

# On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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## Trolling or Surface Lures? Double the fun for muskies

By Dick Ellis



Phil Schweik clients on the Wisconsin River system near Wausau have experienced great musky fishing on topwater lures this summer, including one 53-inch fish caught and released with an estimated weight of 40 pounds

**M**y journey as a musky hunter has evolved primarily from casting to row trolling, in large part due to my heritage as a nephew

to the recognized master of Wisconsin row trolling, Bob Ellis. I am also living proof that angling talent sometimes skips generations. I call row trolling

the “great equalizer”. Even those of us that lack the on-the-water skills that translate into conditions plus presentation specific to those conditions equals fish in the boat. Row trolling allows all of us the ability to catch fish even though we don’t always know exactly “why”. We are simply moving in and out of good water that might be holding a good fish that might be hungry.

Now, I do “kind-of” know what I’m doing on the water. I work structure or use deep-water baitfish as “structure”, a theory and practice pioneered by Bob Ellis. But I doubt that I would have caught the three walleyes over 27 inches in recent seasons taken row trolling had I simply chosen water and went to jigging on northern Wisconsin waters. Or, the number of muskies caught trolling the deep water had I simply casted. Pulling home-made Bobby Ellis special crafted by my brother Jim Ellis and store-purchased old reliables without ever taking the bait out of the water in my opinion is that great equalizer that allows all of us to catch fish. As row trollers, our line stays wet. It’s when the guys who “really” know what they’re doing out there take up row trolling that things really get dangerous...for the fish.

In June, during my first row trolling adventure of the summer from our cabin on the Manitowish Chain, I lost a fish over deep water. I had pur-

posely dug out my brother’s lure which was a match for the bait my brother-in-law Bob Johnson had used the day before to land a 28-inch walleye and a 40 inch musky. That one bait alone crafted by Jim Ellis has led to close one dozen good muskies caught by Bob Johnson.

We’ll get back to more Bob Ellis row trolling later this year. The master was killed in 1989 in a collision with a power boat while row trolling. He’s now in the Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame in Hayward and The Bob Ellis Row Trolling Classic is held each year in his memory. There are some interesting new pieces to his life that I’m pursuing and will relay soon.

In addition to suggesting that you, the reader should consider row trolling for pure fishing fun, there is one other musky tactic that can still pull me out from behind the oars. Throwing surface lures when fish are active means pure excitement. Several years ago, my brother John Ellis and I lost three fish of about 40 inches in one hour throwing surface lures in Rice Creek. As an outdoor reporter, I was disgusted with our “zero” batting average. The story line that such fabulous action had come in less than 60 minutes would lose some credence with no photo proof? As if on cue, the largest fish of the day, a 45 inch beauty, slammed John’s next surface retrieve, and we had our cover girl to pose and release.



Dick Ellis calls row trolling a 'great equalizer' for anglers who may not know every detail about fishing, like the writer, shown with a 27 inch walleye before release. Trolling allows persistent fishermen willing to put their time in to 'keep their line' wet and keep fishing. (John Ellis)



Bob Johnson and Jim Elis expect very good action on both muskies and big walleyes when row trolling deep water, usually with home-made lures crafted by Jim Ellis and often at night. In June, Bob Johnson caught and released a 28 inch walleye on a Hot-N-Tot and a 40 inch musky on Jim Ellis homemade bait within one hour.

"Slam" is the word. At this time of year we watch baby ducklings and goslings lose their numbers as they trail behind mama day after day, providing a sometimes irresistible target for a hungry predator waiting for a meal beneath the surface. That also makes this time of year so effective for surface lures. My friend and guide Phil Schweik is murdering muskies on the Wisconsin system near Wausau now on surface baits including a fish caught and released at 53 inches and 40-some pound. It's fun, it's productive, and it's sometimes beautifully unnerving.

"Surface baits have distinctive, individual characteristics but they also have one thing in common," Schweik said after sending photos of his clients and the fish that fell to a surface snack. "Explosive, unforgettable, mind blowing strikes that will send water spraying and children running for cover."

"Walk the Dog lures will zig-zag through the water with a tantalizing back and forth motion that can tempt somewhat lethargic muskies into

striking," he said, in offering tactics tricks when using his favorite types of lures. "On certain applications you can also get walk the dog style top water baits to dive and pop on the surface by sharply snapping the rod tip. This action at times can entice lazy followers into becoming aggressive strikers. I primarily use walk the dog style baits very early in the day or late in the evening and on very rare occasions very overcast days with little or no wind. The bait is especially effective throughout the summer months. Of all the top water baits, this is the big fish bait."

Schweik said Prop Style Baits have evolved from the old globe to baits like Top Raiders and Sputterducks. He said the primary purpose for prop style lures is to spray water into the air during retrieval to create surface commotion. In addition to a steady retrieve to imitate swimming prey, Schweik recommends a periodic rod jerk.

"The steady retrieve will create quite a commotion on the surface all on its own but when you give that "extra"

sharp jerk on the rod during retrieve you may be able to get the attention of a lethargic fish or entice a following fish into striking," Schweik said. "The best time of the day for running prop style baits is basically...anytime. These lures will work at all hours of the day but I've had my best luck early in the mornings till 10:00 and again from the evening hours until after dark. They also work if it's overcast with little to moderate wind and especially if it's raining."

The slow retrieve and lazy back and forth motion of creeper style baits, Schweik said, will drive the angler crazy. The good news is it also drives the musky crazy. When used in the right situation, he calls the creeper bait, "absolutely deadly".

"When I have an exact point on a weedbed or a specific log along a shoreline or maybe a sunken rock pile that I know is holding a fish I bring out the creeper bait," Schweik said. "These are not the type of lures you want to use when searching for fish. Maybe you had a recent blowup from a musky but the

fish missed the bait or maybe you had a follow but the fish wouldn't commit or you know the location of a fish from a previous visit. This is the time to bring out the creeper style bait. The slow tantalizing and enticing motion of these types of lures are usually more than any musky can take. You are throwing the lure into his kitchen and giving them all the opportunity in the world to eat it. The steady click, clack back and forth motion and sound of this bait is often too much for any musky to handle."

"One thing topwater baits have in common is the violent and explosive strikes that they provoke. No matter if the strike is out 20 feet from the boat or right at your feet, a strike on top water bait is one of the most exciting a rewarding to any musky fisherman on the water." <sup>OWO</sup>

Connect with Phil Schweik and Hooksetters Guide Service at [www.hooksetters.biz](http://www.hooksetters.biz).

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