

**THE HISTORY OF THE ILLINOIS
MUSKIE FISHERY
BY
DON DUBIN**



INTRODUCTION

The History of the Illinois Muskie Fishery

Compiled by Don Dubin

THIS BOOKLET LOOKS AT THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF OUR ILLINOIS MUSKIE FISHERY. IT TRACES THE HISTORY OF HOW THE FISHERMAN BANDED TOGETHER TO START MUSKIE CLUBS, AND WITH THE COMBINED EFFORTS OF THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION, CREATED THE GREAT MUSKIE FISHERY THAT WE ENJOY TODAY.

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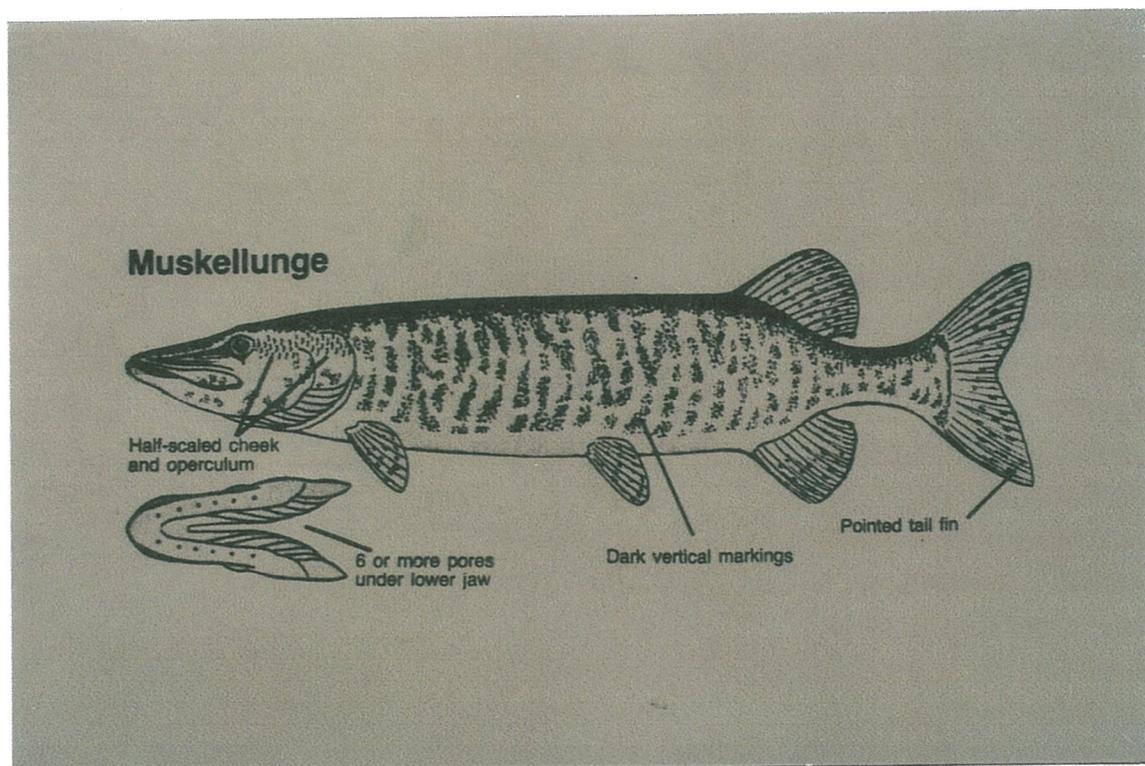
ILLINOIS MUSKIE STOCKING 1980 THRU 1990

STOCKING REPORT 2008 thru 2015

ILLINOIS STATE RECORD MUSKIE

The History of the Illinois Muskie Fishery

The Muskie is the largest member of the *Esox* family, and was called a Muskellunge. This family includes the Northern Pike, Grass, Redfin, and Chain Pickerel. In lakes that have both Muskies, and Northern Pike, they can spawn together and create a hybrid called the Tiger Muskie. The Muskie is indigenous only to North America, however, it may have started as a saltwater specie that invaded the freshwater river systems in North America possibly becoming trapped during the ice age, and then evolving into the specie that we know today. The original native range was the St. Lawrence basin in the northeast, Ohio, Tennessee, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi River basin in the midwest, and Ontario in the northwest. If there were any natural populations of Muskies in Illinois they had disappeared because of pollution, over harvesting, and the destruction of the spawning habitat. Except for a few private lakes, the Muskie fishery had disappeared in Illinois.



The Start of the Muskie Fishing Clubs

During the early years, fishing was very poor in Illinois. There was an old fish hatchery in Spring Grove Illinois that was in poor shape. Our lakes and river were not managed properly and were out of balance. The spawning habitats of many of the existing game fish were destroyed by pollution and over harvesting of many species.

