

# Spring Pike

Northern Pike have a reputation of cooperating when other fish have lock jaw. Although they do tend to be easier to catch at times than walleye or bass, catching the larger pike is seldom easy. The problem is that most pike anglers get into a rut and use the same presentations and thus have only a fair success rate. Pike, like other species, relate to weather changes and seasoned anglers need to adapt to these changes. The good news is that spring northern pike are the easiest predator fish to pattern and even the novice angler can catch big fish if they follow a few basic patterns. As a guide, northern pike have come to my rescue to salvage many a poor fishing day.

One of the main reasons that big pike are vulnerable in spring is because once pike have completed spawning many large females won't venture very far from the actual spawning areas. However, on any given water there is a percentage of big pike that head for deep water. Those big pike that return to deep water remain lethargic for an extended period of time and the cold water of their environment does nothing to stimulate feeding. You can mark them with your electronics all you want, but don't waste any time pursuing them.

Delete those deep inactive pike and don't pay any attention to your locator. If you want to catch big early season northern pike, think shallow! Pike that remain in shallow water are on the feed and are often easy to catch. The shallow back bays in which pike spawn warm quickly and attract a variety of fish species. Minnows will spawn in these bays along with perch. As water temperatures continue to rise, different species of fish will move into the shallows each day. With food being plentiful northern pike have the option of eating anything they desire.

While pike will hit a variety of live and artificial baits, using the proper presentation will be to your advantage. The preferred bait will vary from day to day but for the most part I rely on spinnerbaits, small bucktails, twitch baits and plastics. Although they can all be productive, each bait has their time and place. Spinnerbaits are excellent search baits and can be fished tight to wood and over weeds. Fishermen also have a tendency to fish spinnerbaits too quickly and if the pike are not aggressive a fisherman will fail to hook big pike.

Shallow running crankbaits or twitch baits can be very deadly since they imitate perch and minnows. Perch pattern baits are my first choice and a properly twitched shallow running crankbait will imitate a perch chasing minnows, triggering a strike from a big pike. In order to mimic a feeding perch, cast the shallow running crankbait over open water and give it a few slow pops. Next let the bait float on top of the water, give it a few fast jerks and then let it sit for about 20 seconds. Keep repeating this retrieve back to the boat. Be alert since a pike will strike the crankbait at boatside.

If there are shiners present, use black/silver colored baits. Avoid bright colored baits in the early spring under cold front situations. Even stained water has greater visibility in spring and there is no need for bright colored baits. However, when pike are active they will hit any colored bait dropped in front of them.

Live bait presentations are also effective, especially if the action is slow. A jig and minnow will always take pike. When working the shallows use a 1/4 ounce or 3/8 ounce jig with a sucker or chub. If the bite is light add a stinger hook. It is important to set the hook immediately when fishing with a stinger hook. If you wait too long the pike will swallow the hook.

My number one bait for producing big spring pike is a soft plastic jerkbait with the Case 7" Super Shad being my go to bait. I rig the Super Shad on a 6/0 wide gap Gamakatsu Hook and tie the hook to a two foot fluorocarbon leader. I attach a barrel swivel to the fluorocarbon and tie my braided line from my baitcasting reel to the other end of the barrel swivel. My favorite color for spring pike both in dark and clear water is pearl hologram. This past spring this combination resulted in several large pike.

Just as with the Case Sinking Shad and Sinking Minnow the Super Shad sinks slowly through the water column. I like to cast the Super Shad tight to wood, give it a sharp twitch and let it sink. After about five seconds I will give the Super Shad a few twitches and again let it drop. Watch for any line moment to signal pick up. A big post spawn pike can be lethargic so be prepared for light pick-ups. Make sure you slowly reel up the slack in your line before setting the hook.

Clear water natural lakes are also great for early season pike fishing. You will need to use more caution if you are after big pike in a clear water lake than in a river. Use caution when approaching a shallow bay, for big pike are easily spooked. Shut off your big motor and move in with your electric trolling motor. Look for activity before you start fishing. Besides looking for forage fish, keep your eyes open for big pike. With a good pair of polarized sunglasses, you will see prowling pike. Once you locate a big pike you can target her specifically. This is the only time of year when you can actually sight-fish for northern pike.

First off, we need to examine spring pike location. Prime spawning areas for large pike will include shallow muck filled bays close to the deeper sections of the lake. Also look for inlets, with the more water entering the lake the better. This incoming water is critical if you are searching for big pike.





On one lake I fish, a large shallow bay on the south end of the lake looks ideal for big spring pike. Anglers head for this bay without knowing that it typically only yields small pike. Few anglers realize that the big pike are on the north end of the lake where a creek enters the lake. This creek is a trout stream that attracts spawning baitfish and a few trout, which are ideal forage for big pike.

Weeds are the key to locating active northern pike. On some lakes weeds may be sparse while on others weedgrowth can be surprisingly heavy in spring. Much will depend on the actual time of ice out so the weeds will vary from year to year. If you have an unusually cold spring it will be tough to find any weeds at all. If weed growth is limited locating active pike will be all the easier. If you do have a fair amount of weeds you will need to cover more water effectively.

On many flowages and river backwaters weeds and wood may be present, or weeds may be absent and wood will be the only available cover. Regardless of whether or not you are dealing with weeds, wood or both, remember that cover is cover. In spring, cover is at a premium and all cover must be fished effectively. I see too many

anglers passing up productive structure. I look for even the smallest bit of cover in spring.

If you are looking to tangle with a trophy northern pike, there is no need to head north of the border. The first two weeks of May right after the fishing season opens are prime time. I have a few river backwaters that annually produce quality pike. Weather you fish with conventional tackle or a fly rod give me a call. We could combine a day on the water with pike and pre-spawn smallmouth if you would like. 715-854-2055 or e-mail me at [smguide@centurylink.net](mailto:smguide@centurylink.net).



**7" Case Super Shad**