

FISHING FOR PIKES IN MARCH

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"The American Angler."

IT may be truly said the only "decent" fishing in the month of March is that for the different species of the pike family, which range in relatively large numbers as far east as the Atlantic, west and northwest into Minnesota, and south from Canada to Kentucky, a few having been found in the waters around Chattanooga, Tenn. I know of no other species that live in the vast region named that are so worthy of the rod, certainly none that can be taken so freely and in such numbers during this month. So soon as the ice disappears from the lakes, and when the rim of it is still along the shores, they come eagerly to the lure, and the laws are open for them in the month of March in their habitat as above described. These fish appear to be impervious to cold—no one has ever found them torpid in action, and many believe that they do not hibernate during the coldest of winters.

The pike family includes the pike, irregularly marked with yellow blotches on the body; the mascalonge, black spotted, of the St. Lawrence system, which includes all the Great Lakes and the waters tributary to them; the mascalonge, unspotted, of the Mississippi River region and the waters flowing into it; the cross-barred or reticulated pond pickerel, which is never found west of the Alleghanies, although recently some are reported as living in the Yazoo waters; and two other species—the eastern and western pickerels, which are the smallest of the tribe, seldom reaching a length of more than twelve inches.

Of the two species, I have always thought the mascalonge of the Mississippi system more than the peer of his St. Lawrence brother; the first, when hooked, invariably leaps; the other seldom shows more than half of his body out of the water, and only then when he is forced to do so by the line of a muscular angler.

The mascalonge of the Mississippi system of waters is *sui generis*. Their marked individuality in color and game qualities stamp them as such. Take one, as I did, fresh from the water and note his resplendent coloration; blackish on back; brown and golden bronze nearly to the median line, along which lies a faint emerald-tinted band; below a faun of delicate shading blending with the creamy white of the belly, through all of which a sil-

ver sheen is glinting, while here and there faint, black irregular dashes (— — — —) looking all the world like the telegraphic hieroglyphics. Contrast the above with the coloration of the mascalonge of the St. Lawrence as officially given by Jordan and Gilbert:

"Color dark grey; sides with round blackish spots on a ground color of grayish silvery; belly white."

In the mascalonge we have a doughty quarry to capture. His game qualities are not relatively, when size only is considered, as great as the trout, black bass, or even the grayling; but who can experience the feeling (a strange admixture of surprise, delight, and awe) when a big one, in his eager rush for the spoon, throws his great body two or three feet into the air, and then fights with frantic rage and sturdy insistence until gaffed and boated, without realizing that to kill a mascalonge is a red-letter in an angler's lifetime.

PERMIT a wrinkle or two as to angling for this fish. As a rule, the average boatman rows too fast; make him slow down, and if he tells you that he must row fast to keep the spoon clear of the bottom grass—a disputed point, usually, which you can easily settle by observing the play of your spoon—insist upon his rowing slowly, and, if necessary, shorten your trace to fifty, even thirty feet. Mascalonge will not infrequently seize the lure within ten feet of the boat, if its movements are measured, slow, and without noise. I have had more than one to do it. Don't be afraid of the weeds; your boatman always will be—he don't like to be disturbed in his dog-trot methods. The reason more mascalonge are not killed in a day's outing is because we do not reach their lairs. They lie in the thick water weeds and lily-pads along the shores, and the rule is troll along the outer edges of them; but the ordinary boatman will not row his boat close enough to the shore.

The most scientific and successful method is to have your boat held stationary, here and there, and cast the spoon from the reel into the grass-growth near the shore; but this is fatiguing and weed-catching, causing frequent incursions into the grass to detach your hooks, particularly if there are plenty of lily-

pads, the stems of which are tough, and hold the spoon with a hard and fast grip.

I am aware that many anglers believe that rapid rowing makes the action of the spoon more attractive to the fish, but if this be so the effect is neutralized by many *mascalonge* missing the lure. I have had at least three—and large ones—do so in their mad rush for the troll, which was speeding through the water at the rate of seven or eight miles an hour. So row slowly, Mr. Boatman, and give the “masky” a showing!

