

Fish Of A THOUSAND CASTS

EUAN MILLER AND STUART SUTHERLAND
SPEND THE WINTER MONTHS IN SEARCH OF
BIG PIKE ON THE FLY. HERE THEY REVEAL WHAT
IS REQUIRED TO CATCH THESE BEAUTIFUL
LEVIATHANS FROM THE SCOTTISH LOCHS...

Winter pike fly fishing in Scotland is not for the faint hearted and the further north you go the harder it gets. Gone are the times of plenty of post spawn and autumn pike, when three and four fish could be chasing down your fly at one time, in anywhere between four and twenty foot of water. After around the second week in November we notice a massive reduction in pike activity and their reaction to artificial presentations. The temperature drops down to near freezing, typically around 38-40° F, 3-4° C and the pike drop in the water column too.

USING THE RIGHT APPROACH

Generally in a day's fishing you can expect a couple of pulls throughout the day, but of course we all know the rewards can be great at this time of year, when that one pull can turn out to be a leviathan making what could be a make or break day well worth it. You need to be mentally strong and confident in your approach at this time of year.

This is definitely not a time for trying anything different or new venues. At this time of year we stick to waters we know well. We fish proven fly patterns that have worked well for us before and that we are confident with. We don't waste too much time changing flies. It's more important to be getting your fly to where the fish are and using the right approach to induce a take than the actual pattern itself. One thing that should be said is that blue is a colour to be relied upon when fishing deep and in low light conditions (blue being the last colour to leave the spectrum of light). Don't spend too much time moving around from spot to spot, as it is just a matter of time before a fish will feed. Using a fish finder will be a huge benefit as you can concentrate on features like baitfish, underwater features, depths etc.

A FISH OF A THOUSAND CASTS

Think of musky fisherman at this time of year and how the musky is seen as the fish of a thousand casts. You need to believe that it's going to, and will happen, and even on the days we have blanked we fish just as confidently on the last cast of the day as we did at the first. We've seen it many times when the light is fading and we've never had a touch all day, then out of the blue the magic happens and your rod



Don't expect a pull a cast. You need to be mentally strong and confident in your approach as you may only experience a couple of pulls a session.

buckles over connected to a big fish. Quite often we find that on the days with less fish, a big fish is on the cards and can come at any time. The pike really put on weight at this time of year and are in fantastic condition. This makes fishing for and catching these big fish a true fly fishing addiction.



Stay focussed until the end. This big pike came for Stuart in the last half hour of daylight.



Expect plenty of casting when searching for big pike!

At the end of one fruitless day, I hooked into a superb fish that took my fly in around 18ft of water, with around half an hour of daylight left. I remember saying to my boat partner "I think I'm snagged up!" to which he replied "well your snag is moving!" the result was a huge pike which was more than welcome on a hard winter's day.

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Flies For Big Pike



THE MCPERCHERSON (EUAN MILLER)

Hook: Partridge Predator X, size 4/0

Tail: Gold flash

Body: Bucktail, chartreuse and yellow

Head: Orange Icelandic sheep and black wool

Eyes: Deer Creek Roachie eyes



THE BLUE SHARK (STUART SUTHERLAND)

Hook: Partridge Predator X, size 4/0

Tail: Blue bucktail, blue Nayat, dun saddle feathers, pearl and silver Flashabou.

