

Fish-On! - 6 - Pike

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Fish-On! Chapter 6 Pike (*Esox lucius* Linnaeus) Brought to you courtesy of... TV Ontario© 1985, TV Ontario and The Ontario Educational Communications Authority, all rights reserved

There are four species of pike in North America, but the best known is the northern pike, *Esox lucius* Linnaeus. Although the fish is still looked upon with disdain in some areas and derogatorily called the "jackfish" or "snakefish," pike fishing continues to maintain considerable prestige. Fishing for the "northern" or the "great northern" carries with it a certain myth, much of it due to some strange fish stories. One of the popular misconceptions is that pike fishing is poor in August because pike shed their teeth around that time and their sore gums keep them from feeding. Scientific evidence doesn't support the theory that the teeth are shed entirely at one time but reveals that pike replace worn-out or broken teeth as they are lost. Many local tales also claim their waters carry such large fish that no ordinary line will hold them. Although northern pike do grow to a formidable size, these tales have probably originated because of the inevitably tangled or frayed line or cracked guide resulting from the pike's characteristically savage rush when taking lures rather than because of any greatness in fish size. There are some fishermen who are even convinced that the northern pike is a completely different species from the smaller juveniles, confusing the younger pike with some pickerel and the older pike with muskellunge. The confusion is furthered by the fact that northern pike exhibit considerable variation in size, markings, and proportions, depending on aquatic environment. There are even a few mutants around: the silver pike (*Esox lucius*), which seldom weighs over ten pounds, can be found in the U.S. and Canada; and the tiger muskie, a hybrid cross between the northern and the muskellunge. {mospagebreak title=The Fish - Size, Shape and Color}THE FISH

Size, Shape and Color The Esocidae family includes the pikes, the muskellunge, and the true pickerels. All family members are characterized by an elongated, torpedo-shaped body and a single dorsal fin set well back near the tail, leaving a long stretch of finless back between head and tail. They have large, flattened heads, somewhat duck-billed in appearance. Their eyes are yellow and their enormous mouths are filled with backwardslanting teeth which are replaced continuously. The pike may reach a very large size -- two U.S. trophies weighing about 46 pounds were taken from Basswood Lake, Minnesota, and Sacandaga Reservoir, New York, while two Canadian specimens of around 42 pounds were taken from Delaney Lake and Lake Simcoe in Ontario. It is not uncommon to catch a 25- to 30-pound fish but many catches in some angling areas will weigh in at only about two to four pounds. European pike tend to grow larger and heavier than North American fish. Several European specimens weighed in at over 60 pounds. The sides and back of the northern pike are usually bluish green, and the belly, cream or white. Adults are profusely covered with roundish or slightly oval light spots on their sides and very lightly on their fins. The juveniles, however, are marked with light bars on a dark background in their first summer. These bars gradually break up into light spots as they mature. {mospagebreak title=The Fish - Pike versus Muskie}Pike vs. Muskie It may not matter to some if they've caught a pike or a muskie but it should. In many places, fishing regulations give more protection to the muskie than to the pike and these protective measures can range from a fishing season that is shorter for muskie but longer for pike to a specific bag limit with greater numbers allowed for pike. So, confusing a muskie for a pike could lead to an angling violation. In addition, the unnecessary demise of the muskie contradicts ethics in many areas where anglers believe the species should be released unharmed. The most reliable distinguishing features between the two fish (see figure 6-1) are: the submandibular pores, the scaling on the cheeks and opercles, color, and markings. Under the jaws of each species are small holes called submandibular pores. The pike has ten or 11 while the muskie has 12 to 20. In the muskie, the cheeks and opercles, the bony plates covering the gills, are not fully covered with scales while the pike's are. The pike's background color is dark and the markings lighter, while the muskie's background is light and the markings darker. I have been using the name "muskie," by the way, even though the official spelling given to the species in the statutes of Canada, its country of origin, is maskinonge, derived from the Indian word mashk (deformed) and kinonje (a pike). However, the accepted common name is "muskellunge" or "muskie" for short. {mospagebreak title=The Fish - Biokinetics}Biokinetics The northern pike is primarily a sight feeder with a "gangland" type of attitude of striking first and asking questions later. Its body shape is well suited to its basic nature. Lying in wait for its prey in weedbeds or beside some structure like a rock or log, it can accelerate rapidly to quickly seize an unsuspecting minnow, perch, or other prey. But it has paid the price for this ability -- it can't cruise around like other predacious fish who can rely on sustained swimming for foraging. Lake fishermen know this biokinetic characteristic well by the mad dashes of their hooked pike, especially when the fish sees the boat for the first time. Predator and Prey Someone once said that a pike is a machine designed for the assimilation of enormous quantities of organisms. This description is not that farfetched as the fish has a ravenous appetite, eating five to six pounds of food daily in order to sustain a weight increase of at least a pound a year. A considerable portion of the larger pike's diet consists of perch, shiners, small suckers, ciscoes, herring, and other soft-finned, highprotein baitfish. Nature has seen to it that the pike helps control the populations of prolific breeders like pan fish. Ideally, a pike likes a fish that is about a third to a half its own size, a real mouthful! But there are confirmed reports that pike have killed the occasional smaller muskrat, duckling, and frog with their powerful jaws. That makes the pike not only piscivorous but carnivorous as well. You can also add cannibalistic to that list since pike will quickly resort to eating each other if food is scarce. In general, then, you can say that the pike will feed on any living thing available ... hence,

