



PIKE ON A FLY

by Ben Smith

Not too many anglers today think of northern Colorado as having potential for notable warm water fly fishing. I'm here to tell you that there is at least one location that deserves of such attention. Situated between the towns of Craig and Steamboat Springs, a river winds it's way through the Yampa Valley which, on the surface, appears to be strikingly similar to dozens of other Rocky Mountain valleys known for their excellent trout waters. This illusion is quickly shattered by the violent strike of a Northern Pike.

Any angler unaware of the presence of these gator mouthed serpents is in for a real surprise when he offers a fly to the swirling current of the Yampa River. Some of the local residents view pike as undesirable outcasts and their presence in the Yampa has recently been the subject of debate and controversy. This uncertain fate of the mighty Northern in the Yampa River makes the present time a ripe one to enjoy this unique set of circumstances.



Specialized Flies and Leaders for Pike

As a fly fisherman who primarily pursues trout, the opportunity to float a river containing pike was a welcome change from the recent routine. Last fall, two of my friends and I were afforded just such an opportunity and as soon as plans and arrangements had been made, we loaded the pickup and headed south on a seven hour drive to Steamboat Springs, Colorado on the Yampa River.

When pursuing Northern Pike, an angler must be attentive to the equipment he or she will be using. Unlike trout, pike have a very toothy mouth, which much be taken into account. A short amount of 30-40 pound hard monofilament shock tippet between the leader and fly will

fend off the teeth of a Yampa River Northern Pike. Always be sure to check your tippet periodically, especially after landing a pike, to prevent fly loss due to a damaged leader.

As a rule a 7 weight rod can handle most situations that an angler will find himself in on the Yampa. The ability to cast a heavy fly at least 50 feet is critical when fishing from the shore or a drift boat. A 7 weight rod will allow the angler to cast the fly and play a northern in order to land it. However, there are opportunities to hook into pike that measure 35 inches or more and are willing to put up a fight against an 8 weight rod.

Northern pike are very aggressive predators which will devour any type of prey presented in the right situation. This makes the pike a great species for the fly fisher to pursue. A fly box filled with bright colored streamers, like yellow and chartreuse Clouser minnows and red Lefty's Deceivers make a great arsenal. Specialized flies like the Megadiver provide a profile of a large

food item and work well. northerns are not picky eaters so Dahlberg Divers and saltwater poppers also work in the same bright colors.

when my friends and I finished our discussion about strategy and tackle for these northern pike, we launched our drift boat and started our adventure. We put on the river rather early in the morning and the day was overcast. As we started to cast and retrieve our flies, I noticed a long silhouette directly behind my fly. I immediately let the rest of the crew know by shouting "northern! northern!" As the gator disappeared into the depths I thought to myself 'there really are northern pike in this river.' An angler would never guess by the looks of the Yampa. All the features of a Rocky Mountain trout stream are present: great structure, cut banks, plenty of riffles and deep pools. Actually, the pike were a welcome change, because I normally use a 4 or 5 weight dry rod and rarely have a chance to use 7 and 8 weight rods with shock tippet rigged to saltwater type streamers.

We were all having a great time enjoying the explosive takes and strong battles put up by those pike. Anywhere there was overhanging structure with a tight spot for a pike to ambush prey, we sent our fly sailing. Before we could even make one strip on our line, a northern would often crush the fly. Strip, strip, strip until the line got tight, then a swift hook set would do the trick. Pike tend to bully the angler rather than perform the acrobatic leaps that the rainbows are so well known for; that is precisely why we were on the Yampa River that day.

Expanding my fly fishing endeavors to include different types of fish has certainly increased my enjoyment of the sport. In this case, by simply traveling seven hours south of my home in Jackson Hole, Wyoming to target northern pike for a weekend has made me appreciate the many faces of fly fishing.

To imagine the limitless possibilities of catching a northern pike on a fly would sorely stir any anglers emotions. With only a handful of exceptions, pike are spread throughout the 50 states. In addition, Canada offers a widespread abundance of pike that would satisfy any angler. By simply crossing the border and fishing the boundary waters or flying into the northern reaches of Canada an angler can find pike.

It is for these reasons I will always take advantage of opportunities to fly fish for pike and other species of fish in different types of water.

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