

THE TUG IS THE BUG

I've fished from childhood; from the age of around six my uncle used to take me bait fishing for trout with him, predominantly on the Clyde and some of the Lochs in the Trossachs. When venturing out on my own it was to local disused mine shafts close to the village that had perch and the odd pike in them, that was where it all started for me.

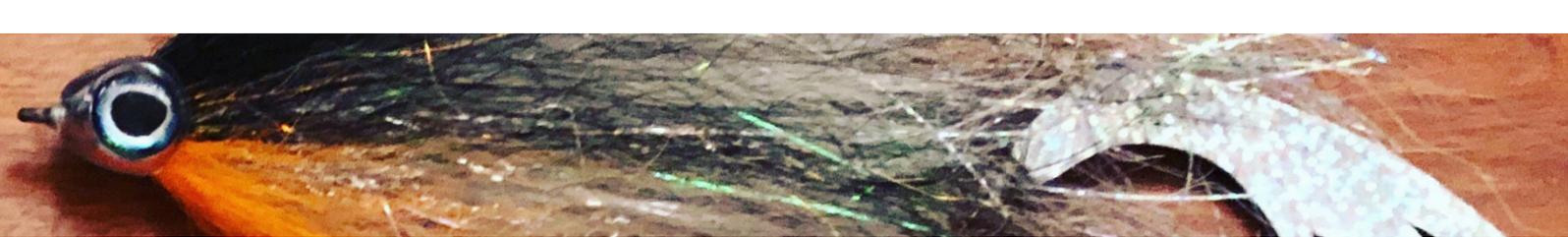
Like most people my initial encounters were sticking a live perch out under a bung or spinning with a mepp or toby. When I got my own wheels, I travelled all over Scotland and parts of England pike fishing, dead baiting and lure fishing. I still went trout fishing, although moved more towards fly fishing for them. This was what led to one of my first encounters with pike on the fly which I can still remember as clear as a bell today. It was the opening day of the trout season on the Lily Loch in the mid to late nineties. I headed up to the loch with the fly rod, cabin fever had me desperate to get out and I must have been desperate because it was blizzard conditions and when I got to the loch I was the only one daft enough to be fishing the fly!

I wasn't there long and had a freshly stocked trout (don't think it had a full fin on it!) on the cats whisker. A short time afterwards half way through my retrieve I got a hit and the line that was about my feet just headed for the horizon, there was no stopping it. The fish took the slack line up to the reel, the rod buckled over and ping! I was under no illusion it was a pike and the seed was planted.

Tackle back then for pike fishing in general, never mind fly fishing for them was pretty limited in the UK. I ended up buying a Masterline toothy critter rod (which in hindsight was mince) and a Shakespeare reel. Like with most of the lures we used back then, I looked to America and got myself a Cortland 444 musky taper line, which only came in a floating version. The flies too were from the states, pike and lake trout trolling flies they were marketed as. I caught fish from the first time out but then again, I only used the method when I knew the fish were up for it and in the shallows and never really realised the potential of the method.

Around 2002 I broke away from fishing as much, only venturing out a handful of times a year but when I did it was either with lures or the fly rod. In 2008 Canadian fly fisherman and guide Barry Reynolds brought out a film and book - Pike on the Fly: In Pursuit of the Water Wolf. After seeing this film my fire was rekindled; Loomis rod and hardy reel was purchased and I started tying my own flies. I started out using a float tube about this time as well. My personal life was still busy and really it's only been the last couple of years where I've really got back into fishing on a regular basis and now, giving the advancement in pike fly fishing tackle, I can fish the fly all year round.





For me there's nothing more personal than catching a pike on the fly and it really is all about that tug or that eruption of the water when the pikes takes a surface fly. Getting a big fish on in the float tube is one of the most exciting forms of fishing you'll ever do. When you get that fish alongside you, a head like a crocodile and its only you and the fish, no net, getting your hand under that chin and sliding the fish up onto your lap, nothing beats it. Definitely an arse making buttons moment!

