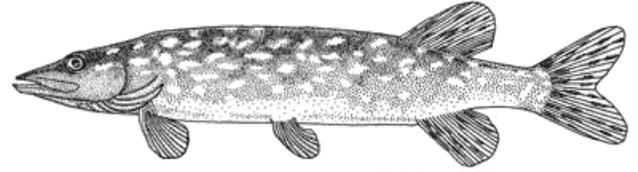




Northern Pike

Northern pike (*Esox lucius linnaeus*) are at home in many of the lakes, rivers, and sloughs of Alaska. They range from the Interior to the Arctic coast, from the Canadian border to the Seward Peninsula, and southwest to the Bristol Bay drainages. A small isolated population is found near Yakutat. During recent years, pike have become established in streams of the Susitna River drainage south of the Alaska Range and also on the Kenai Peninsula.

General Description: The Alaskan pike is the same species that is so popular with midwestern anglers. It has an elongated body and head. The snout is broad and flat, shaped somewhat like a duck bill. The jaws, roof of the mouth, tongue, and gillrakers are armed with numerous sharp teeth which are being constantly replaced. A single soft-rayed dorsal fin is located far back on the body. The pike is variable in color. A fish from a clear stream or lake will usually be light green, while a pike from a dark slough or river will be considerably darker. The underparts are whitish or yellowish. The marking on the sides form irregular rows of yellow or gold spots. Males and females are similar in appearance but females live longer and attain greater size. Pike up to 20 pounds are common in some Alaskan rivers, lakes, and sloughs, and fish weighing up to 30 pounds and measuring 4 feet in length have been caught.



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Life History: Spawning occurs in spring soon after the ice goes out. A 25- to 30-pound female may contain up to half a million eggs which she deposits in the grassy margins of lake shores, slow-moving streams, or sloughs. The eggs drop to the bottom where they adhere to grass, rocks, or other debris. Because of the colder temperatures of Alaskan waters, incubation may take 30 days. Young pike feed on small crustaceans and insects. By the time they reach 2 inches in length they may be eating smaller fish. The diet of larger pike is composed almost entirely of fish, but shore birds, small ducks, muskrats, mice, shrews, and insects are also eaten. Studies in the Minto Flats indicate that pike and whitefish are the most important food items in the summer. One 12-pound pike was found with a 4-pound pike in its stomach! Very little is known of the winter habits of pike in Alaska. However, it is known that most pike overwinter in the deep, slow waters of larger rivers because shallow lakes become depleted of oxygen. Pike also winter in deeper lakes such as George, Wien, East Twin, West Twin, and Harding. Spring upstream migrations from overwintering areas to the spawning grounds and then to summer feeding areas are quite short. Movement during the summer is minimal. Thus, if a good pike hole is fished out it may be some time before pike move in again. In Interior Alaska, a 12-inch pike may be 2 to 3 years old, a 25-inch, 5-pound pike may be 6 to 8 years old. Fish 15 pounds or over may be 10 to 17 years of age. Brooks Range pike exhibit slower growth rates.

Sport Fishing: In Alaska, the pike has been a maligned fish. Old-time Alaskans and commercial fishers scorned them, and their only use for many years was as dog food. With the settling in of former Midwesterners, the stature of the pike has increased, and it is now one of the most important game fishes in Interior Alaska. The major pike fishing areas are accessible mainly by airplane or riverboat. The Minto Flats area west of Fairbanks is composed of 800 square miles of interconnected lakes, rivers, and sloughs, and contains an abundant pike population. Trophy-size pike (over 15 pounds) can be caught in the area. Even larger pike can be taken in the clear water tributaries and sloughs of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. Some lakes of the Tanana River system contain populations of pike and receive considerable angling pressure. Pike can be taken with medium action spinning, bait casting, or fly fishing gear. Almost any type of hardware will produce a strike. A wire leader is a must when doing battle with these sharp-toothed monsters. Pike have delicious firm, white flesh. Small pike are somewhat bony, but the larger fish filet easily for frying or baking.

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Revised and reprinted 1994