This brings me to a second wrinkle:

The average fisherman does not hold himself and rod sufficiently in readiness of poise for the pluck and first mad rush of the *mascalonge*. At the first swirl of the fish the strike should be instantaneous and a taut line maintained. Hold your rod—with thumb, guarded by a stall or a leather overlay, always on the reel—at an angle of about 45 degrees, that you may be ready to strike at once on sight, or feel of the pluck of the fish. The *mascalonge*, if he has a foot of slack line, will at once eject the spoon from his mouth, unless he is hooked fast when the first heavy rush is made. He feels the gritty impact of the metal, realizes its non-edible character, and out of the mouth it goes before your reel can be worked to take up the slack line, which is always there if the fish take the spoon with a rush towards the boat. Of course, I am communing with those anglers who take from the spoon before using it those deadly gangs of nine or more hooks, substituting only one good one, and that is placed about three inches on a wire snood below the wings of the spoon. Any other method is brutal, and the man who uses these triple gangs to catch a fish will, if he gets a chance, and nobody looking on, shoot a game bird sitting placidly, and without four of danger, on a tree or on the ground. Finally, always hold your rod at such an angle as will permit you to strike effectively.

As to tackle: You can kill a *mascalonge* on very light gear, but it must be used as if you loved him; trust to its yielding resistance, and don't attempt to “yank.” Do with him as you are compelled to do with a thirty-pound salmon on a sixteen-ounce rod—give and take. I generally use a rod $8\frac{1}{4}$ feet long, weight $7\frac{1}{2}$ ounces, and have never had any trouble in boating Ash under thirty pounds. I never caught a larger one. By the by, we always made our boatman stop rowing as soon as the fish was brought into deep water—at which the man at the oars always seemed somewhat

astonished, and was inclined to protest—and we felt the fish well in hand. The miserable practice of dragging any fish around a lake with the oars should be discountenanced. In such case the boatman's muscle kills the fish, not the angler. Besides, if you use a light rod it is often impossible to bring, when the boat is in motion, a heavy fish to the gaff, even when nearly exhausted. Again, a fish can be killed more artistically on the rod than on the oars—any other method is butchery.

Use a good multiply reel; a line at least three hundred feet in length, not heavier than what is known as No. 9 cutty hunk. Spoons of the size of No. 8 Skinner are generally in use, but we prefer a size not larger than No. 5, and have found them effective, particularly when the triple gangs are taken off and a single hook substituted.

DOUBTLESS no man lives who has had more and longer practical experience with the *mascalonge* than F. W. Cheney, of Jamestown, N. Y. He has lived his life among them at Chautauqua Lake, N. Y. In an interview with him, he unfolded a new phase of the habits of his favorite fish—feeding and taking a line at night. He told me he had observed that on a clear, bright day and on brilliant moonlight nights that *mascalonge* do not bite freely, while on ordinary nights, cloudless or otherwise, they take live bait, especially shiners, in preference to the spoon. At such times they come in from the deep water to the bars to feed, and swim near the surface, so a light sinker only is needed, as the bait must run near the surface, hence use the same rods and reels that have been in service during the day, taking off the sinkers and shortening the line. At night it is necessary to use a click reel, as you cannot see your float (necessary to keep bait from fouling on bottom) half the time. Row along about as fast as you would with a spoon when trolling. When your reel clicks, stop your boat and wait until your fish has time to gorge the minnow. You can tell when this is done by carefully raising your rod until the line is taut, and when he starts off, strike quick and hard. This is good scientific and legitimate fishing, best of sport—not merely trolling.

One thing will be noticed when fishing at night: when a *muscalonge* takes a bait he never leaves it until swallowed, yet they are not as game, and are easier to get into the boat; but, as a compensation, you are more liable to get larger fish than in the day-time.

