

Monsters on running water

Adam Fisher celebrates the awesome thrill of predator hunting as he prepares for a mobile quest to tempt the biggest river pike he can find

Words: Adam Fisher Photography: Dougal Ziegler



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MONSTERS ON RUNNING WATER

WHAT keeps most anglers awake at night is the anticipation of what the next day will bring. What will the river be like, what will the weather be like, how many will I catch, what will I do if that doesn't work, have I packed enough bait?

Without wanting to obsess about size, with predators that is what it really boils down to. Pike are the perfect species to exemplify that it doesn't matter how big but knowing that there could be a monster caught that day, even if they've never been caught from the venue before, is what keeps us going back for more. While we can have a rough idea about the size of a barbel a river holds, or it's chub and dace, with pike there's so much mystery. There's also an unrivalled level of admiration for the smaller ones, and this comes from comparing them with big ones in photos or in the flesh.

Generally they feed only when it suits them, not on how much bait you put in or how often you feed. They can lie motionless for days, even weeks, between feeds and regardless of conditions (there are still many theories as to

what are best), then all you have to do is be in the right place at the right time to catch the fish of a lifetime, maybe one that's never been caught before. It could be 3lb or 30lb, eyes swivelled to study your silhouette against a winter sky. On clocking you it may start to subtly flex it's fins and move either two nanometers away from you to enhance it's escape route, or towards you if it likes the look of your fingers or toes!

Hunting monsters

Where do you go to increase your chances of finding such a beast, or at least catch a few that might become one in years to come? The Wye is a famous river for big pike, but you must be prepared – the banks are treacherous, the swims are snaggy, and a 20lb fish will flat-rod you in a second. And then of course, the handling of such a fish requires a certain amount of experience to ensure neither you or the fish come to any harm. Start on your local river, get the approach right, then move on. The first thing to be prepared for with the Wye is there's going to be some walking involved. By the time you get to the



Give yourself the best chance of a monster by staying mobile and fishing many swims

“The banks are treacherous, the swims are snaggy and a 20lb fish will flat-rod you”



pub at the end of the day you'll feel as though you've covered as much water as possible and given yourself the best chance. The problem is, if you're not catching this can lead to more questions than answers, especially if you spend longer than you should in a swim where you've caught before or if it 'must hold pike'. After years of practice, the explanation is simple – she's not at home.

Fifteen minutes behind any likely bush is perfect so be strict and time yourself. There may be more than one cast in the swim, and if there's nothing after the first 15 minutes a lift of the bait or another five minutes and a second chance at creating the right 'plop' may tempt a take.

Baiting options

To cover the maximum amount of water in a swim, a livebait is unbeatable. Gathering them, however, requires a fair bit of effort, let alone lugging them around and trying to keep them fit for purpose. A deadbait is a far more versatile option, and if you wish to remove another variable from your approach, stick with just one.

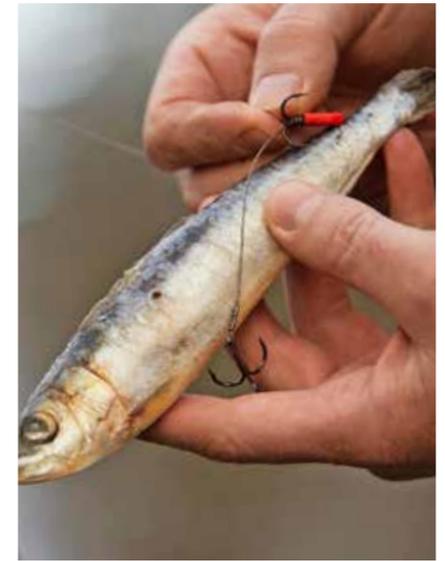
Sardines are the king of deadbaits – they are oily, freeze well and freely release attractants. They are generally the right weight to cock a deadbait float and, even when frozen, they thaw quickly. Most importantly, though, the hooks pull through easily on the strike. They don't cast far, but as long as an underarm chuck is all you need they are perfect.

