



PIKE SCENE

Seasonal advice from predator experts

**NEW
PREDATOR
SERIES**

THIS WEEK: Midlands predator ace Andy Black offers top advice on pike care to ensure your prize goes back in tip-top condition.

Handle with care



IF a big pike engulfs a bait, I'm quite happy to cut the hooks out.

So you've just landed your first pike, it's in the net and the trace is hanging out of its mouth. What do you do now?

First of all, don't panic. Secondly, leave the pike in the net in the water while you sort out your unhooking gear.

Once you're all sorted, bring the pike up onto the unhooking mat and have a look where the hooks are. If they are in the scissors, on either side of the mouth, then it's a straightforward unhooking procedure. If the hooks are deeper, you will have to open the pike's mouth to get them out.

Pike, even though they may not look it, are delicate creatures. They aren't going to try to bite you - any damage are usually cuts or scrapes from the sharp gill rakers.

Anyone new to pike fishing should try and go out with someone who knows what they are doing to show you the ropes. Contact your local branch of the Pike Anglers' Club (www.pacgb.co.uk) and you'll find helpful advice to hand.



A big pike lies in a Sladle, supported across the gunwales of a boat.



I'm a fan of the Greys Prowla floating retainer sling.

RETENTION

I'M a great believer that pike should not be retained for long periods, and should be returned to the water straight away. However, I also know that there is some benefit in retaining pike for a short period just before or just after unhooking. This gives the fish time to recover and also gives the angler time to get a camera, scales and weigh sling set-up.

In most cases, the safest way to retain pike is simply in the net, where appropriate. Obviously in shallow water or steep banks this may not be possible. I don't find pike tubes very user-friendly, much preferring floating retainer slings with a zipped top. I use the Greys Prowla design. The flotation itself helps keep the sling straight in the water, and the sling, having wide mesh 'windows' in the side, allows good water flow.

They are also easy to use from a boat. Simply put the fish in and zip the top and then tie the cord to the boat, and the sling will float away without the fish banging the side of the boat in the waves, which can happen with standard tubes.

Pike should not be put in carp sacks, for any reason, as their teeth and gill rakers can pick up the material and suffocate the fish. Also pike are prone to turning upside down in sacks - I think that the dark material confuses them and they have trouble balancing.

UNHOOKING

THE easiest way to control a pike on the bank is to gently straddle it between your legs on an unhooking mat, so it can't flip.

Once you're in control, turn the pike on to its back as this helps calm them down and enables easy access to the gill area.

After locating the gill area, slip one or two fingers into the gill plate but be sure not to go in-between the gills. Keep your fingers to the outer edge, the boney side, and gently pull your fingers up towards the end of the jaw and towards yourself as this will open the pike's mouth.



With the pike's jaw open, it's now a case of using the correct tools for the job. In most cases, you'll need long-nosed forceps or pliers. In some cases, though, it may be safer to cut the hooks with side cutters.

If the hooks are quite a long way down in the pike's mouth, you can try and enter through the gills to tease them out, but please be careful, as this is a very delicate area.

If the pike has swallowed the hooks, it is best to put the fish back in the net and try and find an experienced angler to help.

Don't be afraid to put the fish back into the net and in the water for a break. It is a delicate creature, and it's best to give it a rest to recover before attempting hook removal again.

When it comes to unhooking a big pike in a boat as you are being thrown around by the wind and waves, it can be tricky.

If possible, I unhook small fish by the side of the boat, but if it's a lump I'll lower the fish straight into an Eddie Turner Sladle (a kind of fish hammock). There are two poles that rest across the gunwales of the boat, and the pike rests in the soft 'sling' in between them. This makes unhooking easier. It's useful for weighing and returning, too.



A straddled pike and some textbook unhooking.

RETURNING YOUR FISH

DON'T get complacent after the weighing and photographs are done. The safest way to return a pike is to carry it back to the water in the sling or, better still, the unhooking mat if you have a folding model.

Once the fish is back in the water, gently hold it by its tail in an upright position and don't let go until it is kicking strongly enough to swim away.

TOOLS FOR THE JOB

LONG-NOSED forceps are a traditional tool for unhooking pike. They are not ideal, though, especially if you are using large hooks as sometimes they don't have the grip required to turn them.

Nowadays I don't even carry forceps. I just use long handled pliers as they are a lot easier to use and cope with bigger hooks and lure fishing. You don't want to be messing around trying to get the hooks out with inadequate tools.

Whether I'm lure fishing or bait fishing I will always have a pair of side cutters in my tool kit too. You simply don't know when you'll need to cut a hook off to get it out of a fish, or even a size 3/0 out of your thumb, which I've had to do.

You should be able to get most hooks out with simple long nosed pliers but, occasionally, you will get one that won't move, or would be dangerous to the pike if you had to pull it out. If I get any hooks in the gill rakers, for example, I always cut the hook out. If you haven't got any side cutters in your pike kit, in my eyes, you shouldn't be pike fishing. Obviously, once you have cut the hook point away, you will still need to go in again with your pliers and tease the rest out.

Bolt croppers are one step up from side cutters. It may seem over the top to be carrying bolt croppers around but, in some cases, normally where large hooks are used during lure fishing, side cutters are simply not man enough for the job.

I find these really useful if a fish has wolfed down a lure and I can simply clip through the split rings holding the hooks to remove the lure body. I then get to work on the hooks with pliers.



These tools should cover me for all my pike unhooking situations.