your assimilation machine concept.

Pike of different sizes require different diets. If an aquatic environment offers a limited forage, the results will show in the limited size of the fish or smaller populations. Large pike will be found in shallow water in the spring and fall but in the summer they'll inhabit deeper water. Both areas, then -- shallow and deep water -- must offer a suitable menu for larger-sized fish.
Habitat - Distribution
 The northern pike can be found almost everywhere north of the fiftieth parallel in North America, Europe, and Asia. In North America its furthest southward limit is the Ohio River and its northern limit is Alaska. Whether the fish is found in the Soviet Union, England, Ireland, or Canada, biologists see it as the same fish in all jurisdictions. In Canada, there are few areas where the pike can't be found. But they are absent from large areas of British Columbia and the Maritime provinces. Records show that northern Ontario is the place where these big fish are at home. Or is it? It might just indicate that northern waters are the place where people fish for pike. There may be fish somewhere in the lower Great Lakes that might intimidate the northern fish.

On the other hand, pike may not live long enough in the south to really achieve the growth that northern fish do. The pike's life span seems to be related to how fast the fish grows. If a pike lives in warm waters in the southern part of its range, it may be finished after ten or 12 years. In the north, though, slow-growing coldwater pike may live as long as 24 or 26 years on the average.
Habitat - Aquatic Environment
 The northern pike prefers the weedy bays, estuaries, and shoals in lake environments as a spring and fall habitat, and conveniently located deeper water areas for summer. In the littoral, fertile zones, the fish can make good use of the extensive submerged and/or emergent vegetation for protection as well as camouflage when feeding. They prefer weedy areas, too, for spawning in lakes or rivers. The food that the cover offers is very important. This cover must provide nourishment for all sizes of pike. If only minnows or bass are present, the pike population will consist of smaller fish since there is no appropriate forage for intermediate-sized fish. There's one important requirement, other than weeds, in the fish's habitat: proper temperature. The northern prefers cooler water than most cool-water species and as such you'll be hard pressed to catch a decent-sized pike in shallow, weedy bays in the "dog" days of summer. These fish do not function well in water that's too warm for them, preferring much cooler water than, say, bass. Their peak period is generally the spring and the fall. In warm water, the pike literally stop feeding and the summer fishermen who catch pike by accident often get fish with pronounced shrunken stomachs.

The winter is proof of their preference for cool to cold water. Pike remain active in the winter and while they may not feed as much as they do in the spring and fall, they do continue to feed. Ice fishermen do well on pike in some areas. Most anglers, though, are fair-weather fishermen. The time of year that appeals most to them is between mid-June and mid-September, when the water is most likely to be too warm for pike and as a consequence they have trouble catching large pike. Only small pike occupy warm surface water at warm temperatures.
Habitat - Management
 Rather than artificial hatching and rearing, fisheries management people and biologists have found that it is more efficient to maintain the species by protecting their natural spawning areas. These areas are even more important when they constitute a wetland area where waterfowl can breed too. For example, a situation may arise where the fry and adults may be stranded in the marshes of a spawning area when water levels drop suddenly. To maintain an avenue to the lake for the fish, small dams with control gates are constructed in the spawning areas. The fry are allowed to live in the protection of the marsh until they are of fingerling size and then the gates are opened for them to migrate into the stream, river, or lake.

