As Matt Burke and I prepared to fish the West Branch of French Creek for the first time, a truck pulled up to us on the dirt road, and a local resident asked us where we were from. After hearing we were from Pittsburgh, and that we had never fished the West Branch before, he began trying to convince us to change our plans.

He told us that all we would catch in the creek were “a bunch of pike and maybe an occasional musky,” and then we were given directions to a nearby farm pond to fish as an alternative. Because we were out-of-town fishermen, we appreciated his sincere interest in us. But after our conversation, our hopes were higher than ever. We had made the trip for the pike.

Fifteen minutes later, we were wading a slow, narrow stretch of stream that averaged three to four feet deep from bank to bank. The usual feeling of eagerness I get when anticipating a big fish was heightened by the unfamiliar but promising-looking new water I was in.

My buzzbait zipped away from the overhanging brush where I had cast, and the slow, still water exploded. It was a total miss, but within seconds the water exploded again as I kept up a steady retrieve. I would soon find that the pike was 27 1/2 inches long, good enough for my first Catch and Release Angler Award, and my love affair with the West Branch of French Creek had begun.
Smallmouths, largemouths, muskies, rock bass and perch, along with pike, are all found in the West Branch, and the Fish & Boat Commission stocks it with walleye fry every other year. This is quite a variety of desirable fish, but northerns are the only ones that can be caught regularly because they are the prominent fish of the West Branch. Just as waterways pick up labels such as smallmouth stream, trout stream, bass pond and sucker hole, the West Branch of French Creek could easily be branded a pike stream.

Nine miles south of Lake Erie, the West Branch enters Pennsylvania's Erie County from New York. The creek remains in Erie County for its entire Pennsylvania length of over 22 miles. It ends in Wattsburg where it adds to the main stem of French Creek. As the beaver dam-riddled creek slowly flows southward, it passes by brushy woods, cow pastures and cornfields. A typical stream stretch is steeply banked on both sides, two to four feet deep with a soft bottom, and rarely over 40 feet wide. Expect to find plenty of good pike cover in the form of log jams, freshly fallen trees, brushy overhangs and even some lily pad patches. Keep in mind that the creek has some shallow, narrow stretches—you would never guess you were in an excellent pike fishery. Little more than trickles, these stretches just add to the mystique of a unique fishery.

Many of the West Branch's finest stretches are barely 25 feet wide, yet northerns up to 32 inches are not rare, and bigger ones of 35 inches are possible. The real action, though, comes from the creek's abundance of 20- to 28-inch pike. If I'm wading the West Branch on a summer morning during the first four or five hours of daylight, I can count on five to 10 bites from pike in this size range. The West Branch is where an angler can enjoy plenty of excitement from pike around the legal 24-inch mark, and have a chance to experience the thrill of hooking a 30-incher in a relatively small waterway.

The best times to target pike in Pennsylvania are right after ice-out, May through mid-June, and Labor Day through November. But on the West Branch of French Creek, the time to target them is during the summer.

Many of the creek's soft-bottomed, steeply banked pike stretches can be difficult to wade even during a low summer flow. Still, wading is the best approach. Log jams and beaver dams make float trips impractical even during spring and early summer. In the fall, when high water is rarely a problem, great gatherings of leaves in slow, pikey stretches can make fishing extremely frustrating. Ironically, the very features that make the West Branch an excellent pike stream also make it difficult to fish during the northern's most vulnerable periods.

Although northern pike inhabit Pennsylvania's entire portion of the West Branch, the creek is quite small around the state line and holds few pike there. Only 1 1/2 miles downstream from New York, however, good pike fishing can be found where Route 430 crosses it. This wide area is tough to wade with its soft bottom and good depth, but it's perfect for a canoe. A canoe can be launched here, but use
caution carrying one down the steep bank leading to the creek from Route 430.

Between Routes 430 and 89 are five miles of slow-moving stream where northerns thrive. I’ve caught pike up to 28 inches in this stretch and have talked to area fishermen who modestly talk of catching 31-inch pike and muskies up to 40 inches here. This stretch’s drawback is its difficulty to wade, so it is best approached during the driest summer spells.

About two miles downstream from Route 89, Wildman Road crosses the West Branch. From here to the next bridge, where Knoyle Road crosses, the creek may seem small, but it’s easy to wade and holds lots of pike. After Wildman Road, good pike fishing becomes very consistent all the way to the creek’s finish, 16 miles away in Wattsburg.

The stretch from Knoyle Road to Page Corners is remote, and is my favorite. This stretch is marked by relentless bank-to-bank log jams that are caused in part by an impressive winding flow pattern. From a single bend in the creek here, I watched my buddy catch and release four pike, all between 28 and 31 inches, in just 20 minutes.

