



Pike Crazy



©John Field 2014 | First published by Sexyloops, Tuesday, 1 September 2015

There are few fish in fresh water that stalk their prey and charge with such ferocity as a pike. A pike resembles and behaves like an inland version of a barracuda. Pike and muskies are related but the pike has a much faster metabolism and needs to feed much more frequently, depending on the water temperature and fish's weight. Where pike are abundant, guides call small pike; snakes, big pike; gators, and when they dislike them; snot rockets.

When I was exploring Canadian waters while writing and filming, I got to know pike very well. I remember my first time alone on the pike bays of Nueltin Lake in the Northwest Territories, now Nunavut. Until 1999, everything in Canada above the 60th parallel and to the Arctic Ocean, was part of the Northwest Territories. I looked at the maps of Nueltin Lake to find remote bays to hopefully find larger pike than reported. I explored all the bays I could reach by boat and even on foot across the treeless tundra. I found the pike and learned a lot doing it.

The most striking thing I noticed about the pike there was their thermal regulation. The pike would come out of the cold main lake basin at about 9:00am single file and enter the bays warming from the sun. The temperature in the main lake was around 52F (11C). They swam slowly and weren't interested in feeding or striking a fly. When the bays warmed up around 11:00 in full sun, the pike started getting active. When I caught one, I noticed

its body was much colder than the water of the shallow bay!

As the day wore-on, the pike acclimated and their body warmed to the water's temperature that reached about 65F (18C) in the afternoon. The pike would remain active into the twilight of the six-month long daylight, until about 11:30pm. Then the pike would return to the cold basin, one by one until morning!

If you select bays with the prevailing spring wind blowing into its mouth, preventing the escape of the sun-warmed water, the temperature contrast will be significant. I once found fish in a bay the lodge and guides said didn't have any pike. The bay looked fishy but its mouth was in the wrong direction for the prevailing winds to hold-in warm water. But when we had a front with winds blowing into the bay out of the east, I went exploring on foot alone.

The bay had clear water with a dark peat bottom that heated-up quickly in the sun. The bay also had floating mats of peat to give cover to baitfish. I was using a nine weight fly outfit and my fly of choice was a Big Fish Fly by Chico Fernandez. They are about seven inches long and its blues and greens reminded me of the ciscos and tullibeas that inhabit these waters. The rule was barbless hooks only, so I flattened the barb.

I walked the bank in the treeless landscape and caught one pike after another, until I ran out of bank. If a pike didn't fight well, I'd examine it to see if its spots or fins looked familiar. If I didn't take precautions, I'd catch the same fish twice. The fish averaged 14 lb. and some bigger fish lurked but these smaller fish beat them to my fly.

When I got to the back of the bay, there was a three-foot high bank of solid peat moss. I slid down into the water and started casting. I was having so much fun with the pike I played a little game with them. I would cast out and get one to follow, then speed up the fly very fast and slide it on top of a floating mat of peat. The charging fish would beach itself on top of the mat. I then pushed the helpless fish back into the water. The next afternoon I brought back an aging lodge guest named Ed and his son-in-law Bob, since they were hoping to catch some pike after a fine day of lake trout fishing. They caught some big pike with me, and on the way back Ed said, "This pike experience was like sipping a cognac after an exquisite dinner."

On Ed's way home on a commercial plane from Winnipeg to his home in

Chicago, he coincidentally was assigned a seat next to Larry Dahlberg, host of the video, **Fly Fishing for Pike**, the In-Fisherman video. Ed excitedly told Larry about my exploits and gave him my contact info. The next thing I knew, Larry called me and asked if I wanted to explore the opportunity of working with him.

I flew to Minneapolis to attend a brainstorming meeting with Larry and a group of his confidants and outdoor producers. Larry and I became good friends and after a year, I was working on his writing projects and co-producing **Hunt for Big Fish**, on ESPN. This took us back to Nueltin to film in a new pike area and to other lakes in Saskatchewan hunting for pike. Larry was driven to find a “star” fish for each show and sometimes he was a little too enthusiastic.

We were filming on the East Bay of Nueltin not long after spawning. Hap, our pilot dropped us off with the magnificent classic yellow Norseman floatplane and was to pick us up at 6:00, if I remember correctly. The lodge already flew-in an aluminum boat and outboard for lodge guests and us to use. Tom Zenanko was shooting the broadcast camera and I was in a wetsuit with a pony SCUBA tank filming pike underwater with an underwater camera rig. We found a nice bay and noticed all the white pop-corn like pike droppings on the shallow bottom. Larry called them fittingly, pike poop. He noted, if you don't see any in a bay, the pike population is probably low. I became hypothermic after the long underwater exposure in the cold bay but I didn't let a little inconvenience get in the way of show biz.

Larry and Tom did a great job and the fishing got better into the afternoon and evening. As a matter of fact, Larry fished past our pick-up time. After we realized and returned to the pick-up point in our aluminum boat, we didn't see the plane. We were cold and hungry, so Larry instructed us to start a fire for warmth and to signal the plane. Larry even caught a lake trout, cooked it on a spit over the smoky fire and shared it with us. It was a welcomed snack. That's when we heard the Norseman circling for us. He was so far away he couldn't see us, or our signaling attempts. Fearing an uncomfortable night and having to work the next day, I jumped into the boat and sped toward the plane, slaloming back and forth to produce a sun reflection in the waves or aluminum hull. It didn't take long and Hap zeroed in on me and I led him back to our crew for pick-up. I guess big pike can make you fish all night and do things sane men wouldn't do.