Illinois did not have any musky lakes, however, a lot of Illinois fisherman went to Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ontario Canada which had great muskie fishing.

In 1966, Gill Hamm, formed a club in Minnesota called Muskies Inc. The goal of the club was to improve and expand the muskie fishery. Over the past 50 years, this conservation organization has become a national force in the expansion of muskie fishing, and today has 69 chapters in 12 states throughout the country.



The Chicagoland Muskie Hunters

In 1968, Emmett Brown, formed a club in Illinois called the Muskie Hunters. The club's goal was to introduce Muskies to Illinois. At that time, the Illinois Department of Conservation was not in favor of stocking Muskies, claiming that they would not reproduce, and would not survive in Illinois lakes and rivers. Monthly meetings, were held, and the membership expanded by inviting the fishing public to join the club. In 1975, the Muskie Hunters joined Muskie, Inc., and became the third club to be part of this new organization. The club also changed the name from the Muskie Hunters to the Chicagoland Muskie Hunters. The club worked with the Illinois Department of Conservation, and established the Adopt a Fish Program. The program was a fund raiser to purchase muskies fingerlings for stocking in Illinois. In 1989, in appreciation of the chapter's efforts, Governor Jim Thompson awarded a Certificate of Recognition to the club, and in 1991, the Illinois Department of Conservation nominated the chapter for the prestigious Chevron Award for outstanding conservation work. Emmett Brown mover to Hayward Wisconsin, and became the Executive Director of the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame.



The Chicagoland Muskie Hunters Logo

The Waterman Project

One of the first attempts to raise muskies was at a sewage treatment pond in Waterman, Illinois. The final stage of sewage water is clean, and well oxygenated. Muskie fry were stocked in the pond, and in the fall, a net was used to harvest the fish. Only two fish were captured. The remaining fish may have migrated into the drainage stream, that emptied into other connecting lakes.



The Chain of Lakes State Park

Another attempt to raise muskies was tried at the Chain of Lakes State Park. The Conservation Department provided a small pond, and stocked it with Muskie fry. It was very difficult to capture the muskies because of the weeds, and the soft mud bottom. Ten fish were caught, however, they did not survive.



Project Illini

In 1975, another club, the National Muskie Association, and the Muskie Hunters unified their efforts to stock Muskies in Illinois and created Project Illini. Terry Tassi spearheaded the project and took on the task of researching the feasibility of stocking muskies. Steve Statland, Larry Ramsell, and Brad Latvaitis were all involved in this project and worked with the Illinois Conservation Department to obtain permission to introduce muskie stocking.

To obtain the muskies, they would have to be purchased from private out of state fish hatcheries. Muskies fingerlings were very costly. A six to twelve inch fish cost about three to five dollars each. Project Illini became a tax exempt organization, and a fund raiser was set up to raise money for this project. Posters and flyers were distributed to sports stores, and promoted in newspapers, radio, and television. Money was raised through a Las Vegas night, fishing seminars, donations, selling bumper stickers, patches, scrolls, and engraved wall plaques.

A historic event occurred in 1975, when Spring Lake in West Central Illinois, became the first official lake to be stocked with 450 Tiger Muskies and 235 natural Muskie fingerlings. The following year, Johnson Sauk Trail Lake, near Kewanee was stocked with 100 naturals, and Lake Story, in Galesberg received 200 tigers. In Northern Illinois, Diamond Lake also received 200 tigers, and Cedar Lake was stocked with 500 naturals. fish that were stocked in Cedar Lake, came from a Muskie Inc. hatchery in Battle Creek, Minnesota.

In 1977, Project Illini working in conjunction with the Illinois DNR and obtained 50,000 muskie fry from Pennsylvania, and stocked them in Lake Shabbona.

Under consideration for future stocking was Lake Shelbyville, and the Fox Chain of Lakes. All of these lakes had the potential to produce a quality trophy muskie fishery.

Muskie Stocking from Kalepp's Fish Farm

The Project Illini fundraiser was very successful and the money that was raised was used to purchase muskie fingerlings from Kalepp's Fish Farms in Dorchester, Wisconsin.



PROJECT ILLINI FUND RAISER

MUSKIES in Illinois!

The *National Musky Association and Musky Hunters Inc.* have been given permission by the Ill. Dept. of fisheries to stock a state lake with musky. Funds

permitting, our primary objective and target is LAKE SHELBYVILLE, an 11,100 acre reservoir. Back up lake is Spring Lake. Your donation is necessary for the success of this program. A minimum donation of five dollars will enable us to stock 1 and 1/2 muskies in Illinois waters and entitle you to wear this handsome emblem. Your name will be publicized in "Man VS. Muskie Digest" (The National Muskie Association Publication) as a supporter of "PROJECT ILLINI". Also, you will be kept informed as to the progress of this project. This is your chance to do something substantial for the ecology of Illinois.

