

Open Water?

Open Water is a phenomenon termed in the musky community that everyone seems to know, but only a few are actually doing it with repeated success. When most anglers think about fishing open water it can be mind boggling to think about casting over the vast basin of a large lake over 3,000 acres or even a 300 acre lake. You can cover more area by trolling, but are you covering productive areas or aimlessly motoring in circles until you find a hungry fish? Let me start by saying there is almost no such thing as open water when discussing musky fishing because there's a reason fish are in that particular spot and they simply aren't just aimlessly swimming the deep basin. Whether it's a random rock pile, deep sand grass, a bug hatch, suspended bait, or a few cast lengths from a main lake structure, there's always a rhyme or reason behind every muskies' location in 'open water'. In this article I'll try to breakdown how to fish open water and how it's made me a successful guide and angler here in Northern Wisconsin as well as other bodies of water I've explored.

First, we'll discuss the easiest type of open water to breakdown; main structure. Kind of hypocritical when we just said we're going to look at open water, right? Looking at a lake map, almost every lake has its hot spots or productive areas that regularly get pressure from other anglers. Yes, fish this spot because it can be a productive spot, but what happens when these hot spots aren't producing? These fish are most likely still nearby and have moved off this main structure and are taking cover at a secondary spot.

These secondary areas are tips of points or fingers that extend off main structure into deeper water where the fish can easily move onto the structure to feed or retreat to deeper water for safety. From here is where one aspect of the open water phenomenon begins to take form. Muskies may be at the tip of a finger or break, or they can be a couple hundred yards off of this secondary area. It may seem as if this fish is sitting in open water suspended in the deep basin, but this fish is still relating to this piece of structure. It's a place where they can easily move onto the structure, but are safer from danger. So a first place to look on any map is a tip of a main structure and to target the area that directly comes out and

beyond until you've fished a few hundred yards. These fish will be more likely to bite than you'd think.

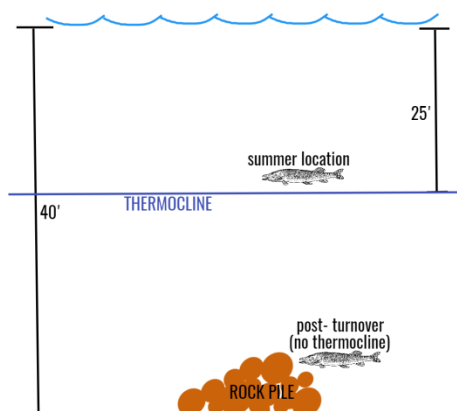
Next on the hit list for open water areas is deep sand grass, which is thin, wispy weeds that forms in matts on the lake's floors and stand anywhere between six inches and as tall as three feet. This type of weed typically grows in 22-28 feet of water, but has been seen it as shallow as 17 and deep as 32. This variance typically depends on water's clarity. All lakes don't have this type of weed, but there's no mistaking it on your fish locator or its potent skunk smell. To find with a locator is the easiest and looks like a layer of thin vertical lines on the bottom of down imaging or clutter on the bottom if using 2D sonar. This type of open water is simple to fish because the fish will relate to these weeds; bait and predator. Sand grass is often an area that thrives with baitfish of perch, suckers, bluegill, bass, walleyes and even the preferred pelagic bait fish. Some sand grass beds will be better than others, but this is definitely a great place to hit when fishing 'open water'.

Early summer can be a great time to get on an open water bite. Muskies have just spawned and are feeding heavily to put weight back on. Around mid-June or when water temps start reaching mid 60s something magical happens in the evenings on the mudflats. Larvae bugs crawl out of these deeper mudflats and make their way to the surface before hatching into flying insects. This can easily be found on your sonar unit or on calm evenings as dimples appear from bluegill, perch, cisco and other baitfish that swarm these areas to feed on the larvae. It's a mass migration of the lake's fish to these areas and the muskies will follow to feed on these bait fish. The hatches take place in the evening and can be very short and intense or last up to a week depending on water temps. A productive technique for this type of bite is large plastics such as medusas or poseidons with large sweeping pulls that produce a long hang time to trigger a bite.

Fast forward to late fall, when pelagic baitfish such as cisco or whitefish stage together before they spawn. This is a great time to troll or concentrate efforts in a specific area of the open water. Using your electronics to locate staging bait is key to success this time of year. Look for some of the deepest

breaks in the lake or areas that are prime spawning grounds for pelagic baitfish such as gravel bars and shores. The baitfish will stage out from these areas over the open water and will move closer as the spawn approaches and muskies will be right in the mix with them. Once the baitfish are located, concentrate on that area by making many passes trolling and running baits similar in size and color to match the hatch. For casting, concentrate on these bait pods. Even though the fish are in 'open water', you're concentrating your efforts into a small area and the bait balls becomes your structure.

Last type of open water fishing is structure specific. It's as simple as fish being on a spot in 'open water' because of a certain piece of structure. This being a random rock pile in a lake's basin, cribs, sunken boats or other physical structures that are considered to be out in the 'open water'. These specific structures are just what the fish are relating to even though they may not be right by it. Let's use a 5'x5' rock pile in 40' feet of water for instance. When a thermocline is developed at 25' in the warm summer months you can expect to find a fish relating to this rock pile, but chances are the musky won't be 40' down by the rocks. The musky are more than likely going to be sitting at or just above the 25' depth where the thermocline has been established and vertically above this rock pile. After turnover, when there is no thermocline there's a good chance this fish will be down near the rock pile in that 40' feet of water.



So when you begin to look at a map and want to explore 'open water', break down open water into sections that are more likely to be holding fish. This will save you lots of time and effort from endlessly casting a lake's basin. As season progresses use the different techniques to continuously locate and catch fish from 'open water'.