**Northern Pike**

**Scientific name:** *Esox lucius*

**Common names:** Pike, northern, jackfish, pickerel

**Description**

Imagine watching a long, slender, moss-covered log floating at the edge of a weed bed in quiet water. A duckling swims over the log, and the log explodes into action, swallowing its prey in a single gulp! You've just imagined a northern pike in action. Adult northern pike can reach lengths of over 30 inches and weigh over 40 pounds. However, most fish caught by anglers are 18 to 22 inches long and weigh up to 4 pounds.

The northern pike's body is long and cylindrical. Its body shape is ideal for its life as a fast-swimming predator, feeding on other fish and animals. The dorsal fin (back fin) and anal fin (single fin on the fish's underside) are placed far back on the body, and the tail fin (caudal fin) is forked. The head and snout are long and flat; the snout resembles a duck bill. Although pike vary greatly in color, the general color pattern is of light, bean-shaped spots (seven to nine rows) on a dark background. The back and sides of the pike vary from bright green to olive green to almost brown. The background color is darkest on the back and gradually lightens on the sides. The underside is creamy white to white. In addition to the yellow to white bean-shaped spots, the body appears to have gold sparkles. Fins are often orange-yellow.

To tell the northern pike from the closely related muskie, look at the general color pattern and for scales on each cheek and gill cover (operculum). The muskie has a light colored background with dark marks and few scales on the cheeks. The pike, however, has a dark background with light marks and completely scaled cheeks.

**Life History**

The northern pike is native to most cool waters of the northern hemisphere, including those of the United States, Canada, Europe and Asia. It is found in weedy lakes, ponds and slow-moving rivers in freshwater, but pike can also live in brackish (somewhat salty) waters.

The northern pike (like the muskie) spawns (breeds) in early spring as soon as the ice melts and water temperatures reach 40°F to 50°F. The adults spawn and scatter eggs in marshy areas with water as shallow as 6 to 10 inches. The eggs are very sticky and attach to the marsh plants. A single female can produce up to 600,000 eggs; less than 1 percent of the eggs survive to hatch.
The young pike hatch in less than 2 weeks.
They are often still attached to the marsh plants
by a sticky patch on the top of the head for about
another week to 10 days. During this period they
feed on stored yolk. Early growth is very rapid.
Newly-hatched fish, called fry, are ¼ inch long.
At 1 month old they are 1½ inches long and at 1
year old about 6 inches long. Males mature in 1
to 2 years, while females mature in 2 to 3 years.
The northern pike’s food depends on its size.
When they become free-swimming, they feed on
zooplankton (microscopic free-floating animals)
and some insects. At 2 inches they begin to eat
small fish. Adult northers will eat any living
animal that they can swallow in one gulp, includ­
ing crayfish, large fish, frogs, ducks, mice and
even young muskrats.

Fishery

Northern pike have been eliminated from
many lakes and ponds where marshes
have been destroyed. Developers and
waterfront homeowners often fill in marshes or kill
marsh plants because they think of these plants
as weeds. Fisheries biologists who are interested
in restoring pike populations make small artificial
marshes by flooding grassy wooded areas. This
restores the pike breeding habitats that have
been lost due to development.

Many lakes and slow-moving streams in
the Great Lakes region contain northern pike.
Anglers consider northern pike good fighters
even though they don’t jump like muskies.
Anglers catch pike on many kinds of live bait and
most artificial lures. The best lures are spinners
and spoons. Because the pike has sharp teeth, it
is best to use a swivelled steel leader or a strong
monofilament leader.

Since the fish prefer slow-moving water with
shallow weedy areas, casting or trolling (slowly
pulling a lure behind a boat) lures near weed
beds is an effective way to catch pike. They can
also be caught by still-fishing in deeper water
near weed beds using live baits. Pike strike best
just after dawn or before dusk and on overcast
days when the light is dim. However, because of
their huge appetites and almost constant feeding,
they can be caught at almost any time of day.

Ice fishing for northers is also a popular
activity in many areas. Pike can be caught in 3 to
12 feet of water using tip-ups with large live
minnows like white suckers or preserved smelt.
They can also be caught by jigging with artificial lures.

There are special regulations about legal
size, fishing methods and seasons for pike.
Check fishing regulations, available anywhere
licenses are sold, before seeking this or any
other fish.

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Glossary

Angler—a person who fishes
Anal fin—the fin on the underside, between the anus
and the tail
Dorsal fin—a single fin on the back, located near
the tail
Fry—a young fish
Operculum—gill cover
Predator—an animal which feeds on other animals
Tip-up—ice fishing equipment, used instead of a rod,
which tips to display a flag to show that the fish took
the bait
Troll—to slowly pull a lure behind a boat
Zooplankton—microscopic free-floating animals