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Good morning anglers and Alaska fish lovers everywhere! I'm Katrina Liebich with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage, Alaska

And I'm Guy Eroh, an independent fish enthusiast.

Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week! We are excited to talk about all the fish.

It's Monday, January 4th, 2021 and our fish of the week is Northern Pike.

Guy, what's the first word that comes to mind when you think about Northern Pike?

Toothy. Sleek. It's an awesome predatory fish. All these kind of aggressive words for this sit-and-wait predator.

A lot of fish that you may be familiar with they have that kind of torpedo shape like a tuna or a salmon. That shape's really ideal for roving or cruising along and for migrating long distances. But Northern Pike are built a bit differently. And that has to do with what they eat and how they hunt for their food.

Those are very important considerations to think about if you're trying to catch them. They've got their fins loaded toward their back end which gives them that really explosive power from a standstill when they whip their tail.

And they're serious piscivores meaning they eat other fish. This allows them to get quite large...In Alaska we can see pike over 20 pounds in some Alaska river systems.

They're a really hard hitting fish when they strike on bait. They've really got a mouthful of impressive teeth that point backwards to hold their prey.

If you're one of the people trying to catch them for food they are good to eat, you know, a white-fleshed fish. But watch out also inside the gills are toothed as well. It's not really dentition but it definitely is kind of spikes. You see after a pike eats a little silvery fish you'll see a cloud of scales come out the gills. Definitely if you put your fingers up in there if you're used to breaking out the gills to bleed the fish be aware that those can cut you as well. I've gotten my fingers cut inside the gills of pike before.

Some people call them "northacudas" because of their teeth. Others call them "slough sharks" since they're often found in slow-moving waters. And I think the funniest one that I've heard so far is "hammer handle."

Oh yeah, especially referring to those young ones...those small ones that resemble the hammer handles.

And one thing that's great about Pike – I want to mention this. There's another fish that you can find in other parts of the US and Canada—the Muskie, which is known as being this really difficult fish to catch—“the fish of 10,000 casts” so they say. Pike are not like that at all. Pike are super aggressive. I one time was fishing for pike and I spoked one. I was wading around in this lake and I spooked one. I tossed a little inline spinner in front of it. That thing stopped in its tracks. It knew I was there, but it came back, followed that lure, and SMASHED it. They'll smash anything shiny. They're not like these muskie that you can drop a spoon on their nose and they won't hit it. They are so fun!

[fishing sounds]

Now Katrina, I've gone fishing for Northern Pike and had a blast in the summertime when I've been able to, you know, wade around in the water and spot them and what not, but one thing I've always wanted to do is pull a big pike out of the ice. Do you have any recommendations on where or how to do that?

Yeah, so I live in Anchorage which is in southcentral Alaska and there's actually quite a few areas to fish around here. Closest one would probably be Eagle River, Lower Fire Lake is a popular spot for ice fishing. Then you've got the Valley—the Mat-Su Valley—that's got a ton of different lakes where pike have become established. Things you would definitely want to think about would be ice conditions – always check those before you head out. You want to be safe on the ice. Something you're going to need—you're going to need to get below the ice, so you're going to need your ice auger. And the ice can get quite thick. It's very beautiful out on a lake in the wintertime. You know, you can have snow on top of the ice. But you're going to need to get down below so you're going to need that ice auger. I would recommend a gas one that you can even put an extension on for different areas around the state if you need it. Make sure you're geared up for cold weather.

In terms of fishing under the ice, you know, you always want to imitate the prey and the behavior of the fish you're going after. So with a Pike, they're going to be going after something like a whitefish, or a juvenile salmon or a sucker. They're going to explode from the weeds or from behind a toppled tree or a submerged log or something like that. So when you're fishing for them you really want your bait to imitate that and target habitats where they're going to be located naturally. So for Pike they really like hiding behind something. So you're going to want to have areas where there are weeds. That would mean kind of shallow. If you're getting too deep into a very deep lake you're not going to have weeds below a certain light level so that's an important consideration when you're fishing for Pike. We've talked a lot about their teeth and how sharp they are so one thing you're going to want to think about with pike is

that they can actually cut your line with those teeth. So what kind of leader you use is important—whether it's a thick monofilament or a steel leader. You're going to want to think about your bait choice. Different options include fresh herring as bait in waters where bait is legal. You can also try actively jigging with spoons or rubber bodied jigs in shallow waters.

From a personal standpoint I prefer jigging to tip-ups. It's a little more active. It's a little more fun. You can actually imitate the prey with your movement. And if you enjoy fishing with a flasher you can actually see when the fish start coming underneath and then you might want to slow down your jigging a bit to entice them into taking a bite. I don't know about you, Guy, but it's a little bit more active. Especially if it's cold out it gives you something to do while you're fishing.