The Basics

For anyone starting out fly fishing pike, the run of the mill set up is a nine foot, nine weight rod and there are loads of choices available these days. This covers the majority, if not all of your needs. It'll be cheaper in the long run if you buy a cassette reel as through time, you're going to want to add different sink rates of lines and with the price of buying spools it can be expensive. You'll need to buy a specific pike taper fly line to cope with turning over the large flies. The leader set up is nothing fancy. For years I just used 30lb mono to 30lb coated wire, now I use 30lb fluorocarbon to 30lb coated wire. The knots I use for connecting the wire to flouro/mono is the Albright knot. Although a lot of people use them I wouldn't recommend using clips for attaching your fly, in my opinion, this is just adding in something else that can fail on you when it isn't required. I have used the Jam knot from the get go, which is a very simple knot and has never once let me down. As far as the leader make up goes, on a floating line an overall length of 7-8ft is fine, down to around 4ft overall if

your using a fast sink. This is to let the line do it job and keep the fly down deep. Stillwater trout anglers have influenced modern pike fly fishing in recent years with their variety of lines and it is no longer a method confined to shallow water. Using the right line, it's now quite easy to get your fly down to twenty feet and with an addition of a few tungsten beads or cone heads, you can get your fly a lot deeper when required.

The retrieves I use vary given the mood of the pike and you really need to experiment on the day and let the pike tell you what they want. As a general rule, if it's cold and the fish aren't moving much, common sense dictates that you use a slow retrieve, like the figure eight. If the fish are up for it and in an aggressive mood a faster rolly polly, hand over hand retrieve works well. When using the rolly polly technique it is important when you get a take not to try and strike into the fish like normal but to set the hook with a strip set. This just means keep going and speed up your retrieve to set the hook. The majority of the time I use a normal strip retrieve but sometimes a retrieve that will get an unresponsive fish to hit is the jerk strip retrieve. This gives the fly a much more aggressive action, almost like you would get with a jerk bait.

When it comes to fly selection, again this is something the pike are going to let you know. My fly box varies from 3" baitfish imitation's to large 12"+ articulated flies that represent larger baitfish species such as bream, flies that pop along the surface to jig flies that are tied with heavy shot to get them down deep. I use tube flies a lot and when fished in conjunction

with a Bauer rig and wiggle tails is a very versatile system. Once you start tying your own flies, you'll never tie a shop bought fly on again.

Strategy

This doesn't just apply to fly fishing but to every form of fishing. It's true that ten percent of anglers catch 90 percent of the fish. Many people are quite happy going out using a chuck it and chance it approach, following others about or only going to well-known swims and even when they are in swims which are known to be productive, don't give a thought on why that area is productive. It's never just down to chance why that area produces more fish than others.

The pike is not an intelligent creature. It's a creature of habit fuelled by its need to eat, hide/be safe and reproduce. At the start of the year (pre-spawn) pike are starting to think about spawning and will move to drop offs close to spawning areas. At this time of year I'll still be fishing sinking lines and if I think the pike are in a feeding mood I will still start by throwing bigger flies at them. I do believe, big fly = big fish and the majority of the time, a bigger fly will trigger a fish in a neutral mood to strike opposed to a smaller fly. My theory being that an easy big meal is worth expending energy on rather than a smaller meal.

This time of the year in my experience is hard going for the fly fisherman but the chance of the next fish being a monster is always there. The fish will move in and out the spawning bays at this time of year, in my opinion this is more to do with checking temperature

than to feed. Coming closer to spawning time, when the fish move into the bays, they tend to go off the feed. Small slow moving fly's can work during this time as pike will still pick up leeches and the like because they are so slow moving and easy to feed on. Rabbit strip flies can be a good imitation of a leech and worth a go, fished almost static.

