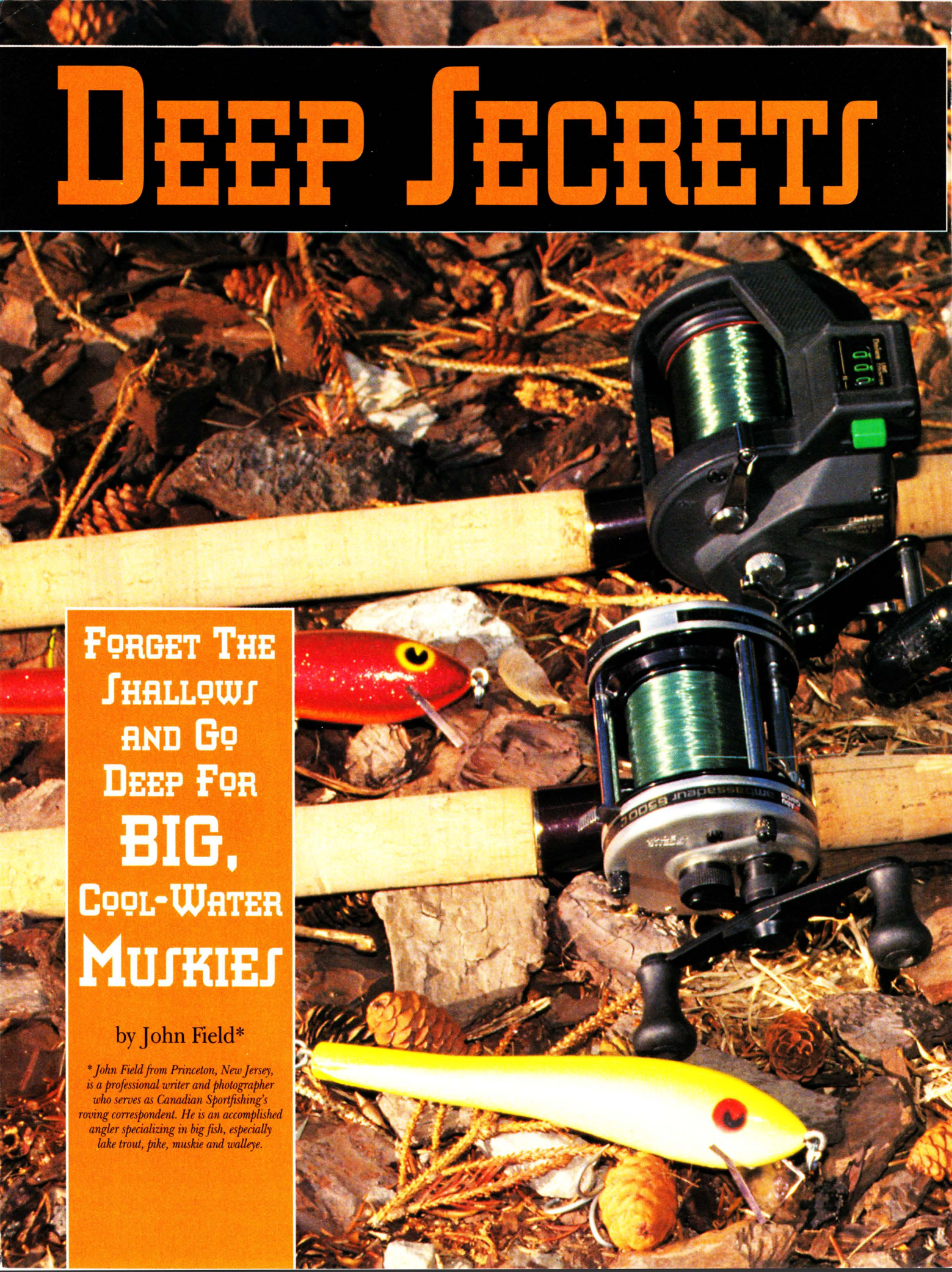


# DEEP SECRETS



FORGET THE  
SHALLOWS  
AND GO  
DEEP FOR  
BIG,  
COOL-WATER  
MUSKIES

by John Field\*

*\* John Field from Princeton, New Jersey, is a professional writer and photographer who serves as Canadian Sportfishing's roving correspondent. He is an accomplished angler specializing in big fish, especially lake trout, pike, muskie and walleye.*

Would it surprise you that there are muskies growing fat and old under our noses? Or



that they rarely, if ever, see lures? Well, it's true, and not just in hidden, mysterious bodies of water. Muskie in even well-known waters die of old age while most angler's lures pass too far above their eyes and ears to be noticed. Individual fish that habitually live deep — below the reach of most fishermen — frequently live to an older age than those that don't. For example, Ken O'Brien's 65 lb. Canadian record, estimated at 29 years of age, was caught trolling deep. Or how about Art Barefoot's 59 lb. 11 oz. French River whopper? Fish like those cause quite a stir amongst muskie anglers everywhere.