I certainly prefer it. And certainly the number one rule before you go fishing is to always check the regs that pertain to the waterbody you're fishing. Check what you can do. But I certainly prefer using artificials [lures] to try and catch fish.

Pike are also known to feed on anything that they can get their "hands" on. One of the most interesting things is birds! Especially young waterfowl. Pike are known to eat these. And they do make lures and flies that imitate birds. So if you're really looking for a challenge, try to go out and catch a Pike on a bird fly. Dragging it across the top of the water. You can get some great reactions...some great top water explosions that can be really cool. Go look up YouTube videos.

Also before I forget, one time I was fishing for Pike up in Alaska and I saw one dude who was bow fishing for them. It was where they're invasive. And he was sticking them.

You can bow fish them, you can spear them. And in southcentral you can kind of do whatever you want [but always check the latest regulations from Alaska Department of Fish and Game]. You can have a lot of fun particularly if you're fly fishing you can tie lures to match the types of food that they eat. It'd be interesting to tie a duck lure. Once we hit summertime I think we should do another episode on Pike.

I would love a summer episode.

Then we can talk about the duck lures! That'd be great.

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Hey everyone, one thing we always want you to keep in mind regardless of what it is that you're fishing for, is safety. Every week we're going to give a tip or two of what you can do to stay safe while you're out on the water.

The first tip we want to give you can be found at the top of any safety checklist for outdoor recreation. And that is to always let a trusted contact know where you are going and when you plan to return. Whenever possible leave a written note as well in case their memory fails them. Accidents happen and in a worst case scenario you're going to want a search party have the best possible chance of finding you as possible. Be sure to always notify your point of contact if your plans change. For instance if fishing is going poorly and you want to change locations be sure to give them a call. Additionally, and hopefully, if the fishing is going well, you can always let them know you're going to return later than you initially expected. Finally, when you do come home from your trip be sure to let your contact know and that will complete the whole process.

[cooking sounds]

So Katrina let's say that I have a fresh Pike. It's dead, it's long, it's slimy. How do I turn that into something that my family might want to eat?

A lot of people complain about the Y-bones that Pike have but you can actually get 5 really nice fillets [6 when you cut the back strap in half]. I can't overstate the importance of having a sharp fillet knife before you cut into a fish. It's going to tremendously help you get a better fillet and more meat off a fish.

So what you're going to do is you're going to set your Pike down on its stomach and you're going to make a cut behind the head with your fillet knife that's really sharp. And you're going to feel your knife hit spine. Then turn your knife towards the tail and slide your knife down its back parallel to your cutting board until you hit the dorsal fin. That's the back fillet, or the "back strap". You'll see a line of Y-bones on either side and you're going to take two fillets off either side, on the outside of those bones. To do this, you'll lay the fish on its side and make two cuts perpendicular to its back. One at the head and one to the front of its anal fin. Then slide your knife down along the ribs from front to back. For the two final fillets you're going to make a similar perpendicular cut just behind its anus and slide your knife to its tail fin. Repeat on the other side and you should have five fillets. You'll skin those fillets and are now ready to prepare a meal!

I like to just throw a bunch of creole seasoning on there and fry 'em up. What's great is that there a white meat fish so you can make them taste like whatever you want them to taste like. You can boil them. If you boil them you can actually have a little dish of butter off to the side that's warm and you can dip them in butter kind of like you'd eat a lobster. You can bake them. You can pickle them. There are a lot of different options.

I want to tie this back really quick into their physiology because I think it's really cool. The reason that they don't taste fishy is related to their role in the ecosystem, their behavior, and

their ecology. Of course we've mentioned already that they're sit-and-wait predators so they don't have a ton of need for all these blood vessels to get a ton of oxygen to their muscle tissue cause they're really just sitting around a lot of the times and they have a lot of anaerobic activity—just quick bursts of activity to get their prey. And so because they don't need all this blood going to their tissues, they're not like salmon, they're not like tuna where they have a lot of this red meat that's really well-oxygenated. And that's really where you get the fishy taste from is from the blood. And so you've got this really nice white meat and they have that because they're ambush predators. I think it's really cool that you can tie in the culinary aspect to the ecological aspect.

Alright so that's your fish of the week: the Northern Pike. Super exciting fish to fish for. We'd like you all to get out there, get fishing, and enjoy all the fish.

Go get 'em!

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Thanks for listening to Fish of the Week!

My name is Katrina Liebich, and my co-host is Guy Eroh.

This show is produced by David Hoffman of Citizen Racecar, assisted by Garrett Teidemann and Kelsey Kohrs.

Fish of the Week is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs.

As the Service reflects on 150 years of fisheries conservation, we honor, thank, and celebrate the whole community – individuals, Tribes, the State of Alaska, sister agencies, fish enthusiasts, scientists, and others – who have elevated our understanding and love, as people and professionals, of all the fish.
