

Fishing northern pike through the ice

“Northern pike are the ultimate winter sport fish, the “people’s fish.” Any angler worth his or her salt will admit a northern pike has saved many fishing trips from being a skunk.”

Where to fish

Do a little homework. If you don’t have a favorite lake already, check our internet page (dnr.wi.gov/topic/fishing) for lakes in your area, or better yet, contact your local fisheries biologist. They can provide information from recent surveys and send you in the right direction.

Keep it simple. Don’t try to out think a northern pike. Northern pike will suspend in the water column, they will be found along deep rocky bars, but for the most part they are going to be associated with vegetation. Vegetation is where the food generally is located and also provides concealment for a stalking predator like the northern pike. In most inland lakes vegetation extends to depths of 10-15 feet of water. Find the vegetation and you will find northern pike.

Best depths and bait placement

Split the difference. Many anglers when setting tip-ups place their bait a certain distance off the bottom. For example, say water depth is twelve feet. Find bottom and set your bait one or two feet off bottom. If you are fishing in vegetation my general rule is to think in halves. Twelve feet of water –put your bait at six feet. This serves two purposes. First, vegetation is still occupying a fair portion of the water column at early ice. If you place your bait based on x feet from the bottom there is a good chance it’s in the vegetation. No sight – no bite. Second, predators like northern pike cruise the water column. Even if they are near the bottom they can find prey above them. The opposite is less likely to be true.

Don’t forget the shallows. Especially during early ice northern pike will frequent water less than 5 feet deep. When setting up your tip-ups put one in shallow. You won’t be disappointed.

The mystique of the northern pike

- Northern pike are common in Wisconsin. At last count they were found in over 2,000 inland lakes, rivers, and flowages in Wisconsin. Not to mention the bays of Lakes Michigan and Superior, and the Mississippi River.
- Northern pike are multi-dimensional. They are mostly known as a food fish but also provide trophy opportunities. Northern pike filets in a skillet are second to none. Check our website for proper filleting techniques to remove those troublesome “Y” bones.
- Northern pike are active and bite all day. Show up at noon and you are good to go. No more of that putzing around in the dark. You should be on your way home by then.
- Northern pike are low maintenance; the perfect winter fish for kids. Drill a few holes in the ice, put in some tip-ups, sit back and have a cup of coffee, let the kids play, and when a flag goes up, everybody runs. That’s good living in a Wisconsin winter.

*- Terry Margenau is a fisheries supervisor stationed in Spooner.
You can often find Terry... on the ice...fishing... for northern pike.*