

Casting for Early Season Northern Pike

(by Burnie Haney)

Northern Pike (*Esox Lucius*), also known as the Water Wolf or called a Gator are just one super fun fish to catch. These fish are eating machines and using the right equipment at the right time in the right location will often yield spectacular results with relative ease.

Before we go into details on how to catch these fish, here's a little information about the current NY State record Northern Pike taken by Peter Dubuc in 1940 out of Great Sacandaga Lake in Fulton County. It weighed 46 lb. 2 oz. and was caught on a Heddon Flaptail. I can't say you'll catch one that big, but there are still many real big Pike swimming around and each year anglers have a good shot at taking a 15-20 lb. class fish or better on rod and reel.

The first thing to remember is a Pike will eat just about any moving creature that's up to 1/3 and sometimes 1/2 their total body length. They prefer other fish, but are known to eat frogs, ducklings and the occasional small rodent. In Lake Ontario and the surrounding waterways I've discovered that one doesn't need buckets of live bait or a large vessel loaded with downriggers or planer boards to catch these fish.

To enjoy open water early season Pike action it's usually best when fishing from a boat. You'll need a medium to medium heavy action rod, spooled up with 12-15 lb test line, some leader material and a handful of minnow imitating lures. At first read that might sound over simplified, but it really isn't.

Early in the year right after ice when water is 35 degrees the Pike move into the shallows to spawn and as the water warms to temperatures between 55 and 65 degrees you can catch quality Pike by applying a few easy to follow steps in your quest for a trophy fish; here are a few suggestions to get you started.

Look for any vertical weed growth in depths of 5-20 ft of water. I recommend starting in the backs of bays or large flats with scattered vegetation in 5-7 ft and work your way back out toward deeper water (20 ft). I've enjoyed most of my success casting some form of minnow imitating lures to submerged weed edges or isolated clumps of cabbage leaf in or around hard bottom areas. I believe early in the season the larger Pike frequent these areas for two reasons, the weed beds provide good cover and these areas also serve as excellent ambush positions to successfully intercept other fish moving in to the shallows in preparation for their spawning cycle.

Another overlooked area is a flat with scattered dead fall. Pike are notorious for setting next to a downed tree that comes off the bank. Early in the season you'd be surprised to see just how shallow a big fish will be hold and the key ingredient seems to be large horizontal cover they can set beside while they wait to capture their next meal.



The author and his winning Pike taken in Lake Ontario on a Stormin Hornet Jig & Zoom Fluke, a 42 inch fish that was released after the weigh-in.

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*L-R: Storm Swimbait and
Lucky Craft Pointer 100 DD*

Lures range from 7/16th up to 1 or 2 ounces and anywhere from 5 to 7 inches in length and a Pike will not hesitate to choke down almost any lure. I've enjoyed good success casting suspending deep diving minnow lures, rubber swimbaits and Zoom Flukes dressed on a Stormin Hornet lead head jig.

When using the deep diving minnow or swimbait a steady retrieve is key to the presentation. Often Pike will follow a lure for a short distance and then strike. Sometimes you'll feel a light tap and other times they'll hit the lure so hard they'll actually knock slack in the line. The light tap is a key indicator

you've got the fishes attention, but either the size of lure or color isn't quite right, hence the tap and not a quality strike. When this happens I go to the next larger size lure and that usually translates into good quality hook ups.

Some more great Pike lures



Stormin Hornet & Zoom Fluke



Strike King's King Shad



Osprey 6" Swimbait

If you're experiencing the slack line strike that's a good thing because it means the fish is hitting your lure with the intent to kill. Now all you have to do is pay attention and on the next strike you reel down fast to take up the slack line and set the hook with authority.

When using the Zoom Fluke on the Stormin Hornet lead head jig I prefer a yo-yo style retrieve. Simple cast out and count it down to the desired depth. In 5-7 ft I count it down to 3 or 4, then on a semi-tight line, raise the rod from nine to twelve, pause, let the lure pendulum down and repeat. It's a very simple retrieve just like casting hair jigs for walleye or smallmouth bass.

With these presentations I usually run a short 18-24 inch shock leader of 20 lb fluorocarbon tied to the main line and I've experienced very few bite offs. Yes the Pike can still bite it off, but usually the bite offs are few and far between and when the bite gets tough I believe the fluorocarbon leader will generate a few more strikes when compared to fishing with a steel leader.

Over the years I've used these techniques to capture 1st place and 2nd place honors in the Pike division of the annual Henderson Harbor Spring Derby held in May. So the next time you want to cast for early season Northern Pike give these simple suggestions a try and I think you'll be pleasantly surprised.