Many pike populations could use heavier angling pressure. In some areas the pike are considered a nuisance and are low on the list of management priorities. The biggest headache for fisheries people is the control of poaching.
Seasonal Changes - Spawning
SEASONAL CHANGES
 Spawning Sometimes the ice isn't even melted before the pike show up in the areas of slow-moving rivers, marshes, and bays. The intent adults will swim in water just barely deep enough to cover their backs to fulfill their reproduction instincts. Males and females will swim close together, then roll on their sides. As the female drops the eggs, the male deposits the milt that will fertilize them. There's no nest-building, territorial fighting, or parental care of the eggs. After the females drop the eggs, from five to 60 each time, they move on and the swirl of water created by their tails scatters the eggs. When the eggs touch an underwater plant, they stick like glue. The chance that a fry will grow to adulthood is very slim. Some studies have shown that 99.8 percent of the eggs will fail to produce a fish that will be big enough to leave the spawning area. Pike compensate for this by laying thousands and thousands of eggs, as many as 9000 eggs for each pound of the female's body weight.

The eggs take from four to 14 days to hatch, depending on how warm the water is. When they emerge from the egg, the young pike stay attached to the vegetation by the adhesive glands in their heads and they feed on the yolk of the egg. But soon they begin feeding on zoo plankton in the pond and at the tender age of two to four weeks, they start eating other fish, including their brothers and sisters.
Seasonal Changes - Movement
Movement
 Some biologists contend that in small lakes with more or less uniform conditions pike wander restlessly from area to area. This may be true, but in larger lakes with appropriate summer cold-water habitat the pike live a more or less sedentary life, other than possibly changing locale for spawning purposes. Most pike return each year to the same spawning area. In general, just like their unimpressive spawning ritual, the seasonal movements of the pike are well-defined. In early spring, they look for conveniently located spawning areas in shallow, weedy water. After spawning the fish are stressed and inactive, relating to the emerging weed growth and points adjacent to spawning areas. As water temperatures rise in

summer, the fish seek summer habitats (weedbeds or rock shoals) in colder water. In the fall, as water cools down, the fish move back to the cover in shallow water. Some deviations have been logged but these are so minor that they do not constitute a problem to anglers. However, if the fish cannot find cold water at a convenient distance from the spawning grounds, they will abandon lakes and move to springs or mouths of rivers where they can find cooler water temperatures. But whatever the water temperature, the fish will remain in any given area as long as there is sufficient forage in the underwater cover.

Equipment - Rods and Reels

EQUIPMENT Rods and Reels You have a choice of spinning, spincast, trolling, fly-fishing, and baitcasting rigs when setting out to bag a pike. Fly fishing has its own unique advantages and the equipment for the technique will be discussed in a separate brochure. Of the remaining choices, baitcasting gear, the usual choice for fishing spoons and bucktails, is suitable for presenting bigger and heavier lures and baits to the fish. Spinning rigs are the usual choice of anglers who use live bait. Flippin' tackle is often used with jigs. With spinning, spincast, and baitcasting rods and reels, you'd do well to stick to medium- to heavy-weight equipment since most of the time you'll be looking for big fish in heavy cover. An example of a good baitcasting outfit is a four-and-a-half to five-foot baitcasting rod, a level reel which is large enough to accommodate about 50 yards of at least 15-pound-test line, a light wire leader, and medium to large shallow-running baits. The new baitcasting reels, with their magnetic control on the line spool, have practically eliminated the backlash, overrun, and bird's nest problem encountered in pike fishing in the days before spinning reels took over the market. Trolling rods of the type normally reserved for lake trout have only recently been used specifically for pike in a new method of specialist pike angling. But whatever equipment you choose, you'll want a rod with some spine in it, both to throw heavy lures and to set hooks.

Equipment - Leaders

Leaders Metal leaders are the most over-used piece of equipment in the tackle box. Some anglers never fish without one and the results are horrendous. A surface bass plug that gurgles nicely when attached to the monofilament becomes useless, a drag in the water, when it's weighted down with a metal leader. Even balsa minnows lose their action and their balance with these leaders.