If the fish are finicky and dropping baits on the run, smelt comes into its own. Unlike a sardine they can be reversed to cover some water on the wobble too.

Where there's prey fish...

You'll usually find a patch of slack water downstream of any bush or fallen tree and this makes an ideal pike feature.

As the flow is virtually non-existent in these places they attract deposits of sand, silt, leaves and dead fish, as well as shoals of small live fish to take cover. And where there's live fish there's predators! Pike like to lie up and may not have to move a fin for weeks. As the silt gathers on their bodies from hours on end of immobility



A livebait is unbeatable but a deadbait is far more versatile and sardines should be first on the hook

they start to blend in even more with their surroundings making it impossible for the bait fish to spot them.

Spots above bushes shouldn't be ignored either. Even if your bait is in the flow the pike lie in among the branches and the scent of your deadbait flowing downstream can prove irresistible. Make sure the clutch is set and don't get caught flat-rodged though – they will want to go downstream once hooked.

Become the hunter

Before making that cast make sure you can get down to a fish once it's hooked, digging your heels into a soft winter bank is easier than you might think, and should be sufficient for you or your team-mate to get down to a netting position. Go easy though – pike sense prey largely by vibrations so they will hear you if due consideration isn't given. This is one of the greatest feelings of entering a pike swim anyway, use stealth like you're the predator, entice the predator with a plop. You are hunting the hunter ▶



Every bite could be from the fish of a lifetime

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Adrenaline will flow and your brain will be in a spin when a pike is hooked

Adam's tackle

Rod: 10ft/11ft rod
Reel: Shimano 8000 Balrunner
Hooks: Drennan E-Sox extra strong trebles
Line: Drennan E-Sox Pike Braid
Float: Drennan Zeppler Pike Floats
Luggage: Korum Mat-Bag and extendable boat net fits inside
Clothing: ESP waterproofs
Muck Boots: Arctic Sport
Bait: Sardines & Smelts

Fish the venue

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or www.wyeuskfoundation.org

and it is such a buzz.

Sit yourself and the rod on the floor with the freespool engaged. At first you may get a twitch on the braid or float as the pike circles the deadbait. The float and line may jerk sharply as the pike flares its gills and uses displacement to engulf the bait and then cue the Jaws theme tune as the pike moves off with its meal and the float slides away. A lift and wind or a firm strike to the side and you'll experience the next magic few moments where the adrenaline flows and your brain is whirling. You have to figure out in a split second just how big it is. Is it a small jack, a mid-double, a 20lb-plus specimen, or 30lb fish of a lifetime?

A word on welfare here is not to leave things too long. If you feel it's picked up the bait and not moved off, then gently pull the line taught, if the fish feels resistance it should move off. Whatever you do, don't let it eat bait on the spot.

Gearing up

Braided mainline is a must when deadbaiting for pike. A 30lb-plus line is super-resistant to trees and undergrowth, and with no stretch and excellent floating qualities is perfect for laying-on a pike float. A good strong single or treble needs no encouragement and don't be afraid to crimp on a good quality wire trace.

