

How To Fish For Pike

by Doug Stange



Jack Penny with a pike from a classic shallow back bay. On the best days everything works and the fish are big to boot. Then again there are all those “other” days. We reveal secrets for tough times in this article.

Among the most-traveled pike anglers in the history of North America is Jack Penny, Newton, Iowa, who has been at it for more than 30 years, from Alaska to virtually every high-profile spot in Canada, and most of the big-fish waters of the U.S., as well. “Have tackle, the curiosity continues and the fire still burns, will travel for giant pike,” his motto has been.

Penny’s rule for catching big fish calls forth the reason for traveling so far and is no surprise: “The first rule for catching big pike is to fish where big ones live,” he says. “Those who search for pike that measure 45 to 50 inches or more, often travel long distances to faraway locations, most notably into Canada. Plans must be made and trips booked well in advance.

“Seasoned anglers aware of the pike’s habits plan trips during peak periods. The early season—spring in most U.S. waters, and late spring and early summer in Canadian waters—draws big fish shallow. On the best days, the action is fast and furious, in obvious embayments, and perhaps in pools below waterfalls or steep rapids in incoming rivers. Lure choices are easy, because during those special times pike bite almost anything, including the classic spoon presentations so famous to Canadian fishing. Those are the days you tell your kids about, your grandkids, or anyone else that might listen.”

But there also are bad days, even during primetime—actually, especially during early season, because of unstable weather. Penny: “You just have to prepare mentally and tactically to deal with the weather hand you’re dealt when you get there. I’ve had many trips where major fronts push through every other day for the entire week. Rain and wind—and maybe a few hours of bright sky and wind, then more rain, some snow, and wind. Finally, more bright skies and wind. It’s as ravaging on you as it is on the fish.

“I’ve also gone the other route over the years, heading to prime locations during late July and August, when the weather’s more mellow. Pike location at that time and the methods to catch them is a story for another day. I’ve done well then, but overall I like the challenge of early season best. The shallow fish are a special thrill.

“If you’re the third or fourth group into a camp, sometimes the big fish also start to get picked over in obvious locations. I believe some of the giant fish might just bite once a year. They get caught early on and released and they just are so old and cagey that they aren’t falling for another lure again soon. So, I have back-up plans that serve me in bad weather and when fish get pressured. I fish some spots that often are overlooked by other anglers. A lot of times, too, anglers don’t give the fish enough credit for being difficult. Canada during prime time should be easy, but the truth is that it often isn’t. Acknowledge that going in.

“Presentation is the final key to getting big fish to go. You don’t need lots of lures, but you need to work through the experiment to see what’s working and what isn’t. Lots of anglers just don’t take seriously the need to fine-tune, even at times when you’re already catching some fish. Honestly, one of the most amazing things of all about fishing is how at times certain types of lures can be just so terribly much better than others.”



Pike love wind, so long as it isn’t extreme, especially during early season. Rocky spots can be one of the most overlooked options in Canadian waters. During early season, look for rocky areas within shallower bays. Or check the mouth of the bays, where rocky points often transition into rocky shorelines within the bay. Also check big, shallow sand bays.

Overlooked Spots

One location that's often overlooked are the somewhat isolated stands of dead reeds and rushes. Penny: "The yellowed grasses are easy to spot as they grow thick and stand out against a mostly green shoreline background. They're almost always in obvious shallow bays, sometimes in the very back but oftentimes closer to the mouth of bays, too. These small stands often don't get closer scrutiny. Close inspection reveals a thick tangled mat of dead stuff. At first you wonder if anything—especially something big—could move in there and find something to eat. But on those days immediately after a cold front, when fish at the creek mouths quit biting and fish in the exposed portions of obvious shallow bays disappear, this is a great spot to check."

These spots aren't easy to fish and most anglers don't come prepared with heavy enough tackle. Every angler should have one medium-heavy action and power rod about 7 feet long, with a reel loaded with at least 50-pound braid. Penny typically uses 65-pound braid. It's standard muskie tackle, but not standard pike tackle for many anglers.

"Presentation presents special problems," he says. "You fish over the top of the stuff, skipping jigs or spoons over the mat or through the tangles until you can drop them into pockets; but you're bound to hang up and that means using tackle stout enough to pull free. Then, when you hook a fish, well, you just have to be ready to pull hard and hold on until you get the fish's head up and drag the fish out—or sometimes you go to the fish and land it in a small open pocket. That means having a pole (usually a log pole from the woods) handy to push in shallow."