If you are going to use a metal leader, first test your lures tied directly to the line and then again with a metal leader. Compare the results. If a lure seems deadened by the extra weight, don't use it. Use those lures that seem to retain an appealing action when attached to metal. Once the lure is tested, choose the longest and finest leader you think is suitable to the situation. Remember, metal is strong; it doesn't have to be thick to resist breaking or cutting. When making your own leader, use as light a material as six pound-test. All lures should be secured with a high-quality cross-lock snap with the exception of jigs that are tied directly to the wire (no snap needed).

Equipment - Lures

Lures There are several types of artificial lures commonly used for pike: spoons, plugs, spinners, jigs, and flies. Flies, mainly streamer flies, will be dealt with in the fly-fishing rigs section on page 64. Spoons are the number-one presentation for pike in practically all situations. Pike are sight feeders, as already mentioned. Studies conducted on fish that depend on sight less than pike, such as largemouth bass, show that these fish display a greater ability to feed successfully while blind. A fish will sight its prey through eyes that are close to the top of its head and attack swiftly, grabbing the prey sideways in its mouth and crunching down to kill it. But pike also become aware of the prey through vibrations in the water. Biologists have temporarily blinded pike with opaque contact lenses and found that they still would sense prey and attack fish and lures, although they would miss frequently. Spoons Spoons are probably the most traditional of the pike lures. They cast like a bullet, wobble nicely on retrieve, and flutter most appealingly when you stop retrieving. Every tackle box should have a wide selection of spoons. There is a great variety of colors and finishes. Good color choices include red/white combinations, black and hot orange combinations, hot yellow, and any lure with fluorescent blades. Plugs Casting plugs can imitate forage fish, frogs, minnows, and a variety of other pike prey. Balsa and plastic minnows can be used effectively either on the surface or underwater. Recently, minnows in sinking models, floater-sinkers, and deep-diving versions have appeared and proven successful. These new models will be effective in the larger sizes. Traditional plugs, as well as muskie plugs like the Swim Whiz, are all effective. Another plug that's become popular is the jerk bait. Unlike most plugs, which have action when being retrieved, the jerk bait relies on the angler's skill at creating constant rod action to give it motion. These plugs can be purchased in varieties that will move from side to side or up and down when manipulated. Jigs Jigs offer a good up and down action and are particularly effective with inactive fish. Jigs between one-quarter and three-eighths of an ounce, dressed with plastics (Reaper types or Twister Tails), are productive, but, generally, the same jigs you would use to fish for largemouth bass will work very well with pike. Spinners

Spinners, with their flash and pulsation in the water, also take a great many pike. The larger sized pike spinners, sometimes made to appear even larger by using hooks dressed with bucktails, often have broad blades that keep them from sinking deep in the water as they are retrieved. Safety pin spinner baits come in large sizes as well. They can be used to probe the bottom with both flash and substance that appeal to pike. Over the years I've had a lot of pleasure using this lure when fishing in weedbeds, casting out into the weeds and then retrieving the lure with the spinner sputtering along the surface. I haven't been getting big pike but I certainly have been getting spectacular strikes.

Equipment - Natural Baits

Natural Baits Live bait Popular live baits include chubs, shiners, frogs, minnows, suckers, and water dogs; they can be dressed like a spinner bait or as a bobber rig. Dead baits are also popular for peak periods, as in spring, or when ice fishing. Some pike fishermen are like traditional muskie anglers and insist that large suckers (12 inches or longer) are the best, and in some cases, the only bait to use. Minnow or a spinner-minnow combination is the traditional pike bait. The minnow, lip- or back-hooked, is allowed to approach the weeds or enter the pool so that when the pike takes it, the float disappears. One old fishing story tells that a pike grabs a minnow sideways, scales it, then turns it in its mouth to swallow it headfirst. The angler is supposed to wait until the pike has turned the minnow before setting the hook. True or not, the minnow does lose its scales when taken by a pike but it is

more or less an accident since the pike bites down to kill it. There are two important factors to consider when you are minnow fishing. One is that you will certainly kill the pike if you allow it to swallow the minnow completely before you set the hook. So if you're fishing for fun rather than to eat fish, strike early rather than late. The other is that the bigger the minnow, the larger the pike you are likely to get. Don't settle for four-inch minnows if bigger ones are available. Dead bait Besides live bait, you can try dead bait. The practice has been rediscovered in Britain where people used to fish for pike using large dead baits centuries ago. Big pike don't turn their nose up at an easy meal. They will pick up and swallow dead bait such as large dead fish. You can try the cast-and-retrieve method or let the dead bait sit on bottom.