## FALL MUSKIE HABITS

Researchers and fishermen have recently concluded that big muskie in deep bodies of water spend the majority of their time either on bottom or suspended at depths between 20 and 60 feet. No surprise — that's where most of their preferred prey, including suckers, bullheads, whitefish and perch, live. That's especially true in autumn, when decomposing weeds often lead to oxygen deficiencies in the shallows. As the surface water cools, it forces muskies and their prey to deeper, warmer haunts.

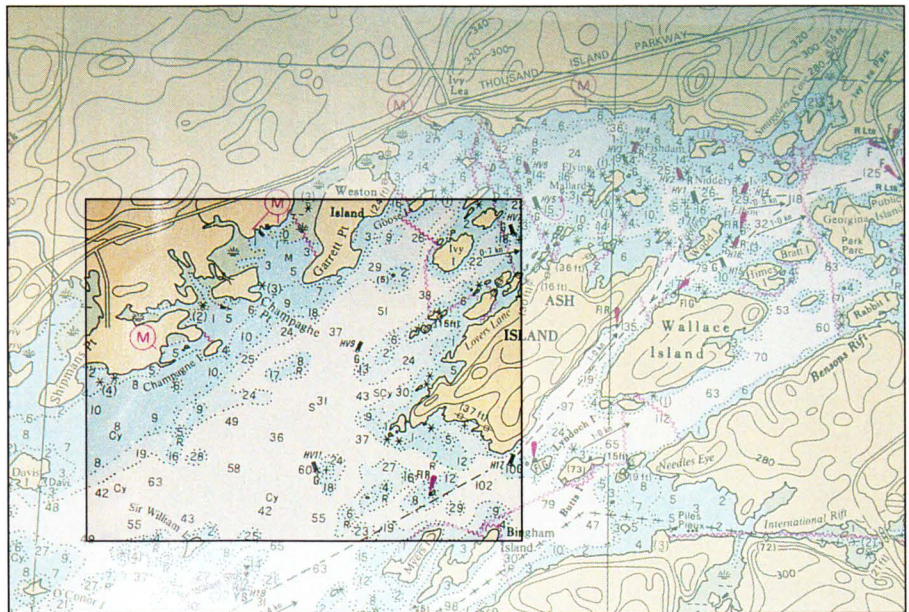
In rivers these places can be near structures like islands, rock humps, holes and large boulders. In rivers, current delivers food to a variety of fish waiting at the head of islands in moderate current, or behind them in heavy current. These are hot locations! Muskie in rivers generally "cord-up" and hold on bottom at strategic feeding stations. In lakes they range more loosely and follow deep schools of forage, but can also be found relating to structure. Each of these cases presents different trolling system options.

## TACKLE OPTIONS

The choice between using downriggers or flatlines is a matter of lure control. With downriggers, you'll generally use much shorter leads than when trolling with flatlines, since they help maintain constant lure depth in current and prevent line tangles when making tight turns. They're also more responsive when you use the downrigger to quickly adjust lure depth over bottoms with radical depth changes.

Downriggers can be used either for muskies on bottom, or for suspended fish. When fishing the bottom, I prefer to stick with deep divers, which provide a depth margin for the safety of the ball and release. That way if something fouls bottom, it will be the bait and not the cannonball. I pre-test the depth of diving crankbaits with a standard lead length — say about 80 feet. If at that length the lure you're using dives 14 feet, and you want to tap bottom in 30 feet of water, you would only lower the ball to 16 feet, keeping the ball free and clear of snags. Actually, you can use the same formula to present diving lures to suspended fish as well.

Downriggers have a lot of advantages (particularly for suspended fish), but they still don't offer the same sense of lure information as a flatline. For instance, flatlines allow you to take advantage of your bouncing rod tip as an information source. You can tell if your bait is fouled with weeds or debris, or even how



**Big muskie in deep waters spend most of their time cruising the depths between 20 and 60 feet. Look for them near islands, rock humps, and holes. Erratic contours in the 30- to 50-foot range can be very hot and are often ignored.**

much line to let out to just tick bottom. In that sense, flatlining tends to be more visual than downrigging.

While downrigging is primarily a monofilament game, in flatlining you have the choice of mono, braided dacron or wire lines. Mono is generally at its best in current and when long leads are required, since its thinner diameter offers the least resistance. Otherwise, I normally go with 30 pound dacron in early fall, especially if floating weeds are a nuisance. Because of dacron's lack of stretch, you can detect weeds on the lure easier than when fishing mono. It also makes it easier to clean off weeds, by sweeping your rod hard, as if setting the hook.

Wire, of course, doesn't stretch at all. It's unbeatable when you need depth, especially when you also need a fairly short lead or troll a route with many turns. Wire also transmits the most feel, but it makes it just about impossible to float a lure out of a snag by quickly freespooling. Try it and you'll face dreaded snarls and kinks.