Weedless lures are mandatory. Penny often fishes weedless spoons tipped with plastic, which, as we mentioned, are dragged across the top of the mat and allowed to sink into open pockets. Weedless softbaits are another option. The advent of weighted hooks for fishing swimbaits rigged texposed recently offers options not available before. Penny: "Pike also like weedless bunny jigs—jigs tied with rabbit-fur strips. Even a pork trailer on a single weedless hook can be effective. Overall, the best weedless presentations usually sink slowly instead of plummeting."

A similar overlooked location is where rushes and reeds might grow tall and usually cover large, relatively shallow sections in the backs of bays. This is some of the best cover for pike after a thunderstorm, but there always are some fish in these spots during early season. In the farthest north waters, pike use these spots all year long. Here again these areas usually are a tangled, matted mess, but pike move right in and the overhead cover allows them to feel safe and comfortable.

"Some reeds won't be quite so tangled and there you can often see pike suspended just below the surface if the water's deeper, and laying on the bottom if the water's shallower," Penny says. "One common guide tactic is to pole a boat right into this stuff to move pike out along the edge where they can be caught more easily than they can in the heavy cover. It's worth a try if you can't get pike to respond otherwise. I try for the fish in cover before trying to move them out to get into better position to present a lure."

Penny often downsizes lures after bad weather and when fish are pressured. “Around cover especially, I like small weedless spoons tipped with a twin-tailed grub,” he says. “One favorite is the Eppinger Rex Spoon, which has a twin wire weedguard and either a feather or a vinyl skirt. A version also is available with a small spinner blade in front of the spoon. The Eppinger Spin’n Rex slinks through grasses and reeds without picking up trash and the little blade flashing and splashing often triggers huge strikes. You don’t need a large selection of lures for this fishing. I stock up with silver and gold spoon bodies with skirt and plastic combinations of chartreuse, white, and black or brown. Hot orange can be good at times, too.”



Flooded reeds and rushes are key spots during early season even though it often looks like there’s no way a big pike could possibly maneuver in the flooded mats. First search along the outside edge, then cast lures and work them over and through the mats. Let lures fall into open pockets. At times it pays to push right into the heavy stuff to reach the farthest back ends of flooded areas. This requires picking out a wood pole from the forest and carrying it along with you in the boat.

Tricky Timing

Another of Penny’s overlooked options often is talked about but not much actually fished, because the timing can be tricky, when you’re scheduling a 4- or 5-day trip months ahead of time, and the water conditions are largely dependant on weather you can’t effect when you get there. White suckers are found in most bodies of water that contain pike. The sucker spawn typically lasts a week—maybe two at best—but if you’re there when it’s on it means hot fishing if you can get to the right spots.

The water has to warm to about 50°F before suckers move into gravelly creeks and current areas. When prime current areas aren’t available, suckers also use shallow sand and gravel spots in backwater margins. Some of these areas coincide with the reed and rush patches mentioned earlier, perhaps one reason pike are there during early season.

Penny: “I’ve seen suckers invade spawning spots by the thousands and sometimes pike by the hundreds move in to take advantage of the all-you-can-eat buffet. So I’m always

looking for these situations anytime I fish a new lake. Even if I'm there in August, I'm looking for potential spawning spots just in case I ever get back during early season. Often just looking at a lake map suggests potential locations. I always try to check spots the first day on the water to see if the temperatures are right and a spawn pattern might be developing. The pike just get so turned on in this situation it's worth checking."

In this case, lure selection is straightforward, because the fish are raring to go; so big bass-style spinnerbaits; straight-shaft spinners with either single or double treble hooks, like the classic Mepps; most types of classic spoons; and a Penny favorite, the 8-inch Suick, are good choices. "Really, there so many great options available today," he says. "Muskie-style glidebaits like those from Rapala, the Glidin' Rap and the X-Rap Subwalk, for example. Just choose a lure that looks like a wounded sucker. Color isn't a big deal. I stock up on some that look like suckers and always also carry some brighter colors like firetiger."



Once the water temperature reaches about 50°F, suckers often push into the mouth of streams, large and small, or search for sand-gravel bottom in the margins of bays to spawn. Although short-lived, these spawning congregations attract postspawn pike that are ready to feed heavily after recovering from their own spawning rigors right after ice out.

More Key Spots

The other spot Penny often catches giant fish from might raise a smile, because they're so obvious on most waters. Still, some anglers don't take time to fish beaver lodges unless they're right along a shoreline they're working in a back bay. Penny goes out of his way to check them—and he's always looking for them. The tangled branches offer cover and food for all kinds of fish, from minnows to perch to suckers and walleyes.

