

in pursuit of

PIKE

BY MARK BEAUCHESNE

Stalking the wily “water wolf” on the Connecticut River

The name *pike* inspires fear and excitement in the heart of the New Hampshire angler. I’ve heard it said that northern pike (*Esox lucius*), sometimes known as the “water wolf,” is so vicious it’ll take down a small duck with its toothy smile. For several seasons now, I have pursued pike in New Hampshire’s waters. The rush of excitement that comes over me every time I cast for this wonderful fish has no equal.

Although pike are not native to New Hampshire, they have become a favorite sport fish in several waterbodies. (See the *N.H. Freshwater Fishing Guide*, available at the Fish and Game website, for information on pike locations.) In particular, the Connecticut River from Hinsdale to Littleton produces a large number of big pike each year. According to N.H. Fish

and Game fisheries biologist Gabe Gries, this is because of near-perfect conditions that exist for pike in this waterbody; fish are able to find appropriate year-round habitat, and the abundance of smaller fish that they can eat is unbelievable. This translates into fast growth rates and plenty of pike!

A Worthy Opponent

The northern pike is not, as some believe, an overgrown chain pickerel, though the two fish are of the same family. The main difference is this: the pike is a thinker. As top predator in the Connecticut River, the pike grows very large and wise.

Pike are built for speed. Their streamlined bodies are ideal for exploding from their hiding spots to engulf unsuspecting



prey. Known as “sight predators,” pike have very large eyes that are focused forward. Pike also rely heavily on the “lateral line” — an amazing sensory system that gives them excellent awareness of their physical surroundings — to help locate prey. Pike have an added advantage to their lateral line system: a row of tiny pores on the underside of the lower jaw. These pores have miniscule hairs inside them that react to vibrations in the water and are directly linked with the lateral line system for super sensitivity.

Pike have a distinctive pattern that will help you distinguish them from pickerel — light-colored bean shapes over a dark background. Also, the pike’s gill plate is only scaled on the upper half, whereas the chain pickerel’s is fully scaled.

With specialized predatory tools including a mouth full of knife-edged teeth, the pike is a worthy opponent. Understanding these tools is just a part of being successful when fishing for pike.

Follow the Fish

Their habitat and seasonal location play a vital role in catching pike consistently. Pike get an early start on spawning, moving into the backwaters of the Connecticut to spawn

in late March. They rarely wait for open water and will spawn under the ice. Since these backwater areas are the first to warm up in the spring, many other river fish use these areas for spawning, too. The pike are there, awaiting their arrival. Spring offers the pike a steady diet of sunfish, perch, bass, frogs, salamanders — and yes, ducklings and small mammals. A pike will eat just about anything. But don’t be fooled by the pike’s omnivorous appetite: they can be frustrating to hook.

In April, the air and water temperatures tend to be in the 40s. The sun will do its job on the backwaters, warming these areas and bringing the pike onto the feed as the water heats up to 50 degrees or so. Water temperatures are a key factor. Too cold and the fish will be sluggish; too warm, the pike move out.

But 50°F is just right, so it’s time for the first trip of the year to the river. My friends and I are armed with both spinning and fly fishing tackle — imitation baitfish lures and flies, a strong spinning rod with ten-pound test line. We’re carrying a seven-weight fly rod with a floating or intermediate line. Both the spinning rod and the fly rod get extra protection from the

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CHOICE LURES AND FLIES FOR PIKE

- Mepps Musky Killer spinner in black and yellow is great for fishing the early season. This spinner really thumps hard on a slow retrieve.
- A floating Rapala, fished slowly in the spring, will turn the heads of many pike. This lure is also good for the summer months — fish it deeper and faster.
- A large Daredevil spoon (right) is a classic pike-catcher. The wobble, flash and vibrations of this spoon are a terrific tease.
- A large willow-leaf style spinner bait in the “clown” color brought me my biggest pike yet. I like this one for an all-season lure: fish it slow in the spring, burn it in the summer. There isn’t a pike that can resist this bait in the fall.
- Soft plastic baitfish lures like the Super Fluke have their place all season long. I adjust my pace when I fish this lure, and adjust the weight as summer progresses. The slow-dying action of this lure is irresistible to pike.
- Topwater propeller-type baits are a blast to fish — brace yourself for a pike explosion!



