

Just about every Musky Hunter would like to catch a World Record, but...

Do Muskies Really Get That Big??

by Larry Ramsell, Research Editor

Over the years, there have been many tales of record sized fish and one of the most often repeated are the ones told about the supposed monster muskies netted by fisheries crews and from days gone by, commercial net fishermen as well as those taken by other methods, including angling. Are or were they true? You be the Judge. Let's review:

Early every season, in one part of the muskies range or another, stories are circulated about the "world record" musky netted by a state or province fisheries crew. Some of these stories are embellished with time, others are known to "grow" immediately, and believe it or not, some of them may just be true!

This past season, one of my clients alerted me to a huge musky that had been taken in a net, several years ago, set by the state's fishery crew to catch spawning muskies. He told me that it had measured 68 inches in length! Wow!, I thought, that is two inches longer than any verified musky that I have ever heard of, and I followed up on it as soon as I could. Before relating that story and sharing that information with you, I thought it might be fun to review our sports long and colorful history regarding similar stories of mammoth muskies. That was, in part, fairly easy for me to do, by referring back to my now "out of print"; "***A Compendium of Musky Angling History***". In addition, I am including some new information, much of it from recent years. I figured that since the recent explosion of anglers new to our sport, that likely most readers hadn't had the opportunity to read or hear about these giants of the past, and my new information will be of interest to all as well.

The first reference was found in the March 18, 1886, issue of ***Forrest and Stream*** magazine, and related an editorial from Vol. 1 p. 236 of ***Forrest and Stream***:

"The largest (Muscalonge) we have ever heard of is vouched for by our friend S.C. Clark, who says that in 1840 he saw one at the mouth of the Calumet River, Michigan, which had just been captured in a seine, that was six feet long and weighed eighty pounds. The mouth would have admitted a man's leg. It showed a perfect Chevaux defrise of teeth, the canines at least an inch long."

Were muskies really that big back then? Other than this "story", there is no other information or photographs that support the size of that fish.

The June 1961 issue of ***The Pennsylvania Angler*** had an article entitled; "Record Muscallunge - Fact or Fiction," by Keen Buss. It gave the following account:

"The Ohio drainage apparently had its share of large 'lunge. Dr. E. Sterling of Cleveland, Ohio, claimed to have speared one of these monsters about the year 1844 which weighed 80 pounds."

In his book; "***The American Angler***," published in 1864 by Thaddius Norris, Mr. Norris had a chapter on "The Pike Family". In that chapter was a sub-heading entitled "Great Blue Pike," which is what the muscalonge was known as in Pennsylvania in the mid to late 1800's. Interesting references to huge muskies:

"I have the head of a specimen sent from Meadville, Pennsylvania in a jar of alcohol, which measures twenty-five inches in circumference; after large slices of it being cut off, to get it into the jar." Note: the circumference of a 40 pound musky is about 18 inches. "It has been taken weighing as much as eighty pounds in Connaught Lake in Bradford County, Pennsylvania."

Recently, Lake Erie and the resurgence of the musky fishery in Green Bay of Lake Michigan has started to make a lot of noise. Can or will these areas return to producing the size muskies said to be found there in the 1800's as the following two examples set forth, which were found in the May 14, 1891, issue of **Forrest and Stream** magazine?:

"In 1864 Mr. Fred Alvord announced his capture of a specimen in Maumee Bay (Ohio) which weighed 85 pounds and in 1865 Mr. Schultz claimed to have seined a muscalonge in the old harbor at Milwaukee (Wisconsin) weighing 100 pounds. The species reaches a length of 8 ft. and individuals weighing 50 pounds are moderately common."

Wow! How about those "fish stories?" I say "stories" because obviously there are no photographs or any other documentation on either of those fish. Based on current knowledge of maximum attainable size, as determined by noted Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources Researcher Dr. John Casselman, muskies do not have the ability to get that big! Do they??

General J. Garrard wrote in the July 1, 1886 issue of **The American Angler** a reference to yet another musky of unbelievable size:

"...There is fairly reliable authority that one (great northern pike as he preferred to call muskies from Wisconsin) was taken two years ago (1884) in Lake Courte Oreilles, headwaters of the Chippewa, that weighed 110 pounds."

"Fairly reliable authority" is the key terminology here. Garrard was working from "heresay"!

