

FISHING HOLE

PIKE LAKE

BY JOE SHEAD

WHY GO: Pike Lake has good populations of walleyes and smallmouth bass. You'll find fish in a variety of sizes, from small ones, to eaters, to trophy-class fish. Plus, there is a low-density northern pike population with some large individuals.

ACCESS: Pike Lake lies approximately 6 miles northeast of Lutsen. The boat ramp is on the south-central part of the lake. To reach it you'll have to drive down Murmur Creek Road, which is gravel. There is a steep descent with switchbacks down to the boat ramp, but the ramp itself is not overly steep. There is a dock at the concrete ramp and adjacent handicapped parking. The parking lot is at the top of a hill and requires a short walk.

GAME SPECIES PRESENT: Walleye, smallmouth bass, northern pike, yellow perch and lake whitefish.

WALLEYES: Matt Weberg, assistant area fisheries supervisