



THE Tweed FOUNDATION

A Tweed Foundation Paper

3 THE FISHES OF THE TWEED AND THE EYE

C.4

Pike *Esox lucius*



Photo C.4.1 : A Pike caught in St. Mary's Loch on the 29th May 2002

Though the Family Esocidae is distributed throughout most of Europe and the more temperate areas of Asia and North America it has just five species, only one of which is found in Europe. The European Pike is a fish of still and slow flowing waters and is designed to eat fish – its teeth are backward pointing which makes the escape of prey all but impossible. The body form, with the dorsal and anal fins set back near the tail is also designed for seizing prey fish, as this gives an ability to make very fast, short rushes from ambush. Spawning is in Spring, when water temperatures are between 4°C and 11°C and may be preceded by long migrations to suitable spawning areas. Males arrive at the grounds first, selecting shallow areas of thick vegetation in which to wait for females. The eggs are sticky and so adhere to the weed: Hatching takes from 10 to 30 days, depending on water temperature and the young grow rapidly, sometimes reaching 4cms after just one month. At a year old, they are 8 to 10cms in length and are already eating small fish. Females generally mature later and can reach much larger sizes than males, and may become important predators of smaller Pike in their waters.

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A charitable trust established by the River Tweed Commission to promote the development of fish stocks in the Tweed River System

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Photo C.4.2: A Pike Fry electric-fished from the outflow of the Shaws Loch, in the Ale Water catchment.

Unlike most other freshwater species other than Salmonids, Pike will feed at low water temperatures, even down to near zero. Where prey fish are in short supply, Pike populations can become largely cannibalistic, with a few very large, generally female fish feeding on a much larger population of small, young, Pike which feed on invertebrates. Frogs, Toads, Water Voles, Rats and Water Shrews are all eaten by larger Pike and they are a significant predator of young water birds. Trout are a preferred prey of Pike and larger individuals compete directly with anglers for trout of catchable size and they are known to have a significant impact on Salmon smolts when these have to pass through lochs and rivers that have Pike populations.

Photo C.4.3: The stomach of the Pike from St. Mary's Loch shown in Photo C.1.1. The undigested vertebrae of small fish were the only contents.

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Though not now generally eaten in the British Isles they were once a prized food, as they still are in parts of Europe and North America, where they are even farmed in some places. They would have been introduced to the Tweed catchment as a food fish for pond culture, most likely in the Middle Ages when a good supply of fresh fish was required for religious reasons (no meat could be eaten on Fridays or during Lent). Commerce would, however, have been another motive for introduction as they were valuable items for sale: Yarrell (1841) reports some of the prices : *“That Pike were rare formerly, may be inferred from the fact that, in the latter part of the thirteenth century, Edward the First, who condescended to regulate the prices of the different sorts of fish then brought to market, that his subjects might not be left to the mercy of the venders, fixed the value of Pike higher than that of fresh Salmon, and more than ten times greater than that of the best Turbot or Cod... Pike were dressed in the year 1466, at the great feast given by George Nevil, Archbishop of York...Pike were so rare in the reign of Henry the Eighth, that a large one sold for double the price of a house-lamb in February, and a Pickerel, or small Pike, fore more than a fat capon.”* It is not surprising therefore that by the middle of the 19th Century it could be written *“Now, however, the pike is to be found in most of the British waters adapted to his nature and habits...”* (Blakey, 1854).

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Pike on Tweed : Pike must have been in the Tweed area by the year 1200 as they were one of the species served to William 1st of Scotland at Norham Castle that year (Maxwell, 1909), but no other records have been found till the Old Statistical Account, written in the 1790's which includes mentions of Pike in lochs of the upper Ale catchment; the backwaters of the Teviot; the Slipperfield Lochs (near West Linton); St. Mary's Loch and the Loch of the Lowes and Yetholm Loch. They were also in the Haining Loch in Selkirk by 1811 as a French Prisoner of War remembered them there as a delicacy (Thomson, 1913) and a Pike of 35lbs was taken from the Hirsell loch in 1837 (Johnston, 1838). They also appeared to have been more common in local rivers than they are now, and an object of sport :

The Sunday Times, 26th April, 1835 : "On Monday evening last, the Duke of Buccleuch, after a day's hunt killed, within an hour, in the pool close by Monteviot, three Salmon, two Perches and a Pike of 14 lbs with a single gut line. Besides those secured, his Grace ran several other Salmon, and another large Pike...." (Buller, 1998)

The slow-flowing Leet Water was, not surprisingly, a good place for Pike in the early 19th Century until some biological control was exerted:

"The channel of Leet contains shell marl and its banks being hollowed out beneath, afford, independent of occasional vines and tree roots, excellent shelter for trout. Not many years ago the whole course of it was infested with pike, but the visit of some otters, irrespective of the angler's art has completely cleared them out and thus allowed the trout, which were formerly scarce, to become more numerous." (Stoddart, 1853)

In the New Statistical Account, written in the 1830's, Pike are recorded in Alemoor, Hellmoor, Moodlaw, Hoselaw, Essenside, Sheilswood, Headshaw and Ashkirk Lochs, the Slipperfield Lochs, Cauldshiels Loch and the Hirsell Loch. However, they are reported as being less numerous in St. Mary's and the Loch of the Lowes than in the past. Pike could be found far down the river, near and even occasionally in the estuary. One of 5 or 6 lb in was caught by a Salmon angler on the 7th of June 1860 nearly quarter of a mile below the Union Bridge "*where the tide flows daily. Pike in the lower parts of the Tweed were never before known*" (Anon. 1867). A Pike of 9.5 lbs was netted below Whiteadder Mouth on the 19th of June 1890 and one of 15lbs at the Gardo netting station in the middle of Berwick Harbour in April 1913 (Bolam, 1919): That Pike can tolerate some level of brackish water is shown by the fact that they live in low salinity areas of the Baltic and Caspian seas.

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The Till was particularly noted for Pike by Victorian anglers:

“ Towards the mouth of the Till, below the pretty village of Etal, the character of the river considerably changes for the better; the banks are less encumbered with bushes and the water, though broad and deep is more broken up into streams, and below the weir contains a fair sprinkling of salmon, grilse, bull-trout, and whitling, besides some very large specimens of the common trout of occasionally 2 or 3 lbs or more. Pike abound here and there over the whole of the Till proper, with also a sprinkling of perch (I once caught one of 1 1/4 pound weight), and no end of eels ... The Weetwood Water, Doddington Bridge Pool, and the Fenton Water near Wooler, as also the stretches of water near Ford Castle and the classic field of Flodden, are favourite haunts of pike... After passing Yetholm, the Bowmont pursues an easterly course... at Canna Mill, about half a mile above Kirk-Newton, there is a deep secluded mill-dam...in which there are numbers of pike...” (Moffat, 1865).

There was even Pike poaching for profit on the Till :

“The Till pike ... are well fed and shy; they do not run large so far up the river, one of 6 or 7 lb being uncommon (this is around Doddington) ... a few are caught now and then by the rod and line, but the greater number of those that are caught in this neighbourhood are nightlined, there being sundry poaching brothers of the angle in these parts who turn a shameful penny in this way” (Francis, 1874).

The largest recorded Till Pike of those days appears to have been one of 27 lbs killed on the Etal Water in July 1904: This fish contained two Whitling, which together weighed between 3 and 4 lbs (Bolam, 1919)

By the 20th Century, it appears that that the range of Pike within the rivers was becoming more limited:

“Twenty years ago it was no uncommon thing for the angler to catch this species at Melrose and further up the Tweed, but nowadays he is much scarcer and it is only on few occasions in the lower stretches of river that he may fall victim to the rod. The Kelso Angling Association has done much to exterminate him, by way of offering a liberal donation for every pike captured in the Kelso district. The pike also abounds in the St. Mary's and Lowes lochs... As the pike is a great destroyer of fresh-water trout, anglers who come to reside at the Rodono Hotel invariably net him in both lochs - a practice which affords much enjoyment in the heat of summer, when trout fishing is not the best description ” (Brown, 1907).

The numbers of Pike for which the Kelso Association paid bounties for is shown in Table C.4.1:

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Table C.4.1: Pike Bounties* paid by the Kelso Angling Association 1903-1922:

YEAR	NUMBER	NOTES	YEAR	NUMBER	NOTES
1903	127	Start of the scheme	1913	51	
1904	61		1914	NA	
1905	84		1915	41	
1906	28		1916	134	Largest total yet
1907	43		1917	149	Heaviest 14 lbs, most 1 to 4 lbs
1908	17		1918	62	Heaviest 24 lbs (Woden Mill lade)
1909	37		1919	55	1 at 14 lbs, 1 at 10, rest 2 to 7 lbs
1910	41		1920	18	
1911	52		1921	41	10 from Teviot, 31 from Tweed
1912	85		1922	17	Averaging 6 lbs

*Bounty for non-members 1/6d, for members 2/- : Sources - Reports of AGM's in the Kelso Mail

At present, though the occasional Pike is taken by anglers on the lower reaches of the Tweed, Teviot and Till, they are much less common than in the past: the breaking of caulds and the resulting loss of areas of stiller water may be part of the explanation for this.