In a Michigan DNR paper written by John D. Schroeder, inland fisheries specialist for the Michigan DNR, entitled "Muskellunge Management in Michigan," , one of histories largest muskellunge references is contained:

"One fish reportedly caught in a pond net off Sleeping Bear Dunes in Lake Michigan in the 1880's was said to have weighed 162 pounds and measured more than seven feet long. The skull of that fish, which was retained by Alvin Westcott of Glen Arbor, measured about 13 inches long and 20 inches in circumference more than seventy years later."

Well, talk about exaggerating the size of a musky! There is "no way" that a musky with head dimensions mentioned could weigh anywhere near what was claimed. In fact, Dr. E.J. Crossman, one of the World's most respected esocid researchers, took it to task. Bottom line was that for a musky to be as big as "claimed" its head would have had to have been as much as 23 inches long and 32 inches in circumference! Was the right head used to take those measurements? In doing his length extrapolation, Dr. Crossman found that a musky of 162 pounds would be about 82 inches or approximately 7 feet long. Did muskies from the past grow to greater dimensions than muskies today? Did a 7 foot muskie actually exist in the 1880's?? Causes one to think doesn't it?

A Mr. Clark, writing about muskellunge in Ohio, had the following reference:

"The largest specimen recorded from the Ohio waters of Lake Erie was described by McCormick (1892) as being six feet long and weighing 78 pounds. It was caught in 1891."

Again, we are confronted with a "reference" and no mention of how this musky was taken or caught.

In all of my research of this topic, the most referenced and written about are the "supposed" 80 and 102 pounders from Tomahawk and Minocqua Lakes, Wisconsin, respectively in 1902. They were reportedly captured by Supt. Nevin of the State Fish Hatchery Commission and E.D. Kennedy while netting for spawn. When noted outdoor writer and world record holder Cal

Johnson contacted the Wisconsin fish authorities to attempt to verify these weights and records of these muskies, he was told that neither of the big female 'lunge were actually weighed and that an "estimated weight was given. E.D. Kennedy's son, Jim Kennedy's comment about those fish when queried by his son Ray, was; "...they say they made better whiskey in those days."!! When queried more recently by Dr. Wm. Pivar, the Wisconsin DNR's John H. Klingbeil, supervisor of fish production for the DNR at the time, replied:

*"...We have no other verification (other than an 1902 article in the **Minocqua Times**) of any exceptionally large fish which were caught. I have gone through the annual reports for the Commissioner of Fisheries from 1902 and 1903 and no mention of either of these fish is made there. There is some question regarding the authenticity of these fish; however, we have nothing really to document the matter...Incidentally, during the spawning operations each year fish in the 52-56 inch bracket are caught annually. We have not come up with any fish of any particularly large size; **however, this may be because of the type of net which is used** or may be of course because of the very few extremely large fish present."!*

Another "fun" reference to huge muskies of the past, a supposed 110 pound musky from the Torch River, Michigan actually turned out to be a 54 pound musky that had been speared and then a local photographer combined photo's of that fish and two different men standing with their arm outstretched to "produce" a 7 foot 4 inch monster.

And while on Michigan, how about the following story written by B.F. Jones in the August 1915 issue of **Forest and Stream** magazine?:

"...But as I was in at the death and aided in the landing and killing of seventy-four inches of fish that weighed over eighty pounds...is at least worth the telling..."

Jim, Doc and I had been in the Kankakee lowland between Torch Light and Grass lakes, two small tributaries of Traverse Bay...I had just pulled a small fish up to my boat when a yell from Jim notified me that he was hooked. When I reached him Jim's boat had been overturned with him in the mud and water up to his armpits - the surface of the water for fifty feet around covered with pond lilies and cattails all torn to shreds, fighting with every ounce of his strength and skill to keep the monster out of a dense growth of pond lilies which was evidently the rendezvous of the brute. Rowing around I managed to place myself in front of the monster and by beating him over the head with my oar I managed, by the aid of Jim's pull to drive him into shallow water; he showed fight gritting his teeth and snapping his ponderous jaws continuously, with an ominous sound that was terribly suggestive. Jim finally secured a firm footing and it was a case of 'Go it fish! Go it man!' Only after I had hooked my gaff between his massive jaws were we enabled to drag seventy-four inches of fish to shore. He weighed eighty-seven pounds and I recall that we slew him with a hand-axe. This fight was over twenty years ago (1890's)."

Man, what a story! And if true and verified at the time, it would "still" be the world record!! Wouldn't that be a bummer?