Wire's no-give attitude transmits every head shake like a miniature explosion, but it works two ways. Play a fish with a bit of a heavy hand and you'll tear the hooks out of its mouth.

## TACKLE RECOMMENDATIONS

To fish for muskies with downriggers, use the same downrigger tackle used on Great

Lakes salmonids: medium-heavy nine-foot downrigger rods and 12- to 20-pound line. Just be sure to add a 36-inch steel leader (which applies to all trolling situations).

For flatlining, I go with a medium-heavy to heavy rod in the seven foot range, rated for 12- to 14-pound monofilament and 30-pound braided dacron, loaded on Daiwa SG Line Counter reels.

You can also use the line counter reel for braided wire, but I find the larger spool diameter of a Penn 60 helps prevent tight coil memory, which can be a real problem — especially with monel wire. For most muskies, 30-pound test is usually sufficient. You can run wire on the same rods you use for flatlining, but you might consider installing a Fuji silicone-nitride tip for braided wire, or a roller tip for monel. These wire outfits are ideal for lakers as well.

## LURES

Simply owning muskie lures is probably as much fun as catching a muskie. They run the gamut, from just-plain-big to just-plain-outrageous.

Happily, selecting the right one on a given day isn't as mystical as it might seem. The most important features to consider are size, action versus speed, depth versus buoyancy, and strength. Ironically, fishermen have their favourite lure colour, but muskies don't since they are carnivorous (they eat any animal - living or dead) and track down food in the



John Field

**Canadian Sportfishing correspondent John Field with the results of trolling deep and paying attention to detail. WOW!**

depths by sensing vibration.

In terms of size, lures from six- to eight-inches are generally best for a deep fall crankbait. Of course it's a good idea to carry a selection of larger and smaller baits, since muskie can prove incredibly picky on any given day. It pays to go prepared.

Action versus speed is another important consideration. Each lure has an optimal speed at which it achieves its maximum depth and peak action. Some lures pull too hard, or otherwise won't behave at the required speed range of two to four knots. These won't do.

Remember that the stronger the wind and

current get, the faster a boat has to go to maintain steering (read boat) control. So your lures have to be cooperative at the speed necessary to control a boat in wind or current. You don't want a lure to wander or come to the surface when it's supposed to be hunting for a strike.

Best bets would include the Believer, Swim Whizz and Depth Raider — three buoyant, plastic lures that run at the right speeds and come in muskie-sized eight-inch versions. In wooden baits, check out the Poe's Cruise Minnow or Lucky Strike Pikie Minnow.

To this basic selection I usually add a couple of big T55 Flatfish or T-16 Kwikfish. With their slow but violent action, these plugs are good bets when the water drops below eight degrees Celsius. Muskies get sluggish in cold water, so slow presentations usually catch more fish.

No matter whether you go with wooden or plastic baits, strength and buoyancy are essential qualities. Freespooling a buoyant lure immediately when you hit a snag often enables the plug



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**Muskie plugs run the gamut from just-plain-big to just-plain-outrageous.**

to float out on its own.

Of course you can catch muskies now and then where ever they lurk. But if you want the best chances of a huge one, fish the best waters you possibly can. I call these proven lakes and rivers Super Waters. Some of the best — Georgian Bay and tributaries, Lac Seul, Eagle Lake and the St. Lawrence River.

It pays to temper fishing reports from lodges or word of mouth by checking against contest results and records. That quickly weeds out the second-choice spots. Then buy good quality hydrographic maps of the places you choose. And try to dig out some local information by asking around at tackle shops or marinas. Quiz local anglers about the hottest trolling passes and how to navigate them.

Most fishermen on heavily-pressured waters troll structure on the 20- to 30-foot contour around obvious shoals and islands they discovered on the map. But for a true muskie-fest, look

beyond these pounded spots for other possibilities. Erratic depth markings in the 30- to 50-foot range, especially those that sit near much greater depths, are worth checking.

It's critical to look beyond the depth itself and consider the bottom composition and character. The most important features to look for on a map are rocky islands and shoals, especially those in current. When out in the boat, use the sonar to find boulder piles, notches and natural stair steps descending into deep water. The more places for fish to hide, the better the spot. After deciding on a couple of structures you wish to target, plan your own trolling passes with an eye to current, underwater contour and practicality. In rivers, motor to the starting point of your trolling pass and troll downcurrent. That's where your next muskie, or first, could be awaiting.

If there is a secret to catching big fall muskie, then trolling deep in proven locations is only a part of it. Most importantly, you have to have confidence in your techniques and the waters you choose, because trophy muskie fishing is an endurance game. So dress for the weather and put in the hours.

After all, it's the angler who can stay on the water with sharp hooks who catches the big ones!

