

Gary Engberg: Muskie stocking continues on Madison lakes

GARY ENGBERG For the State Journal

7-8 minutes

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I've been writing the past few years on the stocking of muskies in Wisconsin's lakes and particularly the Madison Chain of Lakes.

Muskies have been regularly stocked on Lake Monona, Lake Waubesa, and to a much lesser extent on Lake Wingra for the past few years with the purpose being to see if either the Wisconsin muskie strain (Thompson strain) or the Minnesota Leech Lake strain of fish reproduce and or grow faster than the other strain.

Despite the good population of muskies on the Madison waters, there is no evidence or very little evidence of natural reproduction.

The Leech Lake muskie strain has done well on other Wisconsin waters such as Nancy Lake near Minong where they were stocked. They are known for their rapid growth and also being able to reproduce in most Midwestern waters.

The raising and stocking of muskies is an expensive process, so that is why the Capital City Chapter of Muskies, Inc. has contributed and paid for many of the stocked fish. The Leech Lake strain of muskies has been stocked in Lake Monona for more than

13 years and there are 50-inch and greater muskies now being caught. This past October, a Leech Lake strain of muskie was caught that measured 37.25 inches. The muskie was stocked at 9.9 inches in 2011.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has proven that they can raise the Leech Lake muskie strain if given the opportunity and the money. The muskie strains are raised in the Spooner Hatchery. Once the eggs are put in a hatchery jar, the rearing cost is no more than the Wisconsin or Thompson muskie strain that has been stocked for decades in the state. State officials hope that once natural reproduction takes place on these “test” lakes (hopefully) stocking may no longer be necessary. In this period of tight budgets and layoffs, reducing hatchery costs with a better muskie strain is the way to go in the future.

The Leech Lake muskie strain will be compared with the Wisconsin strain of barred muskies to see which strain is best suited for the state’s waters. The former Wisconsin D.N.R.’s southern fish manager, Kurt Welke, said that the Leech Lake strain is the beginning of a “through and comprehensive multi-year experiment.” The mixing of the two different strains shouldn’t be a problem or threat to the fish populations and environment of Lake Monona. Before their release, the muskies were “tagged” with a passive-integrated-transponder (PIT) inserted in their body. These PIT tags allow technicians and helping anglers to record data for research when a “wand” is passed over the fish. The data recorded has when the fish was stocked, the measureables, and the initial muskie size.

This research will take many years before any solid data is available for the fishery managers to compare and decide what is

the fastest growing and most economical muskie to raise and stock in Wisconsin's waters. Hopefully, the stocking will be minimal if the Leech Lake muskies reproduce in these waters and do as well as they have in other lakes.

The future looks bright for the Madison Chain, Lake Wissota, and the Petenwell Flowage all where Leech Lake muskies have been stocked. Since Sept. 1, 2009, there have been 11 muskies caught over the magic 50-inch mark in the Madison lakes. This is the first verified catch of muskies of this size in these lakes.

Every fall the DNR and the Capital City Chapter of Muskies, Inc. have been busy stocking muskies. Again this October, the Madison lakes will be stocked with Wisconsin strain muskies in the 10-12 inch range at various locations around the lake. Workers have to be careful because larger muskies and sea gulls feast on these smaller fish.

This spring I was at the Olin Park boat landing in downtown Madison for a stocking of the Leech Lake strain. I ran into past club president, Lee Bartolini, who gave me some facts and information on the project and the contributions the club has made.

"As a club whose primary purpose is to promote the sport of muskie fishing, we work closely with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in its effort to maintain a high quality muskellunge sport fishery through stocking," Bartolini said.

In cooperation with the DNR, they stocked about 1,000 muskies a year in Lake Monona, 500 Leech Lake strain and 500 Wisconsin strain fish, for the first period of five years of the experiment. The released muskies were PIT tagged and 10-12 when originally stocked. The muskies cost \$17 each plus the tag which the club is

also paying for beside the muskie. This year the Capital City Chapter wrote a check for over \$8,000 for the muskie stocking.

Since the study began, over 6,000 muskies have been stocked for this study. Five hundred 10- to 12-inch Wisconsin strain muskies and 500 Leech Lake strain muskies have been stocked in 2007 through 2017, and again this year. Leech Lake muskies were not available that year. There have been other muskies stocked, but all the muskies in this study have the PIT tag in them for gathering information and helping the future of muskies in the state of Wisconsin. Most of the data gathered so far has come from Wisconsin strain muskies that have been caught and “passed” over with the wand to read the implanted PIT tags.

Only time will tell, but make sure to fish the Madison Chain for muskies because it looks like the fishing will continue to improve and you don't have to go to Canada to catch a 50-inch fish.

A week ago Saturday was the 21st Annual Take an Adult Fishing tournament.

It was a beautiful Wisconsin day with morning temperature in the 50s and rising to 70 degrees. The sky was a beautiful blue for the 60 some young anglers and their parents or guardians.

Most of the “teams” caught fish from the six categories; trout, bass (both kinds), walleye, catfish, roughfish, and panfish.

The National Association of Professional Anglers (NPA) anglers did most of the work. They included myself, Wally Banfi, Duffy Kopf and Chuck Pohlman. This was the 21st year of the event and I'm proud to have been a part of it.

Some of the largest fish which were released were a 5.11-pound

smallmouth caught by Jordan Gauger, a 1.29-pound walleye by Hamden Feiner, a 1.64-pound rainbow trout, a .67-pound bluegill by Ella Tuttle, a 6.89-pound carp by Elwood Devoy Voeliker, and a 4.23-pound catfish by Addison Gager.

The N.P.A.A. gave everyone a rod and reel plus a T-shirt.

Contact Gary Engberg, a freelance outdoors writer from Mazomanie, at gengberg@chorus.net, 608-795-4208 or visit him at <http://www.garyengbergoutdoors.com>.

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