You can also rig your dead bait under a bobber. Balance is important -- your bait should hang perfectly level with the water. A drifting bobber will cover a wider area than one which remains relatively stationary, and it offers the added bonus of giving you a visual indication of a strike. When using a spinner bait type, use a typical largemouth bass presentation, only heavier, and instead of a plastic skirt, add a minnow or other bait such as a sucker. {mospagebreak title=Equipment - Fly-Fishing Rigs} Fly-Fishing Rigs

Anglers who aren't familiar with flycasting often assume that flycasting tackle is flimsy -- a wand-like pole and a thread of a leader -- suitable only for small fish. But fly tackle exists that is big enough to cast flies six inches long and land 100-pound tarpon. For pike, a fly rod must be powerful enough to cast four-inch streamer flies and stiff enough to drive a hook into the bony jaw of a pike. Ideally, that means a rod of eight or nine feet in length and a nine-weight line. A floating line is best, as you will be fishing for pike that are within a couple of feet of the surface of the water and usually near the edge of a river or lake. Some experienced anglers don't bother with backing -- the heavy monofilament suitable for fish that run a great distance when hooked. A pike isn't going to act like a salmon or rainbow trout. But a tapered leader is needed -- the standard variety with a ten-pound tippet; with very heavy fly tackle, wire leaders can be used. If there are snags in the water or the possibility of large pike in a particular body of water, some anglers will use a heavier 15-pound tippet. The length of the leader need not be great -- six or seven feet of leader is more than enough. Count on losing flies and leaders. In fly fishing you don't have the option of putting a wire leader on your fly since it would weigh down the fly and kill its action, so some anglers will use a shock tippet of heavy (25 to 40 pounds) monofilament between the end of the tippet and the fly. The special Albright knot is required for tying the tippet to a shock leader. Pike flies have one characteristic in common -- they are huge. As a consequence they should be tied on hooks sized 2/0 and 4/0. For fish as deep as 25 feet, the line should be weighted forward with a sinking shooting head. In weedy areas, monofilament weed guards will save you a lot of trouble. Color is important and any large, bright streamer fly will serve to attract a pike, especially if there's red and yellow in the pattern. There are at least four flies around that have been designed for trout and specifically adapted for pike: the McNally smelt, the Hot Dog streamer fly, the Marabou perch, and the Creme de Menthe, but all your flies should be matched to the baitfish patterns that pike are attracted to in terms of their predation preferences in a particular body of water. {mospagebreak title=Equipment - Landing Equipment} Landing Equipment Depending on your needs, you can land a pike using a gaff, a net, a priest, or a spreader and a disgorger. If you intend to release a large pike alive, then the proper use of a gaff is probably the best way to handle the fish. Gaffs have a bad reputation because people assume that you use them by driving them into the body of a fish as soon as the fish is within reach. If you are certain you are going to kill and keep the fish, use the gaff that way if the last moments of the battle are tough. If you want to release the pike, though, there's only one place to gaff it: through the lower jaw, right behind the jawbone. A sharp gaff will slide through the loose skin at that point and you will have a firm hold on the fish. If the hook is big enough, you can move your hand (covered with a glove) down the gaff until you can hold both sides of the gaff hook, preventing the pike from flipping away. Remember, however, that the use of a gaff is illegal for some species in certain areas. Few anglers carry gaffs and most rely on landing nets. For pike, size is important. Make it a big net. The size of net carried by salmon fishermen on the Great Lakes just won't do for big pike. Always net a pike headfirst because it swims in that direction. Trying to slide a net over its tail can be frustrating since each flip of the tail will take it farther away from the net, not deeper into it. Make sure the hoop of the net allows most of the pike's length to pass through. If you are planning to release the fish alive, a net has two disadvantages: first the lure will almost certainly become tangled in the twine, complicating the job of removing the hook; second, the net will remove too much slime from the fish, a substance that is a natural protective coating. Some anglers use nets with rubberized twine to prevent hooks from getting tangled and assist in fish handling. Rubberized nets don't last as long as the traditional ones but they may be your answer to releasing the fish. With a live fish that you plan to release, remove the hooks in a way that does the least damage to the fish. If you've been bait fishing, you can simply cut the line close to the hook, releasing the fish with the hook still in place. As long as the hook isn't stainless steel, it will soon deteriorate and fall out. If you decide to kill your fish, you will need equipment that can be used to dispatch the fish quickly with a blow between the eyes. A priest, so-called because it gives the last rites, is one such instrument. It can be a short piece of pipe, a stick with a lead ball at the end, or even a ball-peen hammer.