Below Page Road is another remote creek section that is not touched by another public road until Route 89 crosses it again 10 stream miles away. This stretch was once crossed by Hanna Hall Road, and although not all maps show it, the bridge has been out for years. Beavers have a strong presence here, and their many dams can be thought of as pike habitat improvement projects. This is where you find the creek’s deepest and widest spots, such as the long, pond-like stretch two miles upstream from Route 89. Here the creek abruptly opens up to a width of at least 100 feet, becomes lined with lily pads and is full of northerns. Hardy anglers who have a passion for fishing seldom-seen, productive waters should find this long, isolated stretch rewarding.

After the Route 89 crossing, Route 8/89 crosses the West Branch more than two miles downstream before it flows into French Creek. Skirting the village of Lowville and going through Wattsburg, the creek’s final few miles are not as isolated as are the upstream waters. Nevertheless, good fishing remains steady all the way to the mouth, and the pike seem to run even bigger here. Of the nine pike I’ve seen landed in this stretch during the last two summers, not one has been under 25 inches.

Lures

Large spinnerbaits and inline spinners, buzzbaits ranging in size from as small as an 1/8-ounce up to a 1/2-ounce, floating minnow lures three to four inches long, and two- to three-inch surface plugs all produce well on the West Branch. Often drawing amazingly savage strikes, buzzbaits are the
most exciting of these lures to use for pike. Even though buzzbaits inspire the most outrageous strikes, spinner baits seem to be the West Branch’s most reliable producer. Many frogs, suckers and various species of minnows offer West Branch pike plenty of forage. Except for the bridge on Page Road, every crossing from Wildman Road to the mouth, which is just a short distance from where Route 8/89 crosses the main stem, has baitfish-rich riffles or shallows close by for gathering bait.

French Creek main stem

With the exception of overcast days, summer pike fishing on the West Branch usually slows during the afternoon before picking up again in the evening. This is a good time to try the main stem of French Creek from the New York line to where it receives the West Branch nearly five miles downstream. This stretch of water is crossed just before the state line by Route 474, by Tanner Road 1 ½ miles downstream, and by Route 8/89 in Wattsburg. French Creek enters Pennsylvania just 7 ½ miles south of where the West Branch enters, but it is a very different stream. This upper stretch of French Creek is without a doubt a smallmouth stream.

These upper reaches of French Creek proper may not be as unique as the West Branch and its pike, but it’s a beauty and a pleasure to fish. Averaging 40 to 50 feet wide, the creek passes cornfields, tall woods and some high clay banks as it flows toward Wattsburg. About a half-mile downstream from New York, look for an impressive clay and dirt cliff that reaches some 175 feet high. French Creek’s main stem is a shallow stream, it is perfect for wet wading, and a hard, rocky bottom makes it easy to traverse. After spending the morning on the West Branch in chest waders, wading these waters is an enjoyable option on a hot afternoon.

Catching 30 smallmouths in just a few hours is likely on this stretch of French Creek. It is a “numbers stream.” Although I’ve caught smallmouth bass up to 15 inches here, the eight- to 12-inches dominate the action. This abundance of bass under 12 inches is clearly not related to overfishing or to overharvesting. Instead, such a smallmouth population exists simply as a result of the creek’s natural makeup and what it can support.

A modest selection of small crankbaits, floating minnows and inline spinners can provide an afternoon of smallmouth excitement on this part of French Creek. On these typically low, clear waters of summer, casting anywhere there’s at least two feet of water is worthwhile, but it’s the dark, shady areas where bass lose their clear-water caution and are more vulnerable.

New kind of fishery

The upper French Creek watershed shows yet another face after the West Branch joins French Creek in Wattsburg. French Creek not only greatly increases in size with the additional flow. It also instantly becomes a new kind of fishery. Taking on a look that could be described as a combination of the West Branch and of what the main stem is like above Wattsburg, French Creek becomes more diverse with neither pike nor smallmouth the overwhelming predator. Along with this better balanced fishery comes a larger average size of smallmouth bass, and an opportunity to catch a big stream bass. Downstream from Wattsburg, catching 30 bass in just a few hours is no longer likely, but smallmouths between 15 and 18 inches are suddenly no longer a rarity.

After Wattsburg, the next access is five miles downstream where Arbuckle Road crosses high above the creek. Cornfields and thick woods surround this isolated stretch, plus over a mile of stream flows through State Game Lands 162. Many islands consisting of bleached log tangles stand out in these waters, and they are pike, smallmouth and largemouth magnets. Above Arbuckle Road the creek is impressive and a great fishery, but keep in mind that these are only its upper reaches. Famous for its diversity, and boasting over 75 species of fish, the French Creek watershed is really just getting going here—the creek itself still has over 105 more miles to go before it joins the Allegheny River.

Bridges are the key to gaining access on both the West Branch and the main stem because roads running parallel to either creek are almost nonexistent. Little public land borders these upper reaches, and I frequently remind myself how lucky I am to be fishing such fine waters.