"I think the reason many anglers don't catch good fish from around beaver houses is that they fish the areas wrong," Penny says. "Actually, what I'm about to say applies to a lot of the areas that we fish where pike might be more exposed than they are when they're in the heavy cover. I admit that sometimes the big fish in Canada aren't as spooky as fish

can be in other places; but you never know and shouldn't just assume that's always the case.

“To fish the area around the beaver house, first stay away and make long casts, working the water 75 to 100 feet out from the lodge before moving in and making casts right up to the lodge. The fish often are on patrol just out from the lodge, instead of right up next to the cover—that's where the baitfish are holding.”

Penny uses the same thinking anytime he's fishing for pike that might be positioned shallow in those classic sun-exposed locations in back bays. Don't just blow right up into the shallowest water, determined to spot fish before you fish for them. Eventually, that might be the best overall tactic for the day, but at other times, especially in the shallowest areas, casts need to be made from a ways away before you move up farther. Here again, at times, smaller lures that land without making a big splash work best. A 1/4-ounce black or brown weedless bass-style jig dressed with a 3- or 4-inch plastic curlytail grub is a great choice at times. Swimbaits in the 4-inch class often shine, too.

Penny: “Then again the other extreme also comes into play, for example oftentimes when pike are chasing suckers in spawn mode. Sometime a big splashdown in that situation alerts pike and draws them right to the lure. We're mostly talking tough situations here, though.”

Fine-tuning Presentations

The way a lure is presented relative to the way a pike is holding also is key to getting fish to bite. “Generally speaking, you don't want a lure to surprise pike,” he says. “You don't want a lure to sneak up on them from behind and scoot by. They need to see it coming as much as possible. That's why it is so helpful to be able to see fish before you cast to them—so you can position to make the retrieve so the lure comes neatly into view at a distance and then moves in closer. If you can't see fish it's a guessing game, but it's a game you still have to play at times.

➤ A Few Select Lure Options



“Of course, there are exceptions to every rule,” he says. “You, Doug, always talk a lot about working on the lateral-line sense of fish. The lateral line is an electrical sense that detects low-frequency vibrations. I think the lateral line is particularly important to big pike. If I can see a fish and have presented lures so the fish sees them coming and doesn’t respond that’s when I might cast a lure behind the fish and work it up close so it can’t see it.

“Say I’m working a jig and plastic. Let the jig set on the bottom about 4 or 5 feet in back of the fish and just barely lift the jig and let it fall, then again. They know the jig’s there because they can feel it, but it’s not threatening in the way it would be if the jig swam quickly past the fish from the rear. At times, without ever looking back, they just completely turn on a jig, focus on it, and eat it. As you’ve so often said, sometime if you can get a fish to turn and look you change its attitude.

“You also have written about doing that same thing with bigger lures that wobble distinctly, most commonly the hollow belly swimbaits rigged on a jighead or a weighted swimbait hook. You talk about casting and retrieving the lure in back of the fish but not right past it so it suddenly comes into view. Again, you’re trying to get the fish to acknowledge the lure by turning to find it after it has felt it with its lateral line. That’s a tactic we all need to try more in coming seasons—trick the fish into changing its attitude.”

It won’t be a surprise to veteran pike anglers that Penny mentions wind as a key factor affecting many fishing situations. Too much cold-front wind is bad, but anything from a bit of wind to a distinct wind typically has a positive affect on pike feeding attitude. This also brings us to Penny’s final overlooked fishing spot—rock structures.



Beaver houses are obvious spots that attract baitfish and pike. Many anglers move in close too quickly to make casts right next to the houses when they should fish the outlying water first. That’s where the biggest fish often patrol.

Penny: “Rock often doesn’t get enough attention in Canadian water, especially early, when everyone looks for back bays and weedgrowth. But if you aren’t doing well in back

bays, push out into the middle of bays or out to the mouth of bays and have a look. A lot of times a rocky point at the mouth of a bay transitions into a rocky shoreline as it enters a bay. At times the point and the shorelines get some big fish right up shallow. Typically it takes a bit of wind to get these fish going.”

In this situation Penny prefers lures that can be cast long distance and have a lot of flash to attract fish. “You’re searching in most of these situations,” he says. “You’re not sight-fishing. The swimbaits are good here, too.”

Penny likes a good cribbage game, but not sitting in camp on the shores of a lake with giant pike. “OK, maybe if the weather’s so bad that it’s life-threatening,” he says. “But from vast personal experience I can tell the hardcore among you that even in the most difficult conditions, you can still catch some big fish. Get out there and stay at it—convince yourself that even on the tough days there’s going to be a window of opportunity that’s worth it. On big-fish water you’re always just a cast away from a memory of a lifetime.”

(Article Courtesy of www.infisherman.com)