project also reaffirms what a lot of Illini muskie anglers know: Jackson County's Kinkaid Lake, with 300 catches, continues to yield the largest number of muskies greater than 42 inches. Other high-performance lakes are Shelbyville (164 catches, Shelby County) and the Fox Chain O'Lakes (130 catches, Lake County).

The study also showed that in 2006 alone, four muskies greater than 50 inches were caught, with the largest being a 54-inch trophy from McMaster Lake (Snakeden Hollow State Fish and Wildlife Area, Knox County).

Catch-and-release has become the voluntary rule of the day for most modern Illinois muskie anglers. The release rate, according to the study, has increased from 75 percent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to a whopping 99-100 percent through the early 2000s. The increasing popularity of catch and release is, according to DNR, one of the major reasons why muskie fishing in Illinois continues to improve.

The study showed that, since the 1930s, the hours of effort needed to land a muskie has steadily dropped to the current overall average of 13.7 hours.

That's still a bit long for a casual afternoon fishing trip, but it is heartening proof that there is an eventual reward for the diligent Illinois muskie angler.



Muskie lures come in a range of shapes and colors. This long-tailed lure provides a lot of action because, when muskies grab on to the soft body, they hold on—thinking they have a fish.

One of DNR's Fisheries Managers, Mike Mounce, catches muskies while conducting the annual Lake Shelbyville fall population survey.

(Photos courtesy Todd Berg.)

The practice of catch-and-release fishing has become the norm for Illinois muskie anglers, with nearly all fish returned to the water.