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Something toothy this way comes - Northern pike are among the most aggressive freshwater carnivores found in the northern hemisphere where they stalk the lakes and rivers of Canada, the U.S., Russia and parts of Europe. Commonly called jackfish, snot rockets, water wolves or northerns, these aquatic predators will attack just about anything they can fit into their mouths, commonly targeting other fish a third or even half of their body size.

To get a better handle on what they eat, a recent Canadian study analyzed the gut contents of 1,290 northern pike and found that perch topped the menu, followed by shiners, burbot and white suckers. They are not above cannibalizing smaller pike and also eat birds, ducks, loon chicks, small mammals, frogs, leeches and insects. In other words, they are not picky. Occasionally, such gluttony translates into a literal deadly sin when they underestimate the size of their prey, causing them to choke to death. Where forage is plentiful, northerns can often exceed 40 inches in length.

Northern pike are well-designed ambush predators. A flattened head, fins set far back on a torpedo-shaped body and a powerful tail produce propulsive attacks that surprise and overwhelm unsuspecting prey. Cryptic colouration -- usually a yellowish-green background with pale spots or barring along their sides -- provides northerns with almost seamless camouflage among aquatic weeds, where they patiently lie in wait for unwary victims. Multiple rows of needle-sharp teeth along both the upper and lower jawline help ensure a deadly grip on their prey as well as allow for efficient tearing through the meal du jour, whether it comes packaged in scales, feathers or fur. Once a victim is secured in a pike's maw, it is most likely toast. The largest northern pike carcass ever recorded was a 50-inch long fish, estimated around 20 years old. Its skull contained 700 teeth, some of which were 1-inch in length, making it utterly clear why trophy-sized northerns are called "gators." Savvy anglers know to handle pike with care or else risk uttering "By the pricking of my thumbs, something toothy this way comes!"

During late winter, under the ice, northern pike begin to move to their spawning areas which are typically shallow bays with good sun exposure that offer thick weed stands from the past year. A creek flowing into the bay creates an especially attractive location for pike to spawn. Spawning occurs shortly after ice-out in early spring when water temperatures reach around 5 degrees Celsius / 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Female pike (which can grow significantly larger than males) pair up with one or two males. The male fish swim tightly alongside the females, applying pressure that prompts the release of eggs. Simultaneously, the males eject milt to fertilize the eggs. Newly hatched northern pike fry, like all other young of the year, are vulnerable to predation by waterfowl, perch and many other fish species including other pike. Sometimes, pike spawn in flood plains which reduces the survival rates of their young, as any drop in water levels can leave them stranded.

Anglers target pike during open water season and through the ice. Aggressive strikes can be triggered using live bait, jigs, spoons, suspending cranks, in-line spinners, spinnerbaits, plugs and plastics. Studies reveal that large female northerns produce more robust young, better able to survive the early stages of life. This suggests that releasing bigger fish may help support a sustainable fishery, as growing angling pressure, habitat loss and degradation -- especially spawning sites -- as well as the exploitation of trophy caliber fish threatens northern pike populations today. Any pike slated for release should never be held vertically to prevent damaging their vertebrae.

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