

North Carolina Sport Fish Profiles



Muskellunge

Scientific Name:
Esox masquinongy

Other Names:
musky, great pike



Illustration by Duane Raver

Identification:

A member of the pike family, the muskellunge

has an olive-to-dark-gray back with a silvery side. Its sides usually have vertical bars or blotches, and its fins have spots or streaks. The muskellunge has 12 to 18 small pores underneath the jaw, six to eight on each side. The Northern pike, a close relative of the muskellunge not found in North Carolina, only has 10 pores underneath the jaw. The chain pickerel is sometimes mistaken for a small muskellunge, but the pickerel has a black bar beneath the eye and the muskellunge does not.

Habitats and Habits:

Muskellunge are native to portions of the Mississippi River drainage, the Great Lakes, portions of Hudson Bay and a few northern Atlantic drainages. Muskellunge and tiger musky (a cross between a northern pike and muskellunge) are occasionally reported in the Catawba and Yadkin River systems, where they were stocked years ago.

Muskellunge prefer coolwater rivers and lakes with abundant woody debris, vegetation and rocky habitat. As a top predator, they feed on a variety of fishes, particularly suckers, as well as salamanders, small mammals and other large food items. Muskellunge are not easy to catch, partly because their numbers can be very sparse. Studies have shown that in some rivers, there may be as few as one adult fish for every 12 to 14 acres of pool habitat.

Fishing Techniques:

Anglers often fish large pools and around woody debris. Because musky are large and toothy, heavy baitcasting tackle spooled with 30-pound test line or stronger is common. Lures include large crankbaits, spoons, bucktails and spinner-baits, as well as live suckers and other large baitfish.

Good Places to Fish:

Through its Table Rock State Fish Hatchery in Burke County, the Commission stocks muskellunge in the French Broad, Nolichucky and New rivers as well as Lake Adger, an impoundment on the Green River. Anglers can sometimes catch muskellunge in unstocked reservoirs, such as Fontana and Hiwassee.

Other Information:

NCARP Minimum Requirements: 20 pounds or 41 inches

State Record: 41 lbs., 8 oz., from Lake Adger, Jan. 23, 2001

World Record: 67 lbs., 8 oz., from Lake Court Oreilles, Hayward, Wis., July 24, 1949*

** Anglers provide information on their potential world-record catches directly to the International Game Fish Association, which maintains the world records for sport fishing.*