And how much truth is there is the story related to me by the late Brendon Reid of Gananoque, Ontario? Brendon said that in 1923, while fishing for food and not records, he helped his grandfather kill a musky "around 90 pounds." He said that no records were thought of and no pictures taken, nor was it weighed. It was divided up for food! Another one we will never know for sure about.

In his chapter on "Muskalonge," in the 1937 book; **"Fishing for Bass, Muskalonge, Pike & Panfishes"** edited by Ray Schrenkeisen, Ernest G. Poole related the following about a huge, supposed 125 pound musky from Georgian Bay:

"It was not an uncommon experience some years ago to catch this species weighing up to and over 100 pounds; at least old-timers and commercial fishermen operating on the Great Lakes and

tributaries vouch for this. The St. Lawrence River between the Thousand Islands and Montreal, Bay of Quinte in Lake Ontario, and Georgian Bay in Lake Huron have produced over a period of a great many years the world's largest muskalonge. A commercial fisherman by the name of Gaunthier, operating in the vicinity of the Bustard Islands in Georgian Bay, Ontario, found one of these fish which weighed 125 pounds dead in a net. For some years the head of this fish was nailed up on the outside of one of his fish houses."

Again, no verification, only references.

Occasionally large muskies are found dead washed up on shore. One such reference from Minnesota tells of one such fish found on Pokegama Lake near the outlet. It had been dead for several days. It was measured at 56 inches in length, and in its deteriorated state, still weighed 64 1/2 pounds. Its "estimated" live weight was placed "...not far from 70 pounds."

Let us not forget Hybrid muskies while on the subject of possible record class fish. When "Musky Gus" hooked a giant hybrid on Lac Vieux desert, Wisconsin (home of the two largest hybrid/Tiger muskies ever recorded) he was close to making history. He shot his fish in an attempt to subdue it, and in the process lost it. Later a 60 inch hybrid was found washed up dead. While it was too decomposed to save, taxidermist Fred Aman observed to me the following:

The fish was;..."a full bodied hybrid, 60 inches long," and it was his estimate that it would have weighed;..."a pound per inch," or 60 pounds. It would have far eclipsed the Hybrid World Record!

And what about the Lake of the Woods musky that was found dead, as related by Jason Lucas in the January 1952 issue of **Sports Afield** magazine:

"Two years ago, some Ontario guides - quiet conservative men - told me of a musky that had washed ashore on the north side of Lake of the Woods. He had evidently died of disease, for he was little more than skin stretched loosely over bones. They said that, from his length, had he been even in fair shape he would unquestionably have weighed well over 100 pounds. They were too conservative to say so, but I believe most of them thought, that in good condition, he would have run well over 125 pounds."

Writers license to embellish? You decide.

And what about the reported musky that was illegally speared from Lake Winnebago, Wisconsin during a 1950's sturgeon spearing season? Length given was 72 inches and weight given was 76 pounds. Even the Wisconsin DNR's offer of amnesty failed to bring this one to light. True???

While not a world record, or even close, I felt it appropriate to include a photo of what, before my recent discovery, the "longest" musky that I had a record of as well as proof of and a photograph. That fish was an extremely long but light 66 inch fish that was caught in Leech Lake, Minnesota in 1956 and mounted by taxidermist Roger Halvorson of Fergus Falls, Minnesota, who provided the photograph. It weighed only 43 pounds.

In his 1958 book "**Musky Fishing**," author J.W. Jackson, related the following story:

"A reliable man who was with the Wisconsin fishery service for 35 years - and whose word I respected - once told me that when a state fishing crew - spawn netters - seined the Fishtrap Lake in Vilas County area of northeastern Wisconsin, they netted a musky so large it required three men to free it from the net. It was their combined judgement that it would weigh about 125 pounds - and they had handled a great many muskies."

Very interesting, as you will see later in this article when I related my latest finding from Wisconsin to you, and is very different than that related earlier by Wisconsin's Mr. Klingbeil. While on the subject of Wisconsin fisheries crews and big fish they net, in the late 60's I asked a crew

supervisor such a question. His reply was that one of his crews had captured one that they estimated in the mid 60 pound range. The three of them couldn't handle it, so they let it go!

In 1982, Woodruff Area Fish Manager at the time, Dick Wendt shared a letter with me that he received from Mrs. Clarence (Donna) Tischer of LaCrosse, Wisconsin. That letter contained a photograph of a huge muskie taken by a fishery crew during spawn taking operations May 20th, 1932. The "crew," including Donna's grandfather G.F. (Floyd) Emberson supposedly estimated the fish to be in the 100 pound range, but it was not weighed. This fish was taken from the Three Lakes Chain and the photograph was taken by Bob Becker, then sports editor of one of the Chicago papers.

