

Northern Pike: A Michigan Resource

The northern pike has long been an important part of the fishery in Michigan. Loved and hated, the northern pike has both detractors and fans. It is both a source of food and a fine game fish, yet it is despised by people who incorrectly believe pike decimate other species of game fish.

IDENTIFICATION

Northern pike are a member of the esocid family of fish, which includes the larger muskellunge and the smaller pickerel. This particular family of fishes, technically called Esocidae, share similar characteristics such as long, thin bodies and pointed snouts. They are soft-rayed fish and are well known for their mouth full of sharp teeth. All are piscivores, meaning their primary diet is fish.

While similar in appearance, northern pike have several characteristics that distinguish them from their esocid cousins. In comparison to the grass pickerel, the northern pike prefers cooler water temperatures and is found in a wider range of habitats. Pickerel are much smaller, rarely reaching more than 14 inches in length. Due to their size and their preference to shallow, weed-choked habitats, pickerels are rarely caught by anglers.

Pike typically exhibit light spots on a dark background. In contrast, muskellunge (or musky) usually have dark stripes or spots on a light background. Tail fins on a pike are usually rounded while the tail fins on a musky tend to be pointed. Occasionally, pike will spawn with muskies and produce a hybrid known as the tiger muskellunge, which will normally have the rounded tail fins of the pike. Their markings are similar to muskies; however they have vibrant, dark stripes on a light background.

In addition to the tail fins and coloration, the presence or absence of scales on the cheeks and gill covers is another identifying characteristic. If both are fully scaled, the fish is a pickerel. If the cheek is fully covered with scales and only the upper half of the gill cover is scaled, it's a pike. Scales only on the upper half of both the gill cover and cheek indicate it's a musky.

BIOLOGY

Northern pike are among the earliest species to spawn, typically soon after the spring thaw when water temperatures range from 40 to 45 degrees. Pike scatter their eggs in shallow water, usually in a marsh-type environment. Since pike spawn earlier than other species of fish, the fry hatch earlier. When the fingerlings reach about two inches in length, fish become their primary prey. By the time other species are hatching and starting to feed on plankton, larger pike

fingerlings are able to prey upon these fish. This is one reason pike are able to out-compete muskies in some environments.

Young northern pike grow rapidly, some reaching 15 inches in their first year alone. They'll feed on practically anything that moves that is their size or smaller. Yet, as they grow, they learn that cylindrical-shaped fish, such as suckers, are easier to swallow. Deep-bodied, spiny-rayed fish, such as bluegills and crappies, become less important in the pike's diet as they grow.

Growth rates tend to slow after the fish reaches maturity, around three to four years of age. Females grow somewhat faster than males. A pike that achieves "Master Angler" status, which is 40 inches and/or 18 pounds in Michigan, is usually a female and usually more than 10 years old.

As a cool-water species, the northern pike's optimum growth rates occur around 66 degrees. A pike's metabolism starts slowing down when water temperatures near 75 degrees, leading to the popular misconception that pike shed their teeth in the summer. In fact, they eat less in water temperatures of 75 degrees or more.

Pike are more active in the winter than muskellunge. As they grow longer and heavier, pike prefer colder water. A 40-inch pike would probably seek temperature ranges from 55 to 65 degrees.

Pike are often associated with aquatic vegetation. In especially shallow, weedy environments, pike are sometimes subject to slow-growth rates and rarely achieve more than 30 inches in length.

SOCIAL IMPORTANCE

Northern pike are an important game fish in Michigan and have been for a long time. They are noted for their fighting ability. In winter, anglers primarily use two methods when trying to catch pike. Tip-ups, with natural baits such as suckers, are one of the most common techniques of pike fishing. Other anglers enjoy the challenge of waiting in a dark shanty while attempting to lure a pike within range of their spear. During the open-water season, many anglers attempt to hook northern pike using artificial baits such as spoons, minnow-baits and spinners.

Pike are fine table fare, though they are not as easy to clean as some species since they contain a large number of small bones. But the pike's flesh is white and lean, mild and very flavorful.

Because they are aggressive, pike are vulnerable to angling pressure. Regulations are often tailored to specific waters to allow them to reach their size

potential. It should be noted that anglers must be familiar with the regulations on the specific lake they're fishing.

Although popular with many anglers across the state, northern pike are disdained by others who mistakenly believe pike will decimate other species of fish. All anglers should remember pike are a native species and play an important and necessary role in the ecosystem.

Northern pike are and will continue to be an important part of the Michigan's aquatic environment. The challenge in pike management is satisfying a wide variety of objectives. Anglers and fisheries managers can work to obtain the seemingly different goals of emphasizing larger fish and providing table fare by varying harvest regulations according to lake potential. But above all environmental protection, especially for shoreline and spawning habitat, is critical to maintaining viable pike populations for present and future generations.

For more information on fishing in Michigan, visit www.michigan.gov/dnrfishing.



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