Once a fish is dead, you can remove hooks any way you want. If you want to retrieve your valuable multi-hooked plug from the pike's mouth, a spreader and a disgorger come in handy. A jaw spreader will hold a pike's mouth open while you work, reducing the chance of your hand being cut. Disgorgers can be commercial models made of plastic, or needle-nosed pliers, or, for those who can find them, surgical hemostats. Basically, you need a solid, long, strong instrument to do the job. It's a good idea to wear gloves. Dead fish should be gutted and gilled as soon as possible. {mospagebreak title=Technique - Reading the Water} TECHNIQUE Reading the Water Your chances of catching a ten-pound northern in shallow weed-filled water in the summer are almost nonexistent. This is the place where small pike hang out, but the sizable ones can't live in too warm, too shallow water. Until a pike becomes a respectable size, its summertime home is in deeper water, most likely in a weedy area in a bay 12 to 15 feet deep. There its coloration can camouflage it and allow

it to thrive on medium-sized baitfish. At that time of its life, the pike can tolerate somewhat warmer water temperatures better than when it's older and bigger. It is these pike in this type of habitat for which most anglers, whether they know it or not, are fishing. For those who fish for trophy size, however, you need to look for another habitat, one that provides cooler water and bigger prey. The fact that pike prefer cooler water is proven by their intense activity in spring and fall, the times just after ice-out and just before freeze-up. Just after spawning, pike will go on a feeding spree, patrolling the shores and structures of shallow areas. Usually, the water is uniformly cold at this time of year, so all sizes of pike will be found in shallow water. There's an autumn feeding binge as well. It begins at the time of year when the nighttime temperatures drop significantly below the water temperature. As the season moves on and the water cools, all sizes of pike will be feeding actively. But in summer larger pike require deep water not only for its cooler temperatures, but also to give them the environment to chase down a few soft-finned, four- to seven-pound fish. The general rule when you're searching for pike is to look for weeds. This applies not only to shallow but also to deeper water. As a matter of fact, pike will get bigger in good weeded areas in deeper waters since these areas attract an abundant supply of baitfish. Pike will relate to any given cover for as long as the forage in that cover meets their needs. Don't look for groups of pike roaming near the surface. It's a myth that pike roam and hunt in packs like wolves. For most of the year, pike of the size that interests anglers don't move around that much. They are vaguely territorial, more or less loafing around in the same habitat that suits them for the season. If you want to catch pike, you have to go to them, choosing areas that are obviously good habitat and working them carefully with your bait.

Since pike, then, exhibit movements related directly to seasonal changes (spring -- shallow water, summer -- deep water, fall -- shallow water), an angler will work the water according to seasonal conditions. As a rule of thumb, don't go fishing for pike before lunch. Remember, the feeding mood of the fish is important in your decisions. In water six feet deep or more pike are most active at nighttime and midafternoon. {mospagebreak title=Technique - Casting and Trolling}Casting and Trolling Some very successful angling methods are trolling or casting with shallow-running plugs, flashy spoons with feathers, or bucktails, or with spinner-minnow combinations. There are anglers that insist that casting for pike provides the very best angling thrill.