Body: Pearl Emulator Flash

Head: Blue Nayat

Eyes: Light weight dumbbells, Funky Fly Tying,

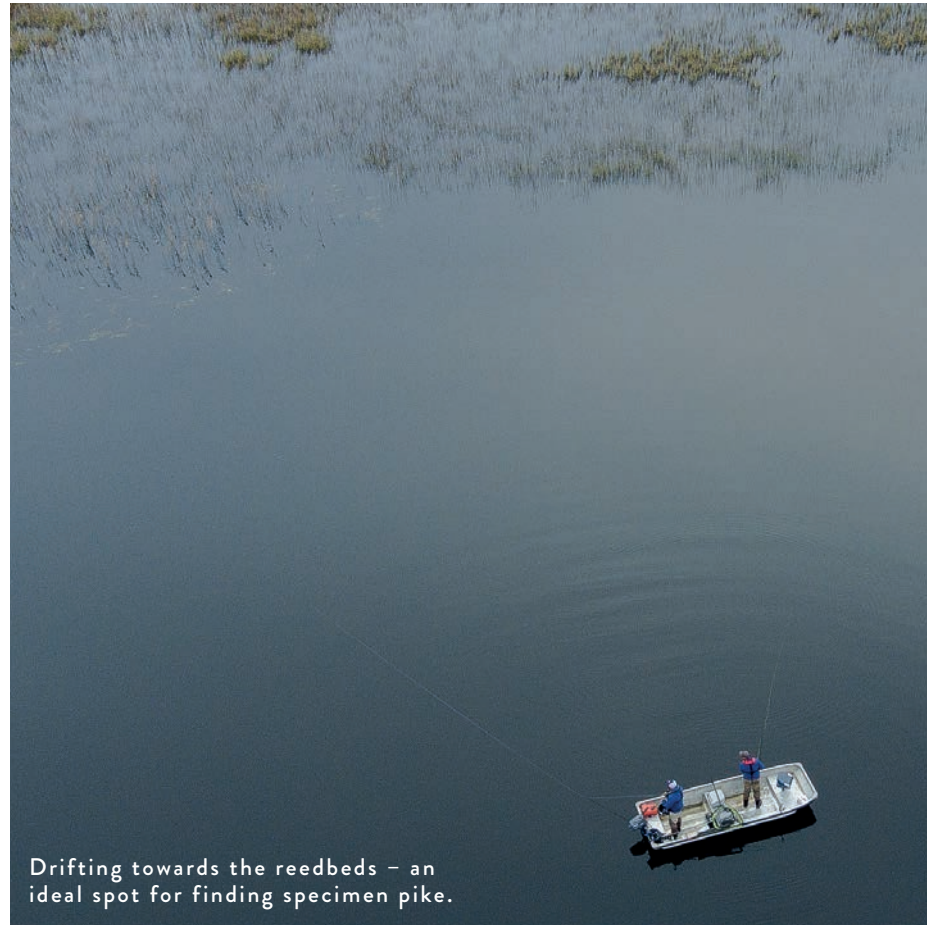
FINDING A SUITABLE VENUE

In Scotland access to rivers is pretty limited due to migratory fish that are given priority over pike and other coarse fish (hopefully through time this will diminish and riparian owners will see the value in allowing access to all). The few rivers that do allow access, normally only allow bait fishing. Our canal systems don't produce anything like the numbers of big fish like the drains and canals further south, so really we are limited to our lochs and stillwaters, a lot of which are massive bodies of water and deep. At times we venture out bank fishing during the winter, concentrating on larger bays, preferably picking one with a low lying inlet, entering the bay. The idea behind this being that the inlet will provide a flow of warmer water into the loch, encouraging baitfish to hold in these areas and the hope that the predators follow.

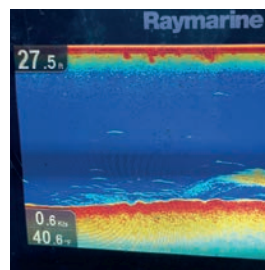
Feeder burns, which enter big lochs, are places to try. Burns like this, that meander through farmland before entering the loch provides a much greater increase in temperature, than say a burn coming in off a hillside which runs through ice and picks up snow melt along the way, drastically reducing the temperature.

AFLOAT BY BOAT OR TUBE

More often than not we will be afloat, either by boat or by float tube. As the water cools the baitfish shoal up and we never venture out without a finder. As the water cools the oxygen sinks through the water column and a thermocline will evolve, creating an ambient temperature bar between the now thinner and colder top layer of water and the warmer denser, more oxygen rich



Drifting towards the reedbeds – an ideal spot for finding specimen pike.



The fish finder. The baitfish have now shoaled up. If it's a large shoal try and fish around the edges of the shoal. Note the temperature as well on the finder.

Where the farmland burns enter the lochs you'll find warmer water, baitfish and BIG pike.

water below. So in theory this means if you're going to catch fish, you're going to be fishing deep, around the 15-30 feet mark. We use the finder to pick up the baitfish and underwater features. Pike will feed in open water but they prefer features and at this time of year the weed has gone, so you're looking for underwater structure such as, rocky out crops, bars coming off points, sunken islands, humps or rock piles.

THREE-ROD SET UP

We always fish a three-rod set up on the boat. In the winter we'll have a Di7, a Di3 and an intermediate. This allows us, as we drift over structures to quickly change rods and adjust the depth at which were fishing, quickly resulting in more fishing time and a greater chance of picking up a fish. If fishing from a drifting boat, a method which allows your fly to get down deeper is to cast at a slight angle away from the bow or stern of the boat, allowing the fly line to drift round. This will give it more time to sink as the boat continues down the drift, starting to retrieve as the line comes parallel with the boat.

No matter what style of fly we use during this approach, we always go for a fly incorporating a Pacchiarini's Wiggle or Dragon Tail.

It is important to remain in contact with your fly throughout as a pike can hit you at any point throughout the retrieve and will readily take a fly on the sink or pause. During your retrieve, just as at any other time of the year, it is important to add pauses. The difference being in the winter, instead of pausing twice or so throughout the retrieve we generally give a couple of strips in-between the pauses.

Another method we use in the winter is a jigging approach; this is a long proven approach for lure fishing for pike in the winter months. We use specifically tied flies on jig hooks with added weight or on conventional patterns fishing in conjunction with brass or tungsten beads and cones. No matter what style of fly we use during this approach, we always go for a fly incorporating a Pacchiarini's Wiggle or Dragon Tail. The reason behind this is that even when

the fly is static just before it drops after a pause on the retrieve, these tails will flutter and move which can induce a take. Sometimes around midday we will leave the deep water for an hour or two and try slightly shallower bays. We have found if the water in these areas is going to warm up then around midday is going to be the time to give them a try. At times the bays may hold fish sunning themselves for heat or they may have followed baitfish into the shallower water. It will always remain easier for pike to take prey in shallow bays as the baitfish, just have less water to hide in and can be hoarded into the shore.

As stated, winter time fly fishing for pike can be a real hard shift, and is most of the time, but the rewards can be great and one thing is for sure, you won't catch them sitting in the house supping broth by the fire! It's a true saying that 5% off fisherman catch 95% off the fish, Join the 5%!

Left: Having three rods set up with an intermediate, Di3 and Di7 means a quick change can be made to the fishing depth increasing the chances of catching. Right: Euan Miller with a big loch pike taken on a long, hard fishing session.