New York's Lake Chautauqua has long been renowned and famous for its muskies. The New York DEC has been spawning muskies there for over 100 years and during those years have, on occasion, come up with some real dandies. In 1982, Bob Bonar shared several photographs of such occurrences, which I share with you now. None of these fish, to my knowledge were ever weighed, but at least a couple of them appear to exceed 5 feet in length!

In 1981, I had the opportunity to visit with New York DEC biologist Bill Pearce. When Bill was a young biologist, he did some spawn netting for bass on the St. Lawrence River during the mid 1950's. One morning during a routine check of his nets he found a big surprise! The nets he used were over 6 feet long and occasionally a musky would be captured. The big surprise was a musky in one of the nets that defied belief. Bill said that the fish was in his net ..."*on an angle, reached from one end to the other; and still had a bend in it.*"!! He said the fish was at least a foot across the head and his best estimate of weight was that it was in excess of 80 pounds!! In fact over the years he has often thought it could have been close to 100 pounds!!! He stated that if he had it to do over again, he would have killed the fish to be mounted for the state's museum. Instead, he gently eased the beast from the net and watched it swim away!!!! What a great story, even though the fish was never weighed. Maybe they really do "get that big!"

Further proof of size appeared in the Summer 1970 issue of **Rod & Gun** magazine in an article by Zack Taylor entitled "*What's The Truth About All Those Musky Lies?*" It is in reference to an 80 pound musky from the St. Lawrence River.

"A St. Lawrence ship channel was once deepened by dynamite and an unexpected result of the explosion was a belly-up musky: It weighed an even 80 pounds!"

In his article; "Ontario's Top 15 Muskies," John Power wrote in **Ontario Out of Doors** magazine in October of 1989, the following:

*"Finally, no collection of 'lunge lore would be complete without mentioning the monster that got away twice - after it was landed! It began near the mouth of the French River in 1947. After observing a fisherman take the musky out of season, game wardens confiscated the fish and charged the fisher. When they finally got around to recording its mind boggling statistics, it **still** weighed 68 pounds, 14 ounces and measured 62 14 inches in length and an astounding 35 3/4 inches in girth. It was duly mounted and given a place of honour at Queen's Park from whence it vanished without a trace when the place was refurbished."*

One can only imagine what it weighed right after being caught, and had it not spawned and been caught during season, could well be the current world record. Some years later I obtained a photograph that is believed to be of that fish.

Jerome Knap wrote of legends in 1980 in **Field & Stream** magazine:

"Wherever muskies swim, there are legends about the truly big ones...Are all these tales of monstrous muskies just fish stories? I suspect not. A friend of mine diving in Eagle Lake (Ontario) claims he saw a musky that was longer than he is tall, and his height is six feet. Once in 1965 or

1966, as a young fisheries biology student working at the Fisheries Research Station in South Baymouth on the Manitoulin Island, I picked up the rear half of a dead musky floating in the North Channel, and that half weighed 45 pounds. (It was weighed on a commercial fisherman's scale.) We estimated that the live weight of this fish would have been close to 100 pounds!"

Whoa! only the "rear half" (the lightest half) and it "alone" weighed 45 pounds!! There is HOPE!!

Ontario MNR fisheries employee Ed Cheverette was doing some spawn netting around 1980 when he came up with one that he "estimated" around 65 pounds. Perhaps it weighed more as it was never weighed on a scale.

And let us certainly not forget the musky that Bernard Lebeau captured in his net on Wabigoon Lake at Dryden, Ontario in 1985. At approximately 5 feet long and a head so big that Bernard couldn't get his arm all the way around it, it was massive. Unfortunately it got ornery and escaped shortly after the photograph, seen herewith and provided by Bernard (see photo), was shot, so no length, girth or weight was taken. Had they been able to corral it, it would have been implanted with a transmitter and could have provided some incredible data! As a side bar to that fish, after Bernard examined the Ontario record 65 pounder caught by Ken O'Brien in 1988, he told me by phone...:

"I hate to tell you this, but the Wabigoon fish was much larger than O'Brien's fish!"

