

The Overlooked Northern

by Jeff Knapp

photos by the author

Like the backup quarterback who commendably fills in for the injured starter, northern pike aren't always appreciated until the more popular species are tight-lipped. Pike fishing opportunities are often overlooked.

Last fall, a group of anglers met on Crawford County's Conneaut Lake to test the possibilities of some new lure designs. The weather wasn't in a cooperative mood. Three days of cold and rain prevailed, hindering bass activity with a few exceptions. However, the pike relished the foul weather, consistently pouncing on both hard- and soft-bodied lures fished over and around Conneaut's abundant weed beds.

Without this activity, there would have been some dull moments.

In general, the reputation of Pennsylvania's northern pike fisheries is that the fish don't reach quality size. But, worthy pike fisheries do exist. Some of these fisheries have pike of 28 inches and longer.

Northern pike are native to the Ohio River basin including the Allegheny and Monongahela watersheds as well as Lake Erie. It isn't surprising that many of the better pike fisheries are found in the western portion of the state. However, there are opportunities to the east. The Susquehanna River



Don't be afraid to use loud-colored lures for pike. Northern pike like visible patterns that incorporate orange, lime green or chartreuse.

Pike



produces some nice pike. Cambria County's Glendale Lake has good numbers of northern pike. But for consistent pike fishing, go to the western waters. Fall is one of the best times of the year for open-water angling. This is when the bigger fish appear. Here's a look at a handful of our best northern pike waters.

Conneaut Lake

A natural inhabitant to Pennsylvania's largest natural lake, northern pike populations have been especially striking during the past decade, as larger-sized fish have been evident.

Conneaut Lake packs a lot of features in its modest 900-plus acres including areas of submerged weed growth such as milfoil, coontail and a variety of large-leafed pondweeds. This cover provides ambush points for pike. The fishing pattern for pike on Conneaut is to concentrate on the edges of weedgrowth.

The two major edges to cover are the deep edge as well as the tops of the weeds. Subsurface weeds grow out to depths of 10 feet, a perfect scenario for pitching a skirted bass jig tipped with a soft trailer next to the outside edge and allowing it to flutter down. Pike are tooth critters, so it's wise to incorporate a 6- to 12-inch fluorocarbon leader of 60-pound-test line. Such leaders will prevent bite offs.

A hard-bodied jerkbait worked in an aggressive, erratic fashion produces multiple northern pike hits.

Submerged weeds are regularly cropped below the surface by a harvesting machine to minimize the impact of weeds on the lake's boating crowd. The result is a band of water 2 to 3 feet above the tops of many weed stands. Aggressive pike will rise out of the weeds to intercept moving baits such as soft swimbaits or lipless crankbaits.

The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission maintains an access area on the northwestern corner of the lake off Route 618. While boat traffic lessens in the fall, Conneaut still sees plenty of boating. It's wise to plan autumn pike trips during non-peak boating periods or during inclement weather.

Middle Allegheny River and Kinzua Reservoir

The 100-plus miles of the Allegheny River from the Kinzua outflow to the start of the navigable water near East Brady harbors a strong northern pike population including a fair percentage of quality-sized fish. It's likely that the upper end of this stretch, from Kinzua outflow to the West Hickory area, contains the best pike. This is because the water remains

The Overlooked Northern Pike



The impressive dentures of northern pike necessitate the need for a strong leader to prevent bite-offs.

cooler due to the dam's discharge. Northerns, particularly larger ones, like cool-water environments rather than warm water. The pike are well distributed throughout the entire length of the waterway.

Pike show up in a variety of river locations. During the early fall, expect to find northerns in places with good shallow water cover such as islands and creek or river mouths. As the water temperature cools and drops into the 40s and below, pike will drift to deeper, slower water pools. When the water is still relatively warm, northerns will chase down moving baits like fluke-style soft jerkbaits and hard jerkbaits. Spinnerbaits do extremely well, particularly when the water is colored from fall rains. The movement to slower water will find fish responding to jig-style offerings presented near the bottom of prime holes.