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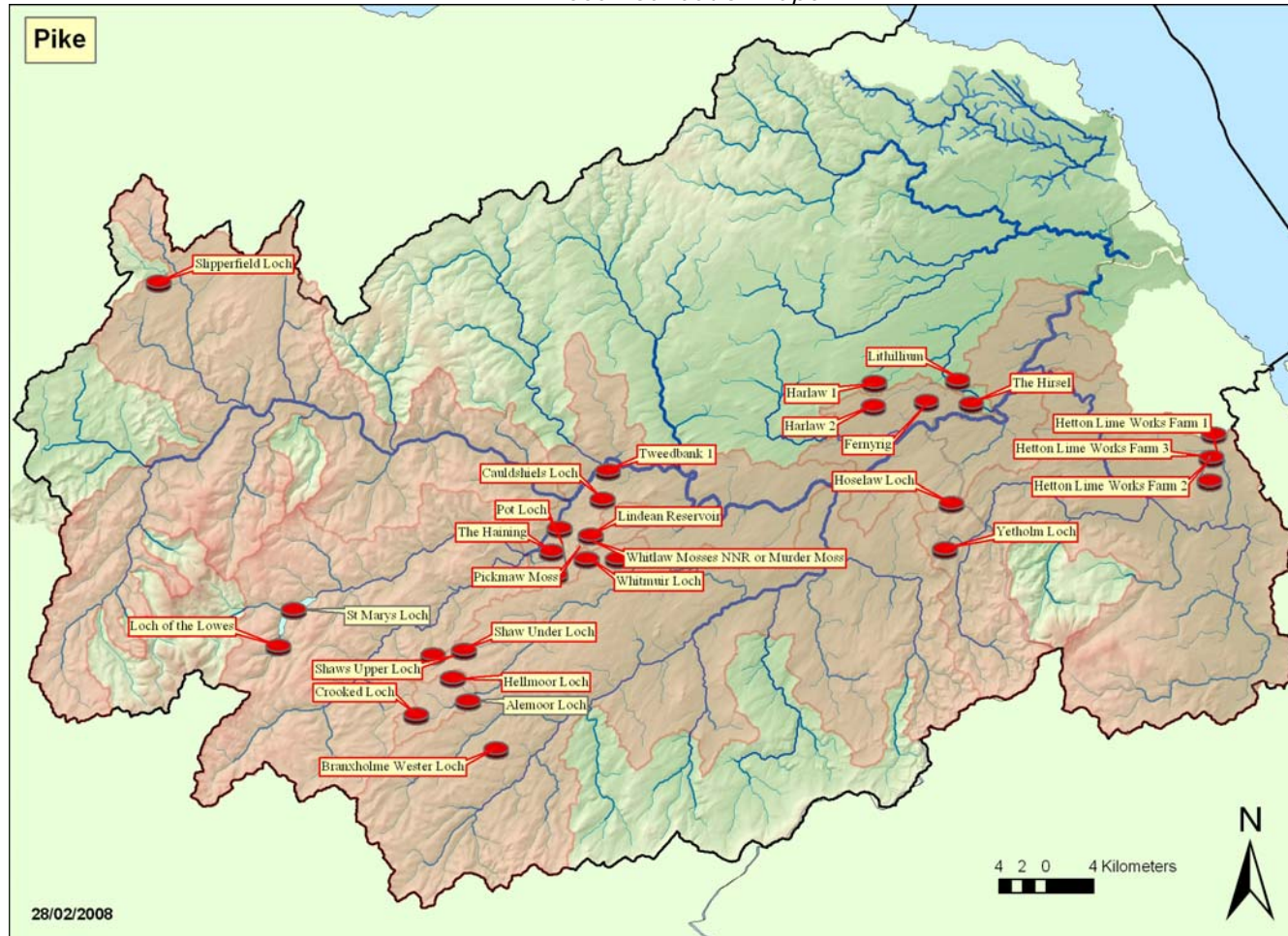
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Map C.4.1 : Known distribution of Pike in still waters within the District
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