In the early 1990's, another huge musky was angler caught prior to season from Georgian Bay waters. This one was quickly released after a couple of photographs were taken. It was not weighed or measured, but the angler related to me that it went "...*all the way across the back of my huge Starcraft boat.*" Many that have looked at the photo "estimate" the fish to be well within the 60 + pound range, but could it have been "world class" come late that fall?

Ok, time to get to the story and photograph that caused me to pen this article. During August of 2003, my guide client, Patrick Delaney, asked me if I had seen the photograph of the **68 inch** musky at the Spooner, Wisconsin fish hatchery. I replied that I hadn't and expressed my chagrin as I had just been there a couple of weeks before! He went on to tell me about it and his visit with hatchery staff member John Parker. I allowed as how I would get back over there at my earliest opportunity and check it out. A week or so later, I had the opportunity, and made the most out of it. I visited with Mr. Parker and got a look at the incredible photograph. Two hatchery employees, H.L. Ganske, holding the tail, and Bill Billings, holding the head were shown displaying "a fish of dreams" taken during spawn netting operations on Lac Court Oreilles near Hayward, Wisconsin during the 1950's. The fish wasn't weighed, only measured for length at an incredible 68 inches. While the photograph doesn't do the fish justice due to the way it had to be held to control it, needless to say there can be no doubt that it was indeed huge! While not extremely heavy in its rear section, the girth of this musky behind the head is immense and the length of the head alone would scare most average musky anglers!! This fish easily dwarfs the 5 foot holding tank in the boat, leaving no doubt as to the accuracy of the length measurement. The fish was not weighed. This photograph was provided to the Spooner Hatchery by Ed Ganske and graciously loaned to me by the hatchery employee John Parker and his Supervisor. This fish now takes its place as the longest verified musky ever and well have been record class! (see photo)

So much for the more distant past, "what have the DNR's/MNR done recently?" Well, even though there is often times reluctance to let information out on mega fish handled by fisheries crews, once in awhile it gets out, so following are a few items. While there have been no 100+ pounders captured recently, there have been several giants.

When I visited with John Parker at Spooner, I asked him what is the largest musky he has ever seen in the nets. He replied that at one time they netted a 58 incher. Other recent western Wisconsin DNR operations have also corralled muskies reported to be 56 and 57 inches long in nets, however they were not actually measured, and not to mention one that was shocked up a

couple of years ago that the biologist "estimated" at 60 inches. All of this transpired in lakes within a 50 mile radius of the Spooner hatchery. Wouldn't it be fun to know what these fish weighed?

In Ontario, things too have been occurring. Interesting findings also occurred in Georgian Bay and the North Channel of Lake Huron. Data from around 1999, when net sampling operations were conducted in five major spawning areas found a fair number of muskies up to 55 inches in length. Areas surveyed were; Severn Sound, Moon River; Serpent Harbor, McGregor Bay and Bay of Islands. All areas with the exception of Serpent Harbor produced 55 inch muskies. No weights were given for any of the fish taken, but in personal communications with Ministry biologists, fish in excess of 50 pounds were taken. Could net size, available time and the immense size of the areas involved have prevented them from capturing a "super-mega" musky?

In an effort to gage pike stocks in Lake Nipissing in May of 2000, The Ontario MNR and the Anishinabek-Ontario Fisheries Resource Centre found a number of muskies that exceeded 50 pounds in their nets! They were unable to obtain accurate weights due to the limitations of the scale they had available. One fish measured 56 inches in length with an estimated girth of 30 to 33 inches. Of about 50 muskies that they had in their nets, three of them exceeded 50 pounds! What else might exist there?

So, "do muskies really get that big," world beater size that is? Dr. John Casselman, the esocids top researcher on age and maximum growth potential has developed some interesting ideas in that regard, based on his years of research work. He believes that a new world record is possible and even probable!

It is his belief that the next record musky will be a 30 to 35 year old female and that it will be about 60 inches long. He feels that it will come from one of seven different musky waters in Ontario. Those are Lake of the Woods; Eagle Lake; Wabigoon Lake; Lac Seul (which cannot happen at this time due to catch and release only regulations); Ottawa River; St. Lawrence River or Georgian Bay.

One should also consider histories giants and the fact that many of them came from U.S. waters! Is there a U.S. waterbody that is being overlooked that could have a "super-mega" musky in it? Man's heavy harvest during the "kill years" is a likely reason none have shown up in the states in many a moon, but with over 20 years now of a high rate of "catch and release," things are a changin'.

It is high time for a new World Record Musky, and I expect one of you readers to "do the deed" soon. Please give me a call when you do so!

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