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Great Lakes 4H Fact Sheet – Northern Pike

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

4-H Club Bulletin

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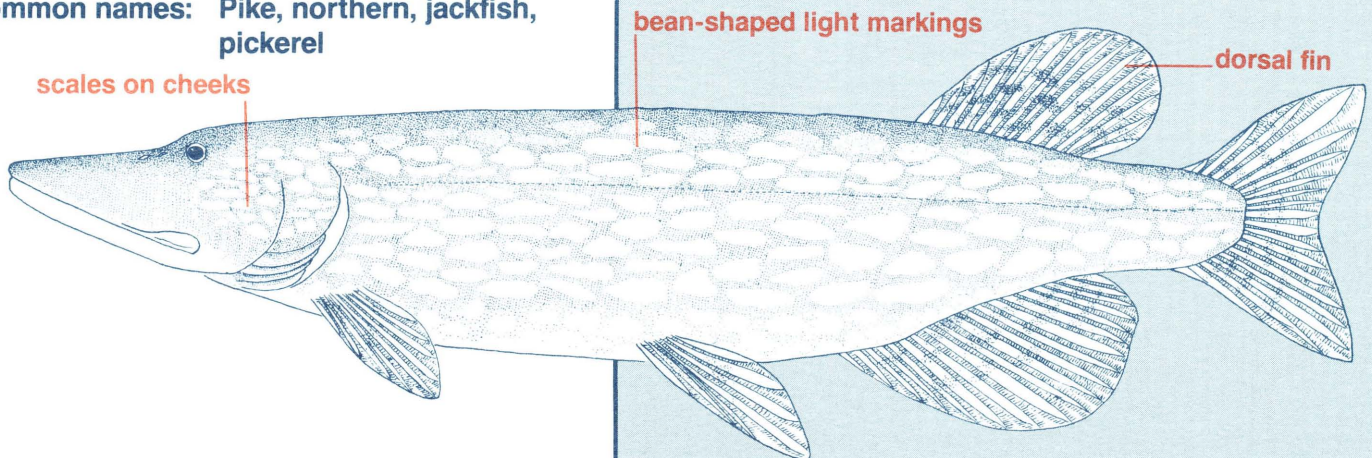
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Northern Pike

Scientific name: *Esox lucius*
Common names: Pike, northern, jackfish,
pickerel



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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 1¾ 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 northerns will eat any living animal that they can swallow in one gulp, including 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 northerns 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. Spearing pike through the ice is also permitted in some areas. A live or artificial minnow is used to lure the pike under the hole in the ice, where it can be speared.

The flesh of northerns is white, sweet and flaky. Usually the fish are skinned and filleted, then battered and fried. The flesh of pike can, on very rare occasions, contain a tapeworm that can be transferred to humans if the fish is undercooked or improperly pickled.

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

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