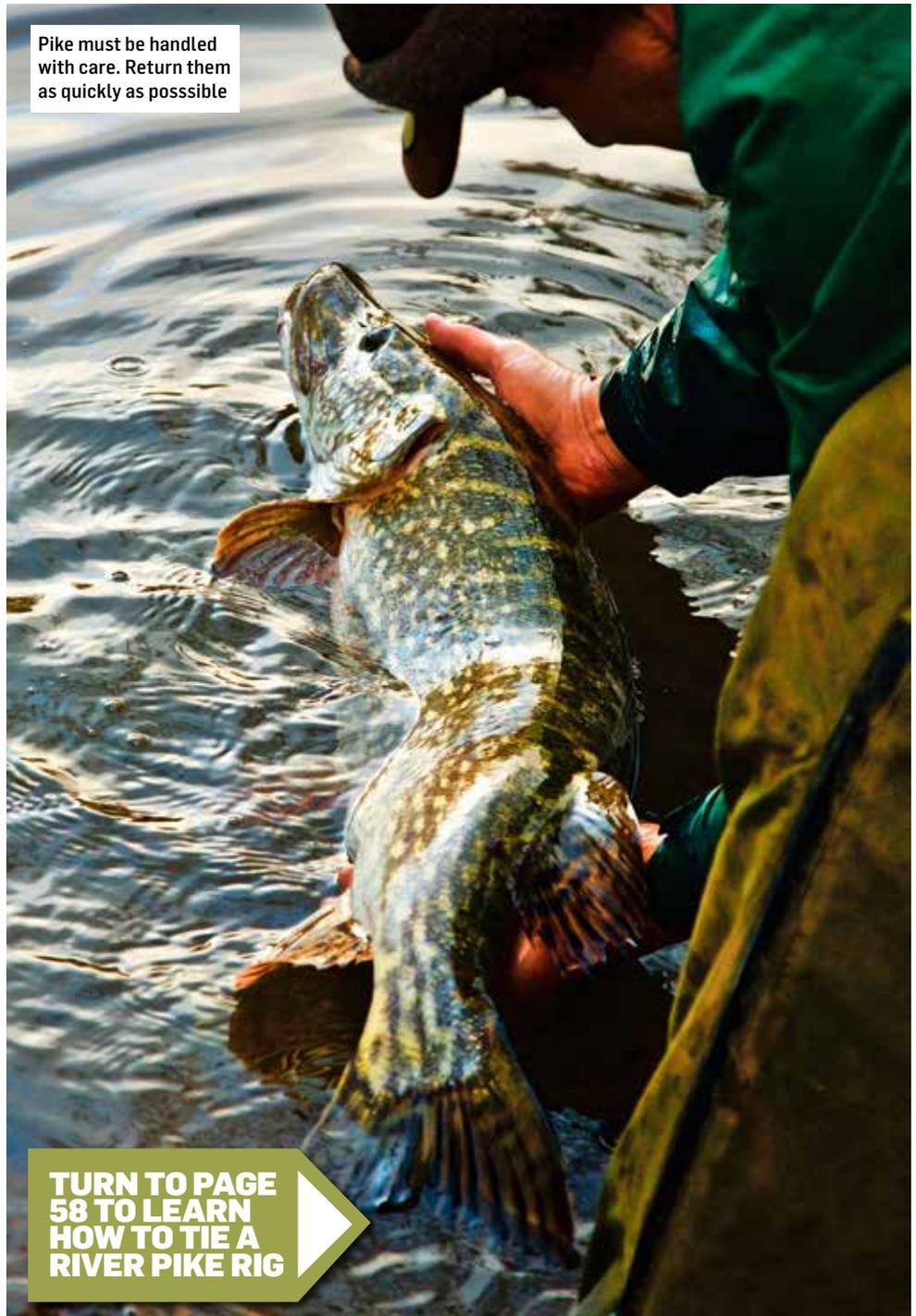
A 10ft or 11ft rod enables easier roving and a good rubber mesh net inside an unhooking mat that doubles as a weigh sling is hard to find but makes life so much easier. Then you'll need a bag containing made up traces, a spare float and some stops – the Drennan Gripper Stops make perfect sliding stop knots to alter depth.

An essential for many muddy-banked pike anglers is warm and durable waterproofs, along with wellies with good tread. The Wye shouldn't be fished without them. A pair of long forceps, some scissors and a first aid kit, and you're away.

A British river in winter is a magical place and wandering the banks will keep you warm on the coldest of days. With renewed hope in every swim, then what could be a better way to spend a day in the countryside. Throw in the real chance of a monster and using the lack of leaf cover as recce work for the summer months, and you've nothing to lose.



Pike must be handled with care. Return them as quickly as possible



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