

Terror lurks in the weeds

They don't call chain pickerel the 'water wolf' for nothing

It was a warm, hazy morning at my friend's cottage on a lake in Mount Uniacke. While I sipped a coffee on the dock, a splash attracted my attention.

Something was struggling at the surface. It lolled about, submerging for a few moments, and then resurfacing a little further down shore.

I called out to my friends to grab a net, and the three of us walked the shoreline, stalking the creature. We finally managed to net what looked like a small alligator. Looking at its reptilian head, I understood why it was having so much difficulty. A fish tail was hanging out of its mouth, still attached to a fish.

What we'd caught was a chain pickerel. It was 23 inches long, and the fish giving it indigestion was a white sucker, all of 17 inches. The fact that the pickerel had tried to swallow something almost as big as itself would be no surprise to anyone familiar with this voracious predator, sometimes known as the water wolf. At this particular lake, the locals said the resident trout population had already been decimated by pickerel.

Smaller relatives of pike and muskellunge, chain pickerel are newcomers to Nova Scotia, and find the province quite to their liking. The Canadian record for a chain pickerel comes from the Tusket River system in Yarmouth, where they were first introduced. That one weighed almost 5½ pounds.

Pickerel are being caught in Halifax and Hants counties, primarily

because of illegal "bucket stocking" of lakes. They are especially prevalent in the Grand Lake Shubenacadie system, and on a gorgeous midsummer day last week I went to Fish Lake, near Oakfield Provincial Park, to find them.

Fishing for pickerel is like fishing for smallmouth bass; they are not leery of large presentations, whether lures, bait, or flies. And, like bass, they are active in warm, weedy water. All my success had been with big spoons like red devils and five of diamonds, usually trolled from a boat. Today, however, I was using top water plugs imitating frogs and large bugs, fishing them in small coves choked with lily pads.

Frogs and grasshoppers leaped ahead of me as I walked the shoreline. Kamikaze horseflies and graceful dragonflies buzzed in the sweltering heat. I cast my little frog onto a lily pad and twitched it into the water. Twice the water behind the popper swirled ominously; then, after I dragged it off another pad, it disappeared.

The pickerel did not jump like a bass, but it fought well. I pulled it from the water and marvelled at its crocodilian head, from the top-mounted eyes to the rows of savage-looking teeth.

I pity the denizens of this stagnant hunting ground, living perilously while this toothed terror lurks in the weeds.

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CHASING PISCES**

CHAIN PICKEREL: IT WOULD CHOMP ON A DUCKLING

● Chain pickerel are relatives of northern pike and muskellunge, and look extremely similar to their larger cousins. They are ambush predators, usually lurking around weedy areas looking for prey. Chain pickerel eat other fish, insects, amphibians, and even ducklings and small rodents.

● They are not native to Nova Scotia and were introduced illegally in the Tusket River system in 1945. Through additional recent illegal stocking, they are now established in water systems in Hants and Halifax counties. Picker-

el are harmful to soft-bodied fish species, especially trout, and have wiped out trout populations in some lakes.



● Aside from their controversial arrival, chain pickerel are good sport fish. They can't be mistaken for any other Nova Scotia fish. Long and slender, they have olive-green to yellow bodies with distinctive black chain markings on their sides. Trolling spoons around coves, or fishing poppers and weedless rigs in lily pads is effective. Pickerel also take bait, minnows being the bait of choice.