In shallow water, around the time of spawning, the best presentation is a lift-and-drop casting technique using a spoon. Since you're casting to weed cover, cast to the tops of emerging weeds on flats and points, letting your spoon flutter in and out towards the fish and retrieving slowly. Other options include a small straight-shaft spinner, a jig dressed with plastics, or a jerk bait. Fish them slowly. In the case of jigs, don't be afraid to let them sit on bottom for a few seconds. In the case of jerk baits, rip them out of weeds as you would when fishing muskie. Some people prefer trolling in shallow water. Specialist fishermen may have a solution to the problem of weeds in shallow areas. They have made some changes to the deep-water trolling technique so that it can be used in shallow-water fishing. You can troll effectively for pike using short (sometimes no more than six feet behind your boat) wire line (20 to 30-pound-test monel), a wire line reel, and short, stiff trolling rods that come with a roller nose or spring to prevent line wear. The wire line carries the lure deeper into water where the bigger fish are usually found. At the same time, wire will cut through weeds rather than tangle in them. (Figure 6-4.)

Troll at four to eight miles per hour, depending on conditions, in order to trigger a strike. In general, for active fish present a lure close to the surface, moving horizontally and quickly. For inactive fish use a deeper and vertical presentation. If backtrolling, place your lure down near the shoals or drop-offs associated with weed growth. In all trolling methods, though, remember that boat control is important as is the right kind of lure. With proper techniques you'll be able to rip through the weeds with relative ease. There are some deep-running plugs that are especially well suited to this technique. They are large, long-nosed, hard-plastic plugs designed for muskie fishing. By attaching your line to the tip of the lure's diving vane you can make the plug run cleaner through the weeds. This type of plug also has a distinct action which is advantageous to the angler -- when weeds foul it, there is a change of action which can be sensed by the angler. Whichever lure or bait you use in trolling, though, stay close to the edge of the rushes or weedbeds and use a fairly short line. When casting with spoons, cast your spoons to the edge of the weeds or into the slow water near a ledge. Don't worry about hitting the water with a loud slap. Their appearance and action are sufficient to attract the pike's attention. Spoons are always your staple lure, whether casting or trolling, and whether you're working shallow or deep water. Here's a technique to try when fishing in non-wilderness areas. Where storm sewers from cities enter rivers or bays, large pike will frequently hang around in the area. The grates that cover the storm sewers often harbor muskrats and other creatures the pike regards as prey. Cast a deep-diving plug towards the grate. There may be a large pike there, willing to accept a smaller offering than the meal it had in mind. I've often wondered if there's even a simpler method to pike fishing. If we accept the fact that a pike's meal is about one-third of its body weight, then we should be able to catch a 40-pound trophy by following a few easy steps: choose a soft-finned fish from ten to 14 pounds, rig it with treble hooks, put a sliding sinker on the line to keep the fish from floating around, drop the bait in water with a clean bottom near a weedbed, and go back to shore to relax and wait for the fish to strike. If the tackle stands up to the ensuing battle, you're all set. This method, if proven effective, would surely become the lazy or tired angler's dream! European anglers are masters of sophisticated live and dead bait rigs using light lines and tiny hooks rigged in huge baitfish. North Americans have a long way to go to reach their degree of sophistication. Some comments about playing a pike would be appropriate here. But first, let's dispel the myth about how pike fight. All those photographs you've seen of pike clearing the water, shaking their heads, or tailwalking brutally with a plug dangling from their jaws can be taken with a grain of salt. A few of them, no doubt, are honest illustrations. But most pike will not give you the play of a muskie. There's excitement to be had in pike fishing but it's a different kind. Nine out of ten pike you hook will come in like a log, drifting sideways to you in the water until they see the boat or the shoreline. Usually, if there's going to be a battle worth remembering, it will happen at this close range. Pike will dive under the boat, sound for the depths, and attempt to hide in

the weeds until they foul your line, or roll until your line catches on their gill plates and breaks. Sometimes, the most exciting part of a fight with a big pike comes when you try to bring it in the boat. The fish that didn't have much life in the water can suddenly become a ball of fire when it has open tackle boxes to knock over, people to throw off balance, and a sudden desire to go back in the water.

So, how do you get a kick out of pike fishing? Try big surface lures that will entice the pike up top for the strike. They'll hit hard, sometimes even clearing water to come down on your lure. Or watch your lure as it is retrieved. Sometimes a pike will follow it in and sit there watching. Put your rod tip into the water and make your lure do figure eights near the pike. Watching a pike strike under those circumstances can be thrilling. Even better, go after big fish with light tackle. If you match the strength of your equipment not to the size of the fish, but to the fish's willingness to fight, then you can really enjoy a battle with a big one.

