

MAKING THE WIND WORK FOR YOU

By: Sara Trampe

Slight chop and low light create ideal conditions for fish to slide up shallow. Photo courtesy Seeke Creative.

We all know that wind is an important factor when fishing; from pan fishing to muskie fishing, wind directs us. But what does it exactly do? And how much does wind matter?

A favorite adage is ... “Wind from the south, the hook is in the fish’s mouth. Wind from the west, fishing is best. Wind from the east, fish bite the least, and winds from the north, only the bravest fishermen go forth.” This is an excellent indicator of what conditions you may expect to find when out on the water. But it’s just that, an indicator. It doesn’t mean that north and east winds are a lost cause. Or that a west wind guarantees a bite.

I’m not a meteorologist, so I will keep weather ‘splaining to a minimum. But that favorite adage of mine explains that west and south winds are usually more stable weather patterns; with the way the Earth rotates, the location of the poles, and changing pressure areas, the most stable movement of air is from the south and the west. North and east winds are usually a change in pressure from an incoming storm. North winds are more common in fall, “blowing in winter,” making an easterly blow the most uncommon and, in my experience, the hardest condition to combat.

Now that we’ve had that fun science lesson, let’s talk about how that actually and effectively will determine where the fish are and how active they will be. There are so many factors that go into a fish eating that, unfortunately, there is no 100% accurate answer - plus, different fish eat at different times. And no matter what I tell you, there will be a situation when you can call me a liar, but using wind to your advantage can help put more muskie in the boat. Knowing certain wind shifts can cause significant hindrances might also help you avoid feeling hopeless.

Wind direction is not as important as consistency. If you have a consistent 10 -12 mph south wind for four days, you can find active fish. Your success on the water for the day will depend on which structures you fish and how you fish them. You have to thoroughly know a piece of water and structure before accurately saying, “they just weren’t biting.” Because if you fish a piece of structure that holds fish during a south wind but you are fishing in a north wind, it isn’t the fish; it’s the location you’re fishing.

Let’s back up. Why does wind dictate where to fish? Wind can create current that will push plankton and

tiny microorganisms in the water column in the same direction the wind is blowing until it reaches structure or a point where it can't blow further. Baitfish follow the plankton, small fish follow the baitfish, and the predator fish follow the small fish. This is all instinctive for fish, and predator fish will use this to their advantage for easily stalking and ambushing their prey. Simply put - wind pushes food, and fish follow their food source.

Wind, or waves, break up the water's surface, making it much harder for the fish to look up and see beyond the surface, meaning the fish can't see you, or lure defects, as easily. Muskie will rely more heavily on their lateral line during circumstances of less visibility. I will predominantly use a bucktail when fish are relatively shallow with the wind because I can easily work it under those circumstances. The bucktail gives off a thump or vibration that the fish can feel. This is also a reason why fishing stained water can seem easier than clear water; fish are using their instinct based on movement more than actually seeing what they are chasing.

I briefly mentioned earlier that consistent wind is more significant than wind direction. And this is explained



When wind conditions push fish shallow, it's really tough to beat the productivity of bucktails.



The author with a clean looking fish caught under bright skies and steady winds.

by the fact that the fish are already in an established pattern. They are set up on their ambush spots and can predict what their prey will be doing. When the wind changes, it stirs up the water and makes it more difficult for an angler to accurately predict where the fish will be and how they will be positioned on a structure.

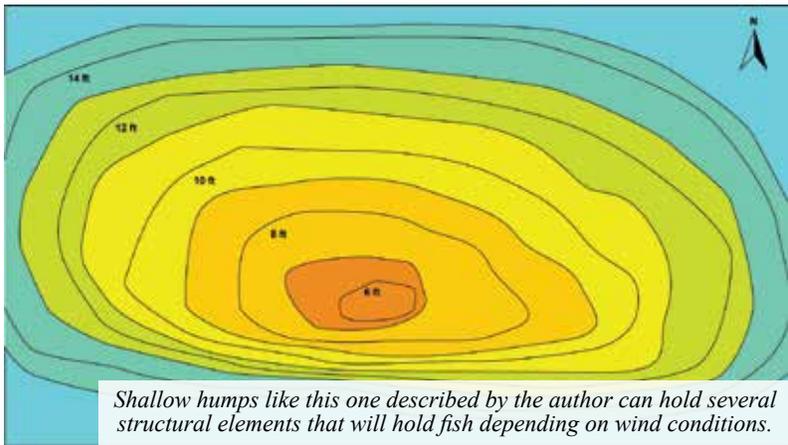
But when I say wind direction isn't as important as consistency, this doesn't mean that wind direction isn't important. Wind direction plays a very important role in where to fish. In my earlier years of wanting to catch a muskie, I didn't necessarily want to sacrifice my comfort, so I spent a lot of time casting useless structures and shorelines because I wanted to get out of the wind. And perhaps I would see small muskies and

