



# *Anatomy of a* **PREDATOR**

*by Carl Haensel photos by the author*

*The lateral lines of pike and Muskellunge consist of many small pores filled with hairs that sense movement in the water and help them target prey.*

When we hit the water in search of big fish, Northern Pike and Muskellunge are some of the biggest, most aggressive fish that come to mind. Possessing many qualities that allow them to thrive and succeed at the top of the food chain, they are truly apex predators in most of Pennsylvania's waterways. Members of the genus *Esox*, they share traits with pickerel as well. Take the time to learn about the unique characteristics that help them survive, and you may have a better shot at hooking a big one the next time out.

### **Camouflage coloration and body shape**

Both pike and muskies blend in very well with vegetation in slow moving rivers and lakes. Ambush predators, they often suspend themselves in the water column in a bed of submerged aquatic vegetation or near other cover to wait. When an unsuspecting prey species wanders too closely to their location, they attack with an intense burst of speed. With a long, streamlined body, they are built for rapid acceleration. Anglers looking to find these big fish do well when they look for ambush points like strong vegetation edges, log jams and distinct reed points. Make sure the drag on your fishing rod is well set to avoid breaking off a big fish when you hook one, and it races away.



*The razor-sharp teeth of pike and muskies capture and hold prey. Take care when removing hooks from them, and use forceps or a jaw spreader.*

### **Mouth and teeth**

The razor-sharp teeth of pike and muskies are well known to anglers who have lost lures to these toothy fish. Able to cut normal monofilament fishing line easily, their teeth are well set up to catch and hold prey. When attacking prey, they will often hold prey fish crosswise. After the initial attack, they will reposition the fish to better swallow a large meal. These big fish can eat another fish nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of their own size, including members of their own species. Plan to use leaders when fishing for pike, Muskellunge and even Chain Pickerel. If you are fishing with live bait, some anglers like to wait after the initial bite for the fish to pause and turn the bait, allowing a better hookset. Alternatively, you can rig multiple hooks in a minnow to hook the fish regardless of where it grabs your bait. When unhooking these fish, use a jaw spreader to keep the fish from clamping down on the lure or your fingers. Forceps are the best tool to remove hooks from these fish.



*The coloration of a pike is one of its best tools to get its dinner. This pike blends in well with the aquatic vegetation in the background of its habitat.*

## Head and eyes

One of the best ways to determine that pike and muskies are predators is their forward facing eyes, which provide them with binocular vision. Their vision allows them to estimate their distance to prey and allows for three-dimensional vision. Compare pike and muskies to panfish like Bluegills to clearly see the difference. Since pike and muskies see poorly behind them, avoid casting directly to the tail of a sighted fish. Instead, if you see a resting fish, cast far beyond it, so you can retrieve a lure a couple of feet in front of its head where it is looking.

## Lateral line

Pike and muskies possess a much more developed lateral line sense than many other fish. This gives them the ability to sense fish and other movements in the water around them. Muskies will often hunt at night, primarily using their lateral line to sense, stalk and strike at prey. Northern Pike do not usually hunt at night and have half the lateral line pores that muskies do on their heads. ☐



*The lateral lines of pike and muskies consist of many small pores filled with hairs that sense movement in the water and help them target prey. In both pike and muskies, these pores even continue up and around the mouth and jaw and help to differentiate between species. Note the small holes around the head of this young Northern Pike.*