

Why Not Pike?

by Mike Bleech *photos by the author*

The most popular popper of the time was slowly retrieved along the edge of a calm pocket below a small point in the Allegheny River. Then, a long, green fish rocketed out of the water at least 3 feet and hit the popper on the way down. It was not a big pike, maybe 24 inches long but that seemed big to an 11-year-old boy who had never seen a Northern Pike except in pictures.

That was the beginning of a long, stubborn affair with pike, unusual in Pennsylvania where pike have never gained a big following.



Pike are built to look up. Notice the location of the eyes. So, baits or lures do not need to get close to the bottom.

I was that boy, 54 years ago. In all the time since, I have encountered maybe a dozen other anglers in this state who intentionally and frequently target pike. The reason for the lack of serious pike anglers is baffling. Pike may not be widespread here, but they are considerably more common than Muskellunge in the better pike lakes. And, catching them is much easier. Muskellunge, a close relative, is one of only a few gamefish in the state that exceeds their size.

Our state record Northern Pike weighed 35 pounds. It was caught during 2003 at the Allegheny Reservoir, McKean County. That is a big fish, one of the largest Northern Pike caught in North America that year.

Some anglers disregard pike, because smaller pike sometimes do not put up much of a fight. Commonly, moderate-sized pike will allow themselves to be pulled near a boat. Then, they go nuts. A big pike can peel off line so fast that a misty cloud forms where the line meets the water. Any pike may go airborne.

Be careful about using tackle that is too hefty for pike. Unlike muskies, pike can be line shy. You will hook a lot more pike using 6-pound-test line than 17-pound-test line. A good compromise is 12-pound-test line.

Just within the past several years, some excellent leaders for sharp-toothed fish have become available. These leaders are much smaller in diameter than the plastic-coated steel leaders used in years past. Leaders of this kind are the best tools for preventing pike from cutting line. Use at least an 18-inch leader, because if a pike rolls the main line inside the gill plates, the gills will cut the line.

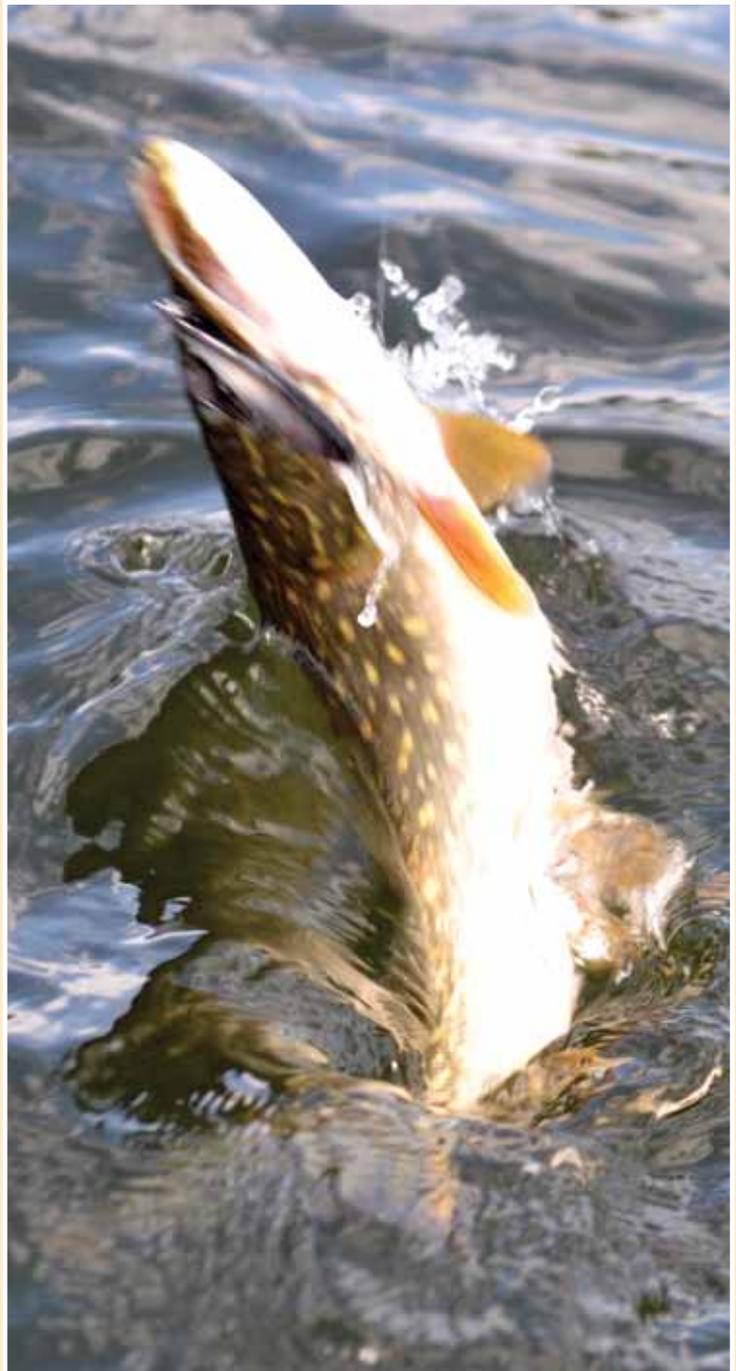
Anglers have the mistaken impression that catching pike is easy. So if they do not catch pike, they assume that pike are not in the water. In truth, pike are extremely fussy more times than not.

Nothing will hook more pike in the long run than a lively minnow, but this is not always the best way to fish for pike. Sometimes, you just need the right artificial lure with the right kind of action, the right size and the right color pattern.

Like many gamefish, pike may be about anywhere in a lake. However, find a piece of wood cover and the odds are good that a pike is lurking by it. This is one of the primary places to fish live minnows. Locating pike in creeks or rivers is easier. Pike do not like current. They are calm water fish. Wood cover will attract them, but any patch of calm water may hold pike, cover or not.

The most useful terminal rig for pike is a wide gap hook and a splitshot about 12 inches up the line. Rig this under a slip bobber, one with a slender shape that easily slips through the water when a pike takes the bait.

A good assortment of pike lures should include stickbaits, banana baits, large spinners, spoons and



Pike are building a following among fly anglers. Even modest-sized pike are great sport on a fly rod.

a few surface lures. Color patterns should include red, yellow, black and green, some mixed with gold or silver, some in bright colors.

The retrieve is often as important as the type of lure or lure color. Until a pattern is established, vary the retrieve speed from very slow to very fast. Try stop and go. With floating stickbaits, try twitching the lure so it dives underwater for a few feet, and wait for it to float to the surface. Pike may hit a lure after it has been floating for 15 seconds or longer.

With good tackle, a good pike waterway and persistence, you will soon know “why pike.” ☐