Chasing pike with a fly rod? There are many great flies to choose from. Here are a few of my favorites:

- Lefty’s Deceiver in yellow.
- Red and white Seaducer.
- Red and white deer-hair popper.
- The double bunny in chartreuse & white.
- Red and white rabbit strip diver (above).



pike’s teeth with about a foot of steel leader. This stuff works great — and it’s your best insurance against getting your favorite lure snapped off.

We work the shoreline and any visible weed beds, where the pike are hiding and waiting for food to swim or float past. Suddenly, the water rises up behind my spinner. It’s a pike for sure! The fish is in full view; the eyes of the pike are locked onto my spinner, and my heart is high in my throat. The pike is either going to inhale my offering or follow it to consider the color, shape or speed. The pike continues to chase my spinner — almost back to the boat. I maneuver the rod in figure eights, trying to enrage the pike. Without warning, the pike turns and slowly swims away. But what a rush!

Best Bets for Late Season

Later on in the spring, the backwaters of the Connecticut have become too warm for the pike, so they take the stage in the main river. Having a strong liking for weeds, pike will seek refuge in areas where weed growth is visible. They also hang out among downed trees, rocks or any sort of break in the current. You can use the same angling tactics as you did earlier in the year; but the food

Don’t stick your thumb in here! The pike’s arsenal of knife-edged, pointed teeth demonstrates the need for using wire leaders.



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choices are improved in the main river, making the pike a bit fussier. (See page 6 for top bait picks.)

Come summer, when the river is just right for swimming, the pike fishing slows down. But you'll still have quality shots at pike, especially on cloudy days. Fishing in the early mornings or until the last bit of light are summertime best bets. Think of the river as a set of steps: the top step is the visible bank. Down one step and you're at the weed line. Down another step you'll find the submerged weed line. That's where the pike are in midsummer — the water is cooler, and sunlight is less of a factor.

Having proper position on the weed line is a must, and it's why most pike fishing is done from a boat rather than from shore. Pike will lie on any side of the weeds — it depends on the temperature and the amount and angle of sunlight. Aligning yourself so you can cast parallel to the weeds will allow you to cover most of the weed patch. I also like to fish the up-river section of the weeds first, then pick a few shots at openings in the weeds. Most of the pike I catch around a weed patch come from the down-river side.

On the outside of many of the long bends of the Connecticut there's a patch of submerged weeds close to the main river channel that makes a great summer spot. The river carries sediment and deposits it on the "slower" edge of the bend.

LIMITS & LAWS

The daily limit of one pike per day with a minimum length of 28 inches helps ensure that large pike are not overharvested and that there are plenty of mature fish available to spawn each spring. Nonetheless, says fisheries biologist Gabe Gries, pike are a top predator; though they are able to coexist with and not negatively impact other fish species in some waterbodies, they must NEVER be introduced to new waterbodies without a thorough biological review of the waterbody and its current fish population.



ERIC ENGBREITSON PHOTO

These sediment deposits, which often have a wavy bottom texture, provide ambush points for the pike and therefore productive fishing.

By mid-September, water temperatures are on the way back down. For me, this is when the river really shines. The weather is good; the surrounding mountains are flush with fall colors. Best of all, the pike are hungry and very aggressive. They know that winter is on the way and it's time to put on the feed.

I'll admit it: Thoughts of pike fishing consume most of my free time. I am ready for my next shot at a big pike, and maybe now you are too. Grab your rod and a few simple lures, tie on a foot of steel leader, and go feel the rush of pike fishing!



Mark Beauchesne is coordinator of N.H. Fish and Game's Let's Go Fishing Program. Fisheries biologist Gabe Gries contributed to this article.

At home waiting for dinner: Rocks, weeds and woody debris are prime pike locations.

MONSTER PIKE ON ICE

The state record for northern pike is 45 inches — and it was taken through the ice! This monster pike, which weighed just under 25 pounds, was caught by Jacques Renaud of Vermont in late March of 2002.

As long as the ice is still safe in late winter/early spring, ice anglers tend to target the pike in the backwaters. (Early ice is highly productive, too.) Big bait is the key to having a shot at getting a pike under the ice — a large sucker, in the 12-inch range, makes for a tempting meal. Tip-ups are the ice fishing tool of choice. Be sure to add a wire leader.



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