

An angler's paradise

A remote area of Manitoba offers peace, quiet and plenty of huge northern pike, walleyes and lake trout.

By P.J. REILLY, Woods and Waters

Eyewitnesses to the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor often describe the sight of torpedoes dropped by enemy planes slicing through the famously shallow waters of Battleship Row.

The underwater missiles, witnesses said, pushed up a column of water as they plowed forward, leaving a wake of disturbed water trailing behind.

Such descriptions immediately popped into my head as I fished a weed bed on a remote lake in the northwest section of this central Canadian province, near the Saskatchewan border, on the evening of June 23.



Ryan Brown, 16, of Elizabethtown, PA, hefts a 43` Northern Pike caught on a Red Eye Wiggler Spoon on a remote lake in northern Manitoba while fishing at Laurie River Lodge

I cast a 1-ounce, double-bladed spinner bait to some shallow water at the edge of the weeds and turned the handle on my reel only four or five times, when a "torpedo" sliced out of the vegetation about 10 feet to the right of my lure and made a beeline for it.

A column of water pushed up in front of the missile, leaving a trail of disturbed water behind. And then the projectile collided with my lure, causing a violent explosion of water.

My medium-heavy rod bowed deep and the reel's drag screamed as the fish peeled off

a couple yards of tough, braided line. My right forearm burned as I struggled to keep the rear end of the rod pointed skyward, giving the fish every ounce of fight that it was giving me. We slugged it out for about five minutes before the beast finally turned its golden-hued side upward, and the tugging quit.

I hauled the fish to the side of the boat, reached my hand ever so carefully past its impressive collection of teeth and grabbed hold of the gleaming white gill plate. I had to steady myself in the boat as I stood upright, lifting the heavy, 40-inch northern pike out of the water to fully and properly admire every ounce of it.

I'd be lying if I portrayed myself as a well-traveled angler who has caught many, many species of fish from waters near and far. Truth is, I've only fished a few places and the list of species I've played on hook and line is pretty short but of the fish that I have caught, the northern pike ranks at the top of the heap.

The scientific name for northern pike is *Esox lucius*. In English, that means "water wolf." Pike are aggressive. They grow to enormous sizes. They fight like Mike Tyson in his prime, and the most prominent feature of a pike's alligator like head is a dangerous mouth full of sharp teeth.

What more could a thrill-seeking, North American freshwater angler ask for? It was a desire to do battle with giant water wolves that drew me and my nephew, Ryan Brown, 16, of Elizabethtown, to Brent and Erin Fleck's Laurie River Lodge in northern Manitoba June 23-30.

I hunted spring black bears at Laurie River two years ago, and perhaps the most important thing I discovered on my hunt is that the fishing is awesome. Laurie River Lodge provides fly-in-only fishing in a remote, 1,600-square-mile area of Manitoba wilderness to which the Flecks have exclusive rights for running a commercial operation.

There are no roads here. Nor are there any settlements. The only way in and out is by float plane. So the only people who fish the scads of lakes and rivers in this swath of Canadian bush country southwest of the town of Lynn Lake are Laurie River's guests.

That's not a lot of pressure and the Flecks run a strict trophy-management fishing program. When it comes to northern pike, fishing is all catch-and-release with barbless hooks. That's for good reason. If you want big pike, you have to allow them time to grow.

"The biologists tell us a 40-inch pike is about 20 years old," Brent said. "So we like our guests to get them back in the water as soon as possible after catching them." Besides pike, Laurie River Lodge's area also has plenty of walleyes and lake trout.

Anglers can keep some of those fish. In fact, you have to catch and keep some walleyes if you want to experience one of Canada's finest traditions — shore lunch. That's a tasty and decadent feast of fresh-caught walleyes, potatoes and onions cooked in about 3 pounds of lard in cast-iron skillets over an open fire on the shore of whatever lake you happen to be fishing that day.

So even though pike were the main course for me and my nephew on our adventure, we took time out to catch walleyes every day just so we could get our fill of shore lunches.

When it came to the pike, my nephew and I came loaded for bear.

We had stout, 7-foot rods. We used 30-pound-test braided line tipped with steel leaders. And we chucked big lures — primarily spoons and spinner baits.

Plain and simple, our goal was to catch big pike.

For the second half of our trip, Ryan and I stayed at Laurie River's posh main lodge on

the shore of McGavock Lake. The amenities and service at the log facility were five-star, but, while we found plenty of pike to keep us reaching for the hook-outs all day long. During the first half of the trip, however, creature comforts were in short supply and big pike were in abundance.

Our base of operations was a tent camp on a two-acre island in the middle of Runner Lake. The island kept us relatively free of the annoying mosquitoes that swarmed on the mainland, although the nightly dips of the mercury down to 32 degrees probably helped even more. It also served as the perfect launching pad for Ryan's and my daily excursions by boat to hunt for water wolves in the abundant shallow bays and creek mouths where the pike seemed to congregate.



***Fresh Walleyes destined
for shore lunch***

Catch and measure such a pike, and declare it to the bureau via postcard, and Manitoba Tourism sends out a Master Angler certificate and patch.

With that 43-incher, Ryan secured his status as a Manitoba Master Angler. I earned my title with a pair of 42-inchers. Any pike over 36 inches is a horse. Hook one and, no matter what tackle you're using, all you can do is hold on and hope the fish wears out before you do. I was running a gold Red Eye Wiggler across a shallow bay June 27 when I felt the heavy strike of a big pike. The fish took its tell-tale zig-zag runs parallel to the boat before rushing straight at the metal craft and diving underneath. I did my best to turn the pike's head toward open water, but I think it finally moved that way only when it was ready to.

Four times I led the fish to the side of the boat and each time it rolled to the surface like a log, stared at me with one of its unforgiving eyes and then rocketed away with a powerful swat of its wide tail. The drag screamed in protest and I just leaned backward, before recovering the line the pike had stripped. It was a true knockdown, drag-em-out brawl that I eventually won when I hauled the fish out of the water for quick measuring

This is the north country — the land of the midnight sun. Fishing days for the most diehard of anglers can run from sunrise around 4 a.m. until sunset around 11 p.m. Ryan and I didn't quite keep those hours, but we spent a good chunk of daylight on the water slinging lures. Through trial and error we quickly learned the biggest of the big pike seemed to hit best early in the morning and any time after 5 p.m.

Those were the times during which we exerted the greatest effort. On our last morning on the island, we fished a single bay for just under three hours and caught somewhere over 50 pike — 10 of which measured between 36 and 43 inches. Ryan hooked the 43-incher. It was a fat log of a fish that threatened to drag us all over the lake before succumbing to Ryan's relentless resistance.

Through its Master Angler program, Manitoba Tourism recognizes pike measuring over 41 inches as "trophy" fish.

and photo sessions.

I then returned the leviathan to the water, pushed it forward and back a few times as I held its tail before it moved off into the murky depths under its own power.

I hope to return to Manitoba in the not-too-distant future and find that fish again. Maybe next time, it will win.

- For information on Laurie River Lodge, visit its Web site at www.laurieriverlodge.com or call Brent at 1-800-426-2533.

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