

PIKE HANDLING

1 Tackle Requirements

Probably more than any other branch of coarse fishing, pike fishing requires some specialised tackle. However, there are a few fundamentals that you might have already.

Always ensure that you have the correct tackle necessary before starting to fish for pike, especially a large micromesh landing net, unhooking mat, forceps, strong wire cutters, small bolt croppers, wire traces, scales and weigh sling.

Wire traces are absolutely essential for pike fishing - even small pike have razor sharp teeth that will cut through ordinary line. For the safety of the pike your trace should be at least 15 inches (40cm) in length irrespective of whether you are bait or lure fishing. With the ultra-thin trace wires that are available today there is no need to drop below 28lb breaking strain.

The use of semi-barbless or crushed barbed hooks, doubles or trebles, no larger than a size 6, is preferable to barbed - you will not lose fish, but unhooking will be easier and quicker, which aids pike conservation. Semi-barbless hooks are not an excuse for allowing a pike to swallow the bait.

Line strength needs careful consideration and it is better to opt stronger rather than lighter line. A main line of at least 15lb recommended if using nylon monofilament, or 30lb if using braided line.

Pike rods usually have a test curve of 2.5lb or more for bait fishing. Floats and/or bite indicators will also be needed.

Other than a reliable reel that holds at least 100 metres of your chosen line you will also require a large landing net with at least 36 inch arms if triangular in shape, or with a diameter of at least 30 inches if round framed.

For unhooking pike you will need one pair (better still two pairs in case one is lost) of strong, long-handled forceps. A sufficiently large weigh sling and unhooking mat, or a sling/mat combo, complete the basics.

2 Rigs

When live or deadbait fishing it is important to correctly place the hooks in the bait in order to effectively hook the pike but also, importantly, to minimise the chances of deep hooking pike. For most livebaiting the top hook goes in the dorsal and the other behind the pectoral. For legered deadbaits the top one goes in the tail root and the other one no further forward than the dorsal fin.

3 Bite Indication

To ensure that pike do not swallow your baits deeply, bite indication must be reliable. Floats are perfect, but they must be watched all the time. If fishing without a float the

drop-off indicator must be set to indicate a pike moving away or towards you with the bait. To achieve this a weighted indicator may be required. Audible alarms can be used but should not be relied on as the primary indicator.

4 Striking

Never wait for a second run. Strike as soon as you are sure that the pike has the bait in its jaws - if the float is moving, or the line is running out if fishing without a float. Always assume that the pike is of reasonable size and strike sooner rather than later. A pike missed is preferable to a deep-hooked one.

Remember, deeply-hooked pike not only suffer damage from the hooks but also from the extra time it takes to get them returned to the water.

Striking a pike run is not like striking other fish. First, engage your reel, then point the rod at the fish and begin to wind in smoothly and quickly, until you feel the weight of the fish. When you feel the weight of the fish pull the rod firmly back to set the hooks. Maintain the pressure on the rod at all times - the pike is likely to become hooked when it relaxes its grip on the bait. Do not snatch at this or you might pull the bait (and the hooks) out of the pike's mouth.

5 Playing

With the pike hooked keep the line tight to the fish by keeping a good bend in your rod. Pike are one of the few coarse fish that will leap from the water in an attempt to shed the hooks. If it does try to do this (you will feel the fish rising in the water) try to keep the fish under the water by putting the rod low to the water while keeping pressure on the fish.

6 Landing

You may see experienced pike anglers land fish by hand, but until you have the confidence to handle pike it is best to use your landing net. Never attempt to 'beach' a pike as its scales and protective slime will be removed. Use wet hands to handle the fish at all times.

7 Unhooking

Handle all pike with the utmost care. On landing lay it in the landing net, grass or an unhooking mat. Never lay a pike on uncovered hard ground. When boat fishing always take carpet underlay, foam rubber sheet or an unhooking mat to cover the bottom boards. Prevent the pike from jumping around when it might damage itself, especially the vulnerable eyes, by holding it firmly against the padding.

Never use a pike gag when unhooking; use the 'forceps-and-hand' technique. Laying the pike on its back and, firmly holding open its jaw (by sliding fingers inserted under the gill cover, avoiding the gill rakers) with one hand in order to open the pike's mouth so you can remove the hooks with the other. Always be especially careful when you find it necessary to insert the forceps behind the gill covers. At all times make sure the fish is held firmly.

You may find that a purpose designed unhooking glove or thick 'Marigold' type rubber glove protects your hand from being grazed and cut when unhooking pike, but take care not to damage the delicate gill rakers.

8 Weighing

Weighing should be carried out using a weighing sling or soft net - not with the balance hook under the pike's chin. Weigh slings should be wetted before the pike is put in them in order to protect the pike's coating of slime.

9 Photographing

If you want to photograph a pike always hold it above your unhooking mat while kneeling. Try not to stand up for photographs as it means the pike has further to fall should you lose your hold on it. Pike can be held with a grip under the chin as used for unhooking, but the other hand should be used to support the fish along its belly. Lifting pike vertically with a chin grip may cause damage to the pike in a number of ways and is best avoided.

10 Returning Pike

If you have to, retain pike in a specially designed pike tube or retention sack, but do so only for the minimum period of time necessary for photographs, etc. Always fully sink the tube or sack and leave alone once in position. Do not tow fish behind boats in tubes or sacks (it is dangerous to the fish to do this) or transport pike long distances in boats. In warm weather in particular, pike can easily die from this mistreatment.

All pike should be returned to the water as soon as possible and, in all circumstances, do not retain pike just for the sake of it. Total time out of the water should not exceed one to two minutes.

Pike are far more fragile than their aggressive appearance suggests. On returning a pike you must ensure that it can keep itself upright before you allow it to swim away. If necessary support the fish in an upright position until it swims away strongly. This is of particular importance on rivers as a fish which floats on the water when returned could actually die from drowning.

NOTES ON LURE FISHING

When lure fishing the same basic principle as outlined above apply. However, as lures are usually fitted with larger and thicker wire hooks than are used for bait fishing a standard pair of forceps might not be sufficient to unhook lure caught pike. A pair of fine nosed pliers, maybe with long handles, is better, and a tool called a HookOut is also recommended. These give you better leverage on the hook and keep your hands clear of both the pike's teeth and any free hooks.

Should you experience difficulty in removing a treble hook with your pliers, it is quicker if you cut up the hook and remove it in two or more pieces. A strong pair of side cutters or small bolt croppers make perfect tools for this job. Close your eyes when cutting the hook just in case the point of the hook flies in your direction. If the cut portion of the hook remains in the pike's mouth remove it with your pliers.

A wire trace is just as essential when lure fishing for pike as when bait fishing. So long as it is fifteen inches or longer it will be fine. Make sure it has a strong swivel at one end and a strong snap link at the other, of a design that will not open up accidentally when fishing.

Line of at least 15lb and trace wire of 28lb are suggested for lures of an ounce or so, but it is a good idea to use stronger line and trace wire than you might for bait fishing as the repeated casting involved in lure fishing will place additional stress on these items. Many lure anglers are now using braided lines of higher breaking strains as these also offer greater sensitivity than nylon monofilament while being no thicker. For techniques such as jerkbait fishing specialised tackle is required and even 20lb line is not sufficiently strong.

Periodically, check the last few feet of line. If you feel any abrasions or cuts, remove the lure and trace, cut off the damaged line and retie the trace and lure. The waste line should be cut into very short lengths with scissors and retained for safe disposal later.