

Fragile! Handle With Care...

By Ken Taggart

One of the most important things we can do to ensure the well being of the Muskies we release is to handle them carefully. There are many ways to properly land a muskie. Basically the tools available include Nets of all types and sizes, Cradle devices, Release Gaffs and various Lip Locking devices. Some are better than others. Some of the methods provide benefits to the anglers in easing the capture and others benefit the fish more than the angler.

I have used most of these methods and devices on various sized fish. I want to share my experiences with them and hopefully save you some time and expense in the process. The best landing method to choose and use regularly can depend on individual circumstances. Generally we want to try and minimize the fight time, handling of the fish and out of water time by using a landing method that can be applied quickly and safely for the fish and the angler.

Landing a Muskie quickly can be difficult using some landing methods. For instance when hand landing or using a cradle you often have to play the fish a little longer to be able to land it safely. Release Gaffs and Lip Locking devices require a little less fight time but they have their problems as well. The problem I have with using a Release Gaff as my only landing method is you need to put an extra hole in the fish. The Lip Locking devices in my opinion are a broken jaw waiting to happen. The surface area that actually grabs the fishes jaw is so small that you can actually tear the skin when grabbing the fish. If the fish thrashes when connected, chances are good that there will be additional injury due to twisting even if there is a swivel built into the unit.

I have had some problems with a Cradle as well. Besides being a 2 man operation there are inherent risks in using a cradle. The fish must be played longer and the risk of losing the fish is higher. The risk of injury to the person holding the cradle is a concern as well due to the way the fish must be brought into the cradle teeth first. I have watched helplessly as a 53" Muskie I caught was in and out of the cradle 3 times while trying to land the fish and it finally shook the lure and swam away without getting a picture. I have watched my fishing partners 50"+ trophy Muskie roll out of the cradle during a Release outing. I have watched special fish, like someone's first Muskie, escape through the cradle, shake the hooks and get away.

I have also had some trouble with the Release Gaff. There is a higher chance for the fish to escape and risk of injury to the fish with any Gaff. Premature release can be a problem in that the fish can slide off the Gaff and escape if you are not very careful. This happened to me with my wife's first 40" Muskie that got away without a picture. Boy did I pay for that one.

Water release has been shown to be the best method for the fish. Minimizing out of water time is key and the water supports the fish much better than we ever can in the air. One way to accomplish this is with one of the new large Muskie landing nets on the market today. They are available with knotless and rubber coated bags to minimize damage to the fish. Basically the net is used as a corral for the fish in the water. This allows the angler plenty of time to prepare the release tools and camera without having to rush and worry about losing or stressing the fish. The fish is just relaxing and catching it's breath in the "pen" as shown at right. Most times the fish will just lay there quietly without even trying to struggle to get away.

I had been apprehensive about purchasing a large net because the main problem with them tends to be storage in the boat. I fish most of the time from a 14.5ft Princecraft Fisherman Tiller so my floor space is limited. I really didn't think there was enough room for one of these monsters in the boat. Besides the expense, the size is the number one reason I hear for people not buying them.

Last season I made the financial leap and purchased one of the purpose built Muskie Nets. I have to report that it is by far the best purchase I ever made with respect to fish handling equipment. As it turns out a little careful planning and there is lots of room. The handle collapses so that the total length is reduced to the size of the hoop. So I can store the net between the front and middle bench seat laying on it's side against the gunwale.

I have landed approximately 20 various sized Muskies with this net so far and have not had any problems. I can use it by myself which is a big plus. I just keep pressure on the fish with the rod in one hand while getting the net ready with the other hand. I slide the handle into the locked position and lay the net on the side of the boat. When the fish is close enough to the boat to reach with the net, I just slip it under the fish, hit the free spool on the reel and put the rod down. I leave the bag of the net and the fish in the water and lay the hoop over top of my rod holder. This allows me both hands free to work with the fish. Often times the hooks catch in the bag as the fish goes in and the lure falls out. The release is as easy as grabbing the fish by the tail and dipping the net below the water so the fish can swim away when it's ready.

A 45" x 21" Muskie recuperates in a large Muskie net.



A word of caution! Never try to lift the fish out of the water using one of these nets! The fish will go berserk and you really risk damaging the fish and your net.

If you have ever considered getting one of these nets and didn't, I highly recommend you think about it again. There is no need any more for the panic that usually ensues while landing a big Muskie with any other method. It really reduces the stress, on the angler and the fish, to be able to land it safely and quickly. Overall it's a much more enjoyable experience for both parties...