

# There is a **PICKEREL LAKE** in Northwest Pennsylvania



*by Mike Bleach    photos by the author*



The Allegheny River drainage basin and the Lake Erie drainage basin are the only native range in Pennsylvania for Muskellunge and Northern Pike. But, these northwest Pennsylvania drainage basins are not the native range for Chain Pickerel. Chain Pickerel are found in drainage basins that flow into the Atlantic Ocean. So, it came as a surprise to read in a Spring 2017 trap net and electrofishing survey by the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) that Sugar Lake, Crawford County, has a stable population of Chain Pickerel.

During the trap netting in April, which was intended primarily to collect data on the Muskellunge population, nine Chain Pickerel were collected. While that may not seem like many, just eight Muskellunge and six Northern Pike were collected. These Chain Pickerel ranged in size from 17 to 21 inches, relatively large for gamefish of this type. These fish have been in Sugar Lake for several years, as a result of flooding.

Sugar Lake is a natural glacial lake not unlike many lakes where Chain Pickerel thrive such as in the Poconos. Aquatic vegetation grows in the shallower water, and the lake is bordered by wetlands at the inlet and outlet.

Before the snow melted under our boots, Herb Wagner and I made plans to meet a pair of anglers from Franklin, Kris Miller and Roger Jenkins, on the ice at Sugar Lake.

Finding them would be no problem. Sugar Lake is a small lake, just 90 acres. It is located between Meadville and Titusville. We found our way to the lake with no problems.

The PFBC maintains the only public access to the lake. The rest of the shoreline is either privately owned or wetlands.

Miller and Jenkins were already ice fishing when Wagner and I arrived. They had caught a few Chain Pickerel. Since we knew little about Chain Pickerel here, we spread out our tip-ups over a broad area. Later, after finding a smaller area that was very productive, we tightened our tip-up spread.

Acquiring bait can be a problem with current baitfish regulations. We bought certified Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS) free Golden Shiners in Erie, and the pickerel were all over these minnows. Do not discard dead minnows. Pickerel seem to take dead minnows as readily as live minnows. I managed to catch three pickerel on one large shiner. Hook dead minnows near the dorsal fin in a lifelike position.



*Chain Pickerel have no problem taking a larger minnow intended for pike and Muskellunge.*



*Pictured are (left to right) Roger Jenkins, Herb Wagner and Kris Miller with a few fish that they caught on Sugar Lake, Crawford County.*

Tip-ups are perfect for Chain Pickerel. When the bait is grabbed by these fish, fight for it. None of the pickerel that took our baits dropped the bait. It is best, though, to use smooth operating tip-ups, meaning the spool spins without any tight spots that can cause fish to drop the bait.

I believe Chain Pickerel have the sharpest teeth in fresh water. When fishing for pickerel in open water, it is not unusual to suddenly lose the terminal rig without any feel of a strike. Chain Pickerel will tolerate a stout leader, at least 12-pound-test line. Better still, use one of the newer leader materials that is made for fish with sharp teeth.

Wagner and I were into fish within minutes of setting out our first tip-ups. Then, for the next few hours before rain drove us off the ice, at least one of us had a flag up most of the time. We even got more flags than we could handle a couple of times.

The largest Chain Pickerel we caught measured 25 inches. Another was 24 inches. One was 21 inches, and several were 19 inches. Some smaller fish were in the mix but none less than 17 inches.

Sugar Lake is a quality fishery for panfish including crappies, Bluegills and Yellow Perch. Using tip-ups for Chain Pickerel and jugging for panfish is an excellent way to approach this lake. Panfish may keep the fishing lively while the tip-up flags are not flying.

In fact, this is an all-around quality fish lake with Largemouth Bass, Muskellunge and Northern Pike. □

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