Access areas are well distributed along the middle Allegheny River. Though much of the river features shallow riffles that require jet-drive outboards during normal flows, there are major pools with good access, such as Oil City and

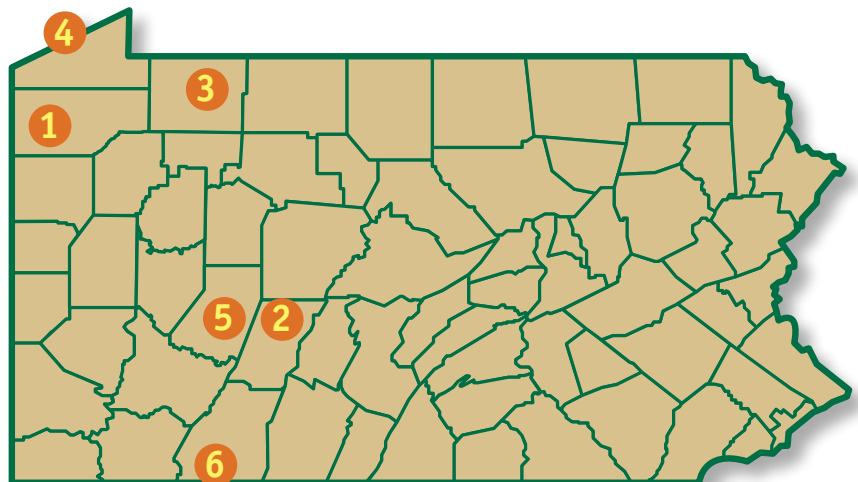
Tionesta, where prop-driven boats can be operated safely. Both can be good options, especially in the late fall, after the fish have moved to deeper or slower water.

The backwaters of Kinzua Lake (Allegheny Reservoir) provide the best opportunity for taking trophy-sized pike. This lake has a reputation for giving up many of its biggest pike during the ice fishing season. Large northerns are taken during open water, mostly by trollers presenting large lures near schools of suspended baitfish spotted on a sonar unit.

Other fine pike waters

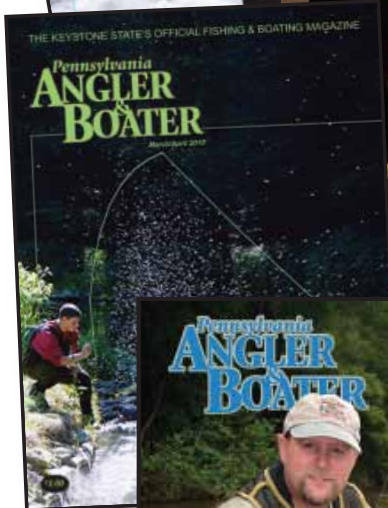
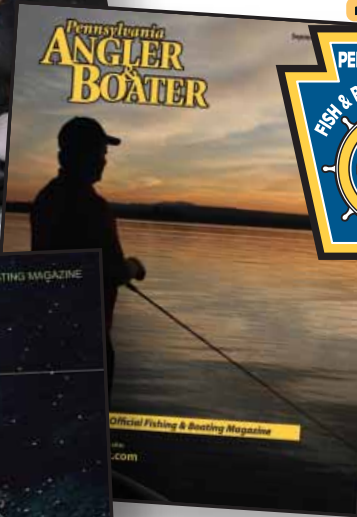
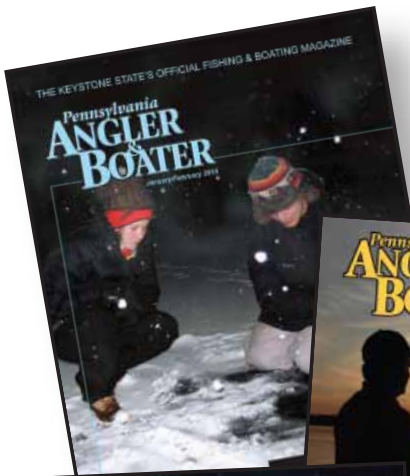
Honorable mention includes Presque Isle Bay, where nice fall northerns can be taken working the bay's weedbeds with the same tactics described above for Conneaut Lake. Indiana County's Yellow Creek Lake holds plenty of pike. By late fall, most of the better fish are taken by jigging the edges of the primary channel. Somerset County's High Point Lake is also a good choice, with pike relating to the weed cover of this Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission lake. 🪿

- 1 Conneaut Lake, Crawford County
- 2 Glendale Lake, Cambria County
- 3 Middle Allegheny River, Warren County
- 4 Presque Isle Bay, Erie County
- 5 Yellow Creek Lake, Indiana County
- 6 High Point Lake, Somerset County





*River bends, rock bars
and major islands
often form
the slower,
deeper pools
that attract
late fall
northern
pike.*



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