

Influx of pike makes way to Presque Isle's shallows

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Spring is in the air and northern pike anglers are getting that open-water itch.

I love ice fishing, but after three months of pulling pike through ice holes on hand lines, I was starting to feel like Nanook of the North. Now I can shelve the tip-ups and retire my inner Eskimo. Actually, I've been preparing for ice-out for more than a month, scanning eBay for discontinued Aqua spoons and Pike Minnows. The only one getting an earlier jump on spring is Mr. Pike himself.

Northern pike began migrating toward their spawning grounds while the water's surface was still frozen. They tend to return to the area where they were born or have spawned in the past. For Presque Isle pike, this means the shallow, weedy lagoons that vein the interior of the peninsula.

When ice-out rolls around and lagoon waters rise above 40 degrees, pike are ready to get it on. Pike are promiscuous spawners, often preferring threesomes to pairs. I've seen them go at it in less than a foot of water, and it's quite a show. Two or more males position themselves on either side of a female, pressuring her flanks with rough abdominal thrusts. When her eggs squeeze out -- an estimated 3,000 to 120,000 at a time -- they fertilize them with clouds of milt.

The big question is how many pike will show up this spring.

The population suffered a devastating kill eight years ago, and has yet to recover. Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia -- an infectious disease that causes fatal internal bleeding -- is suspected.

"This incident occurred before VHS was 'officially' discovered in the Great Lakes, but this could have been an early incident because of signs of hemorrhaging in the dead fish," said Tim Wilson, a biologist with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. "Our (trapnet) samples from 2003 and 2006 were well below the long-term average, suggesting that this incident substantially reduced overall pike numbers."

There are signs, however, that the population is rebounding.

"We have heard reports from anglers about increased catches," Wilson said. "We hope to sample the bay next year to determine the status of the northern pike."

Pike feed before the spawn, but once they're in the throes of passion they're nearly impossible to catch. You can toss any kind of bait you want at them and they will ignore it.

As for nurturing skills, northern pike fall somewhere between Charlie Sheen and Britney Spears on the parenting scale. After their eggs are deposited among the weeds, they promptly abandon them to predators. Few hatchlings survive to adulthood.

Pike, particularly smaller males, remain in the lagoons for a couple of weeks after the spawn. They're sluggish during this cold-water recuperative period, so you have to work lures slowly to catch them. If you're getting follows, but no strikes, try a two-rod technique I call "spooning them in." Throw out a dead shad or sucker under a bobber on one rod, then cast a spoon and slowly retrieve it past the bobber with the other rod. Interested pike will follow the spoon straight to your bait. Be prepared to switch rods quickly.

I usually hit the lagoons in a canoe, but boating isn't required.

"Anglers also like to fish from shore," said Brian Gula, a naturalist at Presque Isle State Park. "They can do that by walking Long Pond Trail."

See you in the lagoons, pike fans. I'll be the guy with the bag of stinky suckers.