Once the pike are in the swing of spawning it is best to leave them alone to carry on with the job in hand. Come the very end of April into May (post spawn) is one of the best times of year for fly fishing for pike. The fish are aggressive and willing to chase and are often still in the shallows, so they can be located quite easily. It can be great sport this time of year fishing divers and poppers. The Umpqua pike fly, tied with a foam diving head is one off my favourite flies when fish are in this state. At this time of year I am more likely to go for a bright, colourful fly to provoke the pike into taking.

The fish will stay close to the shallow bays till the end of June feeding on other coarse fish that come into the hatch so to speak. If the Pike are feeding on roach, I'll be fishing a small sparkler or roach imitation. If its perch they are on likewise, I'll be picking a fly that matches the general profile and colour of a perch. As the water warms the pike head out onto drop offs and weed lines as the need deeper water and an ambient temperature to digest there food. This is where you really need to start being smart and do your homework; you need to get to know the topography of the lochs your fishing. If you have

a map or depth chart brilliant, if not google earth is a good place to start. I'll be looking for features like outcrops into the water, saddle areas between islands, turns in or out in weed lines, typically trying to fish in of around 15-25 feet of water. If you manage to find the shoals of baitfish, the pike won't be far away. I'm back to predominately fishing more natural colours of flies now and follow the old code; bright day bright fly, dull day, dull fly. When fishing from the boat, I'll have three rods set up, with different sink rates of lines to allow me to fish from shallow into deeper water throughout the day.

Influences in tying and fishing

As said previously one of my biggest influences in pike fly fishing was Barry Reynolds, the Canadian fly fisherman and guide. His books and his film Pike on the Fly: In Pursuit of the Water Wolf, really do get you excited. Myself and the group of guys I fish with, copied the patterns in his book; Dan Blantons flash tail whistler, Lefty Kreh's deceiver and the Umpqua pike fly was the mainstay of our fly boxes and are still patterns that get put on at times now when the going gets tough.

In recent times the Scandinavians have leapt forward in their fly design and pike fly patterns. People like Nicklaus Bauer and Ulf Hagstrom have done some excellent fly tying tutorials and pike fly fishing videos on YouTube. Musky fly fisherman's patterns from guys like Blane Chocklett and Brad Bohlen are something else and these guys are really forward thinking fly tiers. Producing flies that move to mimic injured bait fish through using articulation and flies that cause a lot of disturbance in the water on retrieval. Dougie Loughbridge further developed a lot of flies for the UK market and my life long fishing buddy George Abbott has always been one step ahead of me when it comes to tying, so I usually steal his patterns and make them better (if only).

Fly fishing for pike does open up a lot more water to the pike angler. There's very few water that are now off limits as most places will let you go along and fish a fly rod. Although every method has its day I really struggle to tear myself away from fly fishing - I suppose it's just what floats your boat. I know if I get a fish with the fly I've worked for it! The next tugs just as exciting as the first!



SOME OF MY TINSEL





In this pic you can see my fly line working through the shoal of baitfish, getting down to the pike underneath. The orange mass being the baitfish, the diagonal lines being my fly line and the boomerangs on the bottom the pike.

This fish was only the second fish on the first outing at a new venue and was only about two hours in! When we arrived, there were a few guys fishing and bagging up on bream. On went a big 12" bream pattern, got in amongst the shoal with the finder and boom! I do believe in big fly, big fish.



Lomond twenty

Again the homework was done in advance of catching this fish. The spot was picked from the admiralty chart and was an area I knew the fish should be at that time of year. I could only manage a short four hour session due to work commitments but the effort was worth it.

Rolly polly technique pic

A retrieve technique I use a lot is the roly polly, overhand retrieve. Varying the speed and trying to remember to add a pause now and then. That in combination with a big wiggle tail tube resulted in the above fish!

Winter fishing Only pull of the day 28lb

There's no getting away from it, fly fishing in the winter for pike is a hard game. The fish are sitting up and reluctant to move far, fishing can be really slow. Mind-set is everything at this time of year, you need to remain confident and believe that next cast is going to be the one. This fish came near the end of an eight hour shift at the start of February and was the only tug of the day.

Stuart Sutherland