Why not improve the sport fishery in the state and make available to everyone ***THIS GREATEST OF ALL FRESH WATER TROPHIES?*** If not interested give this sheet to someone who would be!

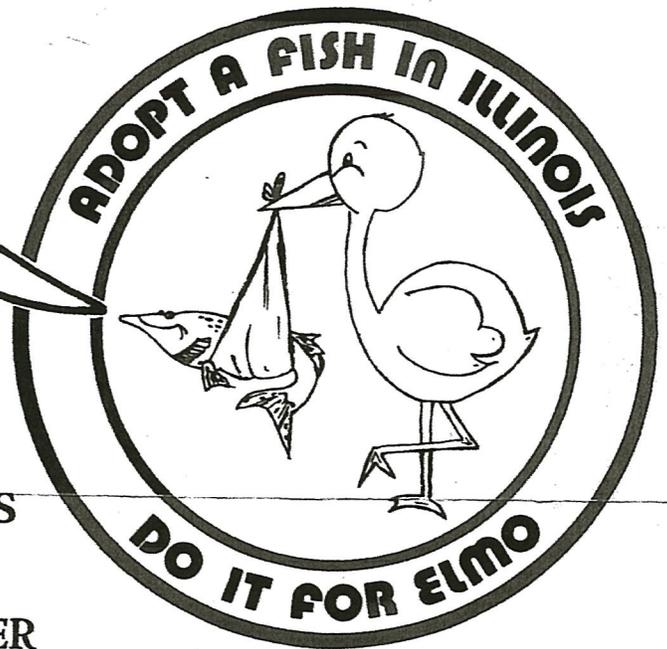
Minimum donation \$5.00 per patch. My donation is \$____.00

For my donation please send me #____patches.



wear this
patch on
your jacket
Be Recognized
As A
Conservationist

**ARE YOU
MY
DADDY?**



**PRODUCTS
OF AN UNDERSTAFFED STATE
HATCHERY SYSTEM, THOUSANDS
OF YOUNG MUSKIES ENTER
ILLINOIS WATERS EACH WINTER
WITHOUT A HOME OR A HERITAGE -**

Show one you care by replacing its number with a name. Adopt one for your own. You'll be able to give it your love, give it your good advice, give it the keys to the car when it's sixteen, everything its real mom and dad would give if they could find it. But first you must give up some money. For a \$10.00 donation you'll receive:

- *An official Adopt-a-Fish certificate granting you parental custody rights.*
- *A lake map revealing your fish's location.*
- *Updates about the condition of your ward as forwarded by the Illinois Department of Conservation.*
- *Entry of your name in "Elmo's Buddies" the registry of Adopt-a-Fish participants.*

Your donation will be used to purchase muskellunge fingerlings for stocking in Illinois. Who says you can't buy friends. **PLEASE ACT TODAY**, eligible orphans are waiting.

THE SPRING GROVE FISH HATCHERY

Since the attempts to raise muskies at Waterman, and the Chain of Lakes State Park were unsuccessful, it was decided to try the Spring Grove Hatchery in Northern Illinois. The hatchery was built in 1914, and was badly in need of repair. In the back of the hatchery was a large drainable pond. In the spring, the Illinois Conservation Department stocked muskie fry in the pond. In the fall, they started the draining process to see if the fry survived. After two days of draining, the muskie fingerlings started jumping and boiling the water at the top of the spillway. The Conservation Department netted out over 10,000 muskies that averaged 10 to 12 inches. The Spring Grove Hatchery remained as a state hatchery for a number of years, and was used to collect and hatch the eggs to produce muskie fry. When the new Jake Wolf hatchery was opened, the Spring Grove Hatchery was closed. Today, the hatchery building has been remodeled, and the land alongside the hatchery is a park with a fishing area. It is now a tourist attraction that is open to the public.



Harvesting Muskies at the Spring Grove Fish Hatchery



Fish rearing at the Spring Grove Hatchery

The Fox Chain of Lake were stocked with muskies for brood stock. In the spring, when they mature adults migrated into the shallows to spawn, the Conservation Department set out fyke nets to capture the spawning muskies. The fish were transported to the hatchery until they were ready to be processed for spawn.



Processing the Spawning Muskies

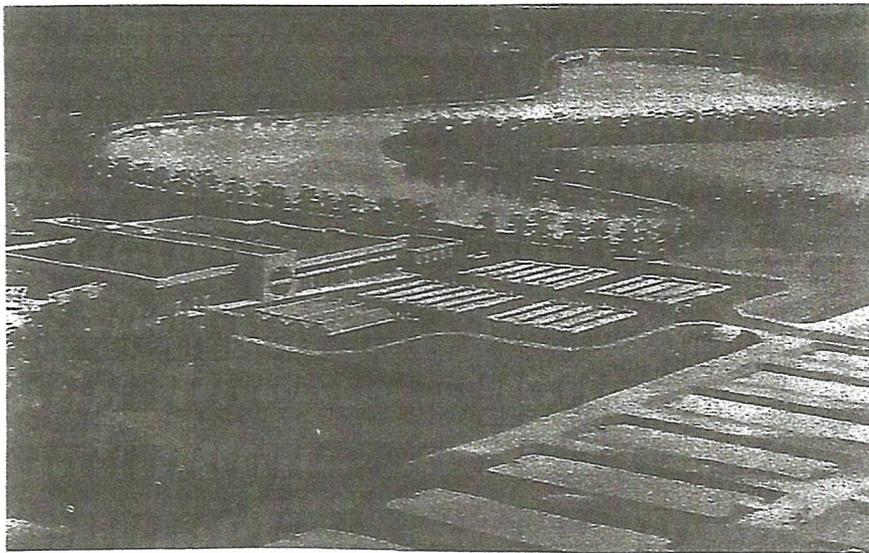
At the hatchery, the fish are kept in concrete tanks until they are ready to spawn. The eggs are removed from the females, and milt from the males, and mixes together. The fertilized eggs are put in jars with circulated fresh water. When the young fry hatch, they are raised to 10 to 12 inches before being released.





The Jake Wolf Fish Hatchery

In 1979, Illinois broke ground to build the Jake Wolf Fish Hatchery, at the Sand Ridge State Forest, near Peoria, Illinois. The Little Grassy Hatchery near Carbondale, Illinois was renovated, and the Spring Grove Hatchery was closed. The Jake Wolf Hatchery was set up to annually produce 48 million fish of 15 different varieties of cold, and warm water species, which includes muskies. The annual production was set up to meet the stocking requirements to maintain a quality sport fishery for the next fifty years.



When the hatchery was completed in 1980, the state started stocking muskies that were received in trade from other states. The genetics of the Illinois muskies were completely mixed, and many people called them the "Mutt Strain". A program called Project Green Genes was started to determine which strain was the best for Illinois. The strains that were chosen, was the Leach Lake, Ohio, and our own mixed strain. After a 10 year study, it was determined that the Ohio, and our mixed strain did the best in the research project. At one time, the hatchery started producing Tiger Muskies, which is a hybrid cross between the Muskie and Northern Pike. The Tiger strain grows very fast, however, it does not reproduce. The state was looking for natural reproduction, and the Tiger program was dropped in favor of the true natural muskie.

The Illinois Muskie Alliance

As the fisherman started catching muskies in Illinois, a controversy arose on the possession and size limit for muskies. The IDNR wanted to make the size and possession limit the same as the Northern Pike, which was 24 inches, and a possession limit of three per day. After debating, it was decided to increase the size on muskies to 30 inches, and 1 per day. Today, the minimum size limit is 36 inches state wide, however, several lakes have special regulations of 42 and 48 inch size limit.

As the Illinois muskie fishery started to develop, the Muskie clubs started to expand. In addition to the Chicagoland Muskie Hunters, there were the Fox Valley, South of the Border, Midwest Muskie Club, The Flatlanders, Lake Shelbyville Muskie Club, Quad County Hawg Hunters, The Central Illinois Muskie Hunters, and the Shawnee Muskie Hunters.

In 1982, a statewide organization was started to represent the muskie clubs in Illinois with a unified voice in dealing with the Illinois Department of Conservation on muskie related issues. The Organization was called the Illinois Muskie Alliance, or the IMA. The Chairmen of the IMA is Ray Thompson. Throughout its history, the working relationship between the IMA and the Department of National Resources has grown to one of mutual admiration and benefit. The member clubs have contributed thousands of dollars which include, netting for rearing ponds, fingerling stocking, tagging programs, fish rescue, lake barrier nets, Kids for Conservation, and other educational, and conservation programs. Today, the muskie fishery has progressed and Illinois has produced over 60 muskies 50 inches or larger.

"WHAT A GREAT MUSKIE FISHERY WE HAVE CREATED"



Illinois state record Muskie

Caught by Matt Carmean

38 lbs. 8 oz. 50³/₄ inches long

Caught below the Lake Shelbyville Dam
on the Kaskaskie River, April 20, 2002