

Have an encounter with a northern pike in its weedy domain

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I'm waist-deep in the weedy waters of Misery Bay, casting a Red Eye Wiggler into the wind, when I hear a ruckus.

A man with a thick Southern accent is yelling obscenities and lunging around the deck of his bass boat.

"Grab him!" he says to his friend. "It's a big-un!"

He crashes into a tackle box and stumbles, overturning a cooler.

"Holy ..." he shouts. "It's slimier than a catfish! And look at those teeth!"

He finally gets a grip on his catch and lifts it up. Squinting, he studies its bold camouflage and belligerent, underslung jaw. He shoots his friend a puzzled look.

"What is this thing?" he asks.

The Southerner has just had his first encounter with a northern pike, and he's amazed, as many people are, that such creatures swim in Erie's waters.

I first became aware of the pike when I was a kid. Every Easter, my brother got the canoe out and took me into the lagoons at Presque Isle State Park to fish for them. It was hard to fall asleep the night before, and when I did, giant northern pikes thrashed about in my dreams.

I was suffering from a strange illness, notorious among North Country anglers. They call it Pike Fever. The disease progressed steadily over the years, and then suddenly abated. I found that

most of my pike fishing had been reduced to sitting along French Creek drinking beers and watching bobbers.

But Pike Fever is like malaria -- it always comes back. Lately I've grown addicted to the excitement of wade-fishing *Esox lucius* in his own domain, on his own terms. To really know a fish, you have to get in the water and wrestle with him.

I've tangled with a lot of mean species over the years, but nothing compares to having an angry pike slash at a bait mere inches from your bare kneecap. Sometimes they leap right out of the water, trying to chomp a spinner I've lifted from the drink.

You can wade for small "hammer handle" pike anytime, but the big girls crave cooler, deeper water, and vacate the shallows fairly quickly after the spring spawn. To catch them when wading, you have to get wet early. So early, I actually broke down and bought a pair of neoprene waders this year. It was either that or discover hypothermia.

I like to cast spoons or minnow-imitating plugs in the spring. After they spawn, pike get sluggish, so I usually bring a bag of dead bait (chubs or jumbo shiners) for days when they just won't chase a lure.

But what about our Southern friend? He's still there -- standing on the boat, holding his first northern pike. He's ready for his close-up, but before his buddy can get the camera ready, the pike gives a quick jerk and flops into the water. With an insolent tail-splash, he's off to the chilly depths.

The Southerner stomps and cusses, then casts his lure right back out. As he wildly reels in, I recognize that familiar crazed look in his eye. It's Pike Fever.