When at night on the bars, and it is too dark to keep on the feeding-ground, stick a stake in the centre of the bar and hang a lantern to it, so that you may always keep your bearings. The water must be clear and quiet, for a windy night is not good; the fish bite best in the early part of the evening.

When the muscalonge feed at night they do not do so during the day. A good way to locate them is to row ashore on a still night and listen. You will hear them splashing when they are after minnows. The latter are feeding on flies, and the muscalonge are in turn feeding upon the minnows. The best time to fish at night is during September and October, warm nights being the best.

We all know that the true test of a game fish is his habit of leaping, after being hooked, on a *slack line*. Few of them—the black bass, rainbow trout, and salmon of the fresh waters invariably do so—have this trait, and the muscalonge of the Mississippi system belongs in this honored class.

SOME one has said, years ago, that the pike was appropriately named. Let us note in confirmation his great length in proportion to his girth; his head, although of immense size, is so shaped as not to hinder a rapid progress through the water, his huge jaws so flattened as to resemble almost an arrow-head in its power of cleaving it. He seems to be formed more for tremendous springs at lightning speed than for long-continued gentle progress; his great tail, with the dorsal fin close above it and the anal fin just below it, enables him with one sweep to dash at his prey with great velocity; but the pectoral fins, which are most used by fish to keep themselves stationary in a stream, are small in proportion. His eyes are placed nearly at the top of the head, so that he can see above him, thus accounting for his lying near the bottom. Perhaps the most striking feature, to a casual observer, is his immense mouth. A mass of small teeth of extraordinary sharpness covers the roof of it, and these teeth, which are all inclined backwards, are so arranged that it is almost impossible for a small fish, or any other living thing, to escape when once that awful trap has closed upon it. The larger teeth have been supposed by many to be used for the purpose of killing their prey before swallowing, but live fish have been taken from a pike's stomach absolutely uninjured. The gullet, or throat, of a pike is very distensible, and capable of being stretched nearly to the

size of the large mouth; so that almost any thing that can be received into the big jaws can be swallowed whole.

When the pike is in perfect season and condition, the top of the head and his back is usually of an intense dark olive green, inclining to black in dark river water. This coloration is toned down to dark grayish along the sides, which are flecked with dusky yellowish white spots or blotches about the size of a common bean; but sometimes, these spots run into cloudy streaks of greater size.

Pike are so constituted that they cannot, under any conditions, resist the attractions of a spoon line whenever they can or do set it. This trait is developed in them more so than in any other of the lake or river fishes. It is their Nemesis. Yet they are taken by many other lines; any form of spinner, dead, alive, or artificial, will attract them. Frogs, young mice or birds, grubs and worms of all kinds, and, if the angler has neither spoon nor bait of any kind, but happens to have about him some red flannel or any kind of red fabric, he will stand a fair chance of catching *lucius* by using it as a troll. A piece of white rag will sometimes answer the same purpose, for the pike takes what he can get, and looks not a gift horse in the mouth, but opens his own widely to all that comes his way.

A very effective way of taking the pike is to stand on the bank of a lake or river and cast a No. 5 spoon outward as far as you can, and then reel in slowly. Don't be too quick, however, in your play, because if the fish is large and touches the shore before he is exhausted, he will, unless very securely hooked, often break away. Above all, do not put your Angers into its mouth when alive, unless you want them severely scarified; and he will close his jaws viciously upon any object after you think he is dead.

We doubt if there is a man or boy east of the Alleghenies who is fond of the angle who has not, at some period of his life, caught a pond pickerel. The fish is almost ubiquitous; either it or its smaller representatives—generally known as the grass pickerel by the farmer's boy—can be found in nearly every pond, large or small, in the Middle and Eastern States. He is a close brother to the pike, but is without spots, having very irregular cross bars, sometimes very faint, but more conspicuous above the median line. He will take a small spoon natural bait, dead or alive, and is peculiarly sensitive to a lure of a strip of his own silvered belly attached to a troll.