Technique - Fly-Fishing

Fly-Fishing The places to look for pike when you have a fly rod in hand are the usual shallow-water haunts of the fish. Cast to the edges of weedbeds, to eddies of rivers, to drop-offs, and among the lily pads. Some fly fishers will wade the shallows or nose through them quietly in a canoe. They cast to places where they think pike may be lurking. Occasionally, the flipping of minnows will give the pike away. Twitching a fly across the minnow's path often brings a strike. One of the big advantages of using a fly to attract pike is that it allows you to fish at moderate depths without having to worry about snagging bottom in shallow water. The floating fly line will keep the fly from going too deep, permitting some of the most effective slow fishing. You can twitch the fly slowly through the water knowing that when you stop retrieving, the filaments of material that make up the fly won't stop moving. They'll continue to quiver in the slightest current, attracting fish even while making no forward motion. A slow retrieve can be varied with a technique that quickly pulls the streamer back towards you. A falling/rising effect can be created by adding splitshot to the line just in front of the shock leader. As you retrieve, the fly will rise toward the surface, then sink again as forward motion stops. When you have a pike on, you seem to start from an awkward position. The fish has the fly in its mouth but you are standing there with the line you've retrieved lying about your feet. If the fish is small, there's little problem -- you can horse it in just by pulling the line. But you have to play a big pike by letting the fly line slide through the fingers of one hand, keeping enough tension on the fish to keep it from spitting the fly. With the other hand you must wind madly until all the slack is on the reel. Finally, you can play the pike from the reel, allowing the tension on the reel to help tire the fish.

Technique - Ice Fishing

Ice Fishing Pike seasons often extend well into the winter. The fish are active in cold water and can be taken by several methods. Some anglers think winter pike is a better catch because the flesh is firmer and, they say, better tasting. The species is popular in some areas for winter spearing in dark houses. Anglers build spearing sheds that cut out the light from above, then dangle a minnow-simulation offering and wait for the biggest pike to spear. There is a great deal of controversy over this method of fishing and in most areas the practice is illegal. Check to see if your region allows spearing in winter or even in another season as some areas allow it during the spawning period. Personally, I am yet to be convinced that this is a sporting pastime.

Generally, taking pike in winter is a matter of drilling a hole through the ice in an appropriate location. Anglers ice fishing for walleye often choose to fish where they know there is a current under the ice. The pike fisherman should choose a spot where he knows there are weed flats giving way to deeper water. Live bait, dead bait, and spoons are the most popular presentations through the ice.

Nature's Balancer

NATURE'S BALANCER

There are some who don't give the great northern its due. One of its great attributes is that it has an excellent flavor, although the flesh is somewhat bony. With a little knowledge and practice it is possible to remove the extra bony ribs from the fish and have a great meal. Tips for filleting and cooking are provided in the "Fish Preparation" section at the back of this handbook. Remember to carefully skin the fish instead of scaling it to remove the slime or mucous which can impart a strong, fishy flavor to the pike. Years ago, people considered pike as rough fish because of their slimy skin and voracious appetite. Some of them went so far as to try to remove pike from local waters. It has taken years of good publicity to bring the fish the gaming status it deserves. The northern pike is one of our important and valuable game and food fish. Commercial fishing is still practised in many areas, mainly because the fish's flesh is white, firm, and flaky, and excellent when cooked. The species seems to withstand increased pressure, making it unnecessary to restock it in most areas. However, some areas do designate closed season on pike during spawning season to maintain natural reproduction.

The pike's most valuable attribute, however, is its position in nature's scheme of checks and balances. Northern pike is one of the best natural balancers of fish populations. In other units of this book you've learned about the problems encountered by management people in lakes where fish like perch and crappie live. These fish are such prolific breeders that they can take over a lake and cause problems for preferred sport fish. Without the efficient and voracious northern pike or similar species, many waters would be overcrowded with undesirable, stunted fish. Surveys have shown that in lakes where northerns are present in good numbers, surplus pan fish, rough fish, and the like are thinned out sufficiently to give remaining populations room to roam, feed adequately, and grow to normal size.