hook up with those, but the big girls are hunting the wind-blown points. So, if you are looking for the bigger fish in the system, they are not in the calm bays during a consistent blow.

Let's fish an imaginary main lake hump together. Its peak comes up to 6 feet, and the east and north sides gradually slope into the depths covered with large boulders. The south side has a much steeper drop, and the west edge has a shallower flat with sporadic weeds and tapers off.

When a consistent west wind blows during a midsummer

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Shallow humps like this one described by the author can hold several structural elements that will hold fish depending on wind conditions.

day, the west side of our main lake hump will hold fish. I would start on the fast-sloping southwest corner and work my way across, fishing deeper to shallow into the northwest side, where fish could also be laid up in the boulders.

But let's say there's an island further out west of the hump; now, the fish are much more likely to be laid up on the northwest corner where the wind will be funneling baitfish into the rocks instead of the calm, western weed flat. It's all about how the wind hits the structure and where the baitfish are.

Fishing the structure properly is just as important as fishing the correct structure. Let's go back to our main lake hump. Same conditions as earlier, but I approach from the northwest first. First, I'm missing a big section of the underwater boulders that could be holding fish. Second, I'm also not casting 100% with the wind, which decreases castability, and in some instances, I might be bringing my bait past a fish that has to turn entirely around to try and eat. This brings the muskie into the boat for a possible boat side strike or a sideways hookset and alerts the fish of my presence if it doesn't hit. I'm not positioning myself to have the best chance at a successful hookset.

Wind speed also plays a factor. First and foremost, boater safety is the number one priority - high wind speeds can cause unsafe conditions for you, and the size of the boat you are operating should keep you off the water. High, powerful winds will also drive fish deeper into the water column for more control and

stability in their movements. But if it isn't dangerous wind conditions, it's prime time to cast for muskies.

While a consistent wind can produce a consistent bite, storms and fronts are associated with stronger winds and changes in barometric pressure; these pressure drops bring opportunities for big fish. Indeed, big fish are old fish, and old fish are experienced fish. They know what conditions will produce the most optimal time for them to move shallow for feeding. The most optimal condition for anglers is when a front moves in, coming from the exact same direction that the wind has been blowing. If you are out fishing and a front rolls through, fishing will peak as long as the pressure is dropping, but once the storm settles in and the pressure starts to rise, fishing will slow until the weather stabilizes.

What if the wind lays down completely? The fishing will slow because this is a period of rising pressure, but the time for recovery will depend on several factors including when the muskie ate last and how long it takes for the pressure to stabilize. I have found that fish will recover much faster when the wind lays down versus when a major storm rolls through. However, when the wind lays down, you are not only losing the lower pressure system, you are now losing the refraction on the surface of the water, increasing visibility. This could be a good time for adjustments in bait selection or the depth you are fishing, or maybe it's just a good time for a lunch break.

In my opinion, the most detrimental of all wind factors is a wind shift. I would rather have a 20-degree temperature drop with sustained winds than a wind shift. Wind shifts are a change in pressure, which could be rising or falling, and a change in the current, which means relocation of the food source. How fast does a wind change affect the location of the food? It depends on the wind speed, and it isn't instantaneous. However, I have fished many times when a wind shift occurs, and the fishing is affected faster than I can imagine, from fishing a structure with active fish to nothing in a matter of minutes.

The more casts you make, the more successful you will be, and even fishing in non-ideal situations will make you a better angler. ■■



The author with a muskie that clearly has not skipped a meal!