



photo-Red Childress

Fall River Fishing for Pike

by Bob Frye

Fall is the time in Pennsylvania when the hunters become the hunted, even as they look to fill their own bellies.

Don't think we're talking about orange- and camo-clad sportsmen being chased through the woods and fields, though. No, this predator-slash-prey is a sleek, strong, powerful carnivore, one that looks eternally angry and fights with an attitude, and is himself most susceptible when eagerly on the prowl.

So what is this creature, one that both pursues and is pursued across colorful Keystone State autumns?

Why, it's the northern pike, *Esox lucius*, a torpedo-shaped cousin to the muskellunge. Native to western Pennsylvania's Ohio River and Lake Erie drainages, the species can be found



photo-Jeff Knapp



photo-Howard Wagner

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across a wider swath of Pennsylvania today, thanks to a consistent although small stocking program. The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) has annually stocked pike through its history—in the decade spanning 1999 through 2011 in excess of 5,800 fingerlings were stocked annually on average. Such stocking programs have expanded fishing opportunities. However, most opportunities for this species are contained where they occur naturally, in the western portion of the state. Good fishing can also be found in several reservoirs across the state and in the upper Susquehanna River where they are stocked or have become naturalized. Anglers in central and eastern Pennsylvania experience no lost opportunities whatsoever as they enjoy the widely distributed native chain pickerel, who exhibit an equal up-tick in activity in fall and winter seasons. The chain pickerel, native to the Susquehanna River, Delaware River and Potomac River drainages will be subject matter in future issues.

Forget the pike and pickerel geography, though, and remember the following. If you want consistent action on fish feeling feisty after months of sulking in deep water, the fall season on rivers and larger tributary streams is the time and place to target pike.

Angler catch rate data compiled by Commission biologists over decades shows that anglers catch more pike per hour from rivers in October than in any other month of the year, although catch rates overall fall well below those of the more abundant black bass species. With respect to northern pike though, the difference in catch rates is stark. October accounts for about three times as many fish caught per hour compared to summer.

“That’s a factor of weather and biology,” said Bob Lorantas, PFBC’s Warmwater Unit Leader.

“Once water temperatures start to drop, pike, as a coolwater fish, get as active as ever,” said Lorantas. “And, rivers are more influenced by landscape in terms of temperature, so that may be why we see more pronounced changes in fish activity in rivers where temperatures may cool sooner.”

Whatever the science of it, veteran pike anglers know to hit rivers and streams when the leaves change color and the air takes on a chill.

“I don’t really catch that many pike until late fall,” said Howard Wagner, Beaver County, former owner of the Fish Education Center and a chaser of muskies and northern pike for decades. “I think they lay dormant in deeper holes in the warmer months. But, they definitely seem to get more active as the water gets colder. They start hitting in fall and then we catch them right through the winter. It’s a lot of fun.”

“When I first moved up here, the old timers used to tell me to expect the pike to move shallow and get active after the first frost in September,” said Red Childress, owner of Allegheny Guide Service, Warren. “I’ve



photo-Carl Haensel

found a lot of truth in that old adage. When the water temperatures start to cool, the pike just come alive.”

To catch river pike in the fall means looking for certain types of habitat.

“When water temperatures drop, baitfish move into shallower typically warmer water,” said Lorantas. “Predatory fish including pike who typically prefer cooler temperatures follow them.” Add to these observations that pike seek to build energy reserves for early spring spawning. This thermal and biological combination simply favors good pike fishing in the fall.

Under those conditions, especially for bigger pike, it pays to “go a little shallower with your presentation,” said Childress.

Some shallows are better than others, though.

“We find pike in spots where there’s a sandbar on the upstream side of a feeder stream,” said Wagner. “If that sand flat is right next to deeper water, that’s perfect. They’ll come in there chasing minnows when the fall or winter sun hits the water.”

“Fishing structure is also critical,” said Childress. “Baitfish like dace, suckers, chubs, shad and even small carp—all of which hungry pike will feast on—congregate around big boulders in the water, timber, grass and anything else that breaks the current, because it makes them feel safe and hidden,” said Childress. That structure also makes perfect cover for pike, which are ambush predators.

“Pike don’t go cruising around looking for their food. They’re more apt to tuck themselves in somewhere, lie in wait and ambush their prey as it goes by,” said Childress. “That doesn’t mean you’ll find them in every piece of structure. But, you can narrow things down over time by process of elimination until you find the spots where they’re hiding.”

Fall river pike can be caught in a variety of ways. Live bait, especially slender-shaped chubs and

suckers—caught locally from the river you’ll be fishing—is a favorite technique of some.

Wagner and Childress both prefer lures. Wagner, who is usually pursuing muskies as well as pike, tosses 5- to 6-inch musky plugs. If he’s using some of his local favorites, Wiley Lures and Leo Lures made in western Pennsylvania, he goes with natural colors, resembling suckers or carp. If he’s using Rapala shad raps or Rebel crankbaits, he goes with foil or chrome patterns. However, mixing things up on occasion can make a difference.

“Every once in a while that crazy firetiger pattern is all the fish want. And, I don’t know why. It doesn’t resemble anything in nature,” said Wagner. “But, they catch fish, so I always have one or two firetigers along with me.”

Childress fishes 7- to 8-inch plastic swimbaits like Curly Sues and 4- to 6-inch spoons like Dardevles and Red Eye Wiggles, using crazy colors like chartreuses and purples.

Scent can be just as important as color. “Pike seem to be much more responsive to smell than some other fish, like muskies, so sometimes we spray garlic on our swimbaits,” said Childress. “Anything that smells can almost turn your swimbait into a live bait.”

Childress also recommends paying attention to lure size. He uses smaller lures in the days immediately after a storm, when the fish seem unsettled and perhaps more interested in a snack than a big meal.

In all cases, strong leaders are important, given the pike’s famous rows of pointed teeth.

However you hook a fall river pike, be prepared to hold on. Anglers who catch northern pike in summer know they can be sluggish. That won’t be the case in fall.

“That cold water is just what they like, so they fight hard. They even jump sometimes,” said Wagner. “I think they may be even faster swimmers than muskies. I almost hate to say it, because muskies are my all-time favorite fish, but those pike can really move.” ☐