

Predacious pike designed to kill

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Last spring, my father-in-law thought that he had me stumped. My wife and I had just arrived at their place in Bigfork as he was filleting out the second northern pike of the day's catch.

"Mike, what do you think I found in the stomach of this pike?" he asked.

Without hesitation I said, "A baby duckling."

From his expression, I sensed that I was right, although it wasn't my intent to spoil the intrigue of his find. All he uttered was, "Huh, how did you know that?"

If a baby duckling wasn't right, I was willing to bet on any number of other large prey items that pike commonly feed on. Frogs, mice, muskrats and even coots are often on the menu for this "freshwater shark." I also could have said other fish, which are the overall preferred fare of the pike, but I thought that would have been too easy an answer.

Pike are designed to kill. Camouflaged by green coloring broken by rows of elongated white spots, they blend in perfectly to the marshy areas where they lurk and wait.

Large fins are situated towards the tail of their long, sleek bodies, powering the fish to make quick bursts of up to 10 mph as they slam into their unsuspecting prey. Upon impact, the many rows of long sharp teeth quickly slash into their victim. Pike even have teeth on their tongue to help grasp their struggling quarry.

The pike's love affair with meat starts at an early age. By the time they are three to four inches in length, they are beginning to prey on other fish. Whatever they can fit inside their mouth is fair game. As adults, they can swallow other fish roughly half their body length.

They don't get indigestion easily. Bones, fur and feathers are no problem for their highly acidic digestive juices that can even corrode metal.

Pike are true Montanans; however, they never existed west of the Continental Divide until the 1960s. They were transplanted here by well intended but unapprised amateur bucket biologists.

Although fun to catch and good to eat, pike do their part to reduce the numbers of other popular game species like trout and salmon, in addition to countless other forage fish. As a result, the bag limit for pike is a little more liberal in the western part of the state, although the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks recognize that they won't be able to wipe them out through fishing.

The Montana state record for the largest pike is 37.5 pounds. An unofficial catch from the

Whitefish River of a 38-pound, 47-inch pike has been reported. A good time to fish for pike is from March to May, soon after the ice goes off the lake and during their spawning period. Look for emergent vegetation in the bays of Whitefish Lake and along the shoreline of the Whitefish River.

I'd better not say where my father-in-law's secret fishing holes are, but if you go for morning coffee at the Korner Kitchen in Bigfork, you might pick up some pike fishing tips. Get there early and look for the bunch of guys wearing flannel shirts with suspenders holding up their britches pretending to be talking politics.

They might open up if you buy them a cup of coffee — none of that fancy stuff, straight up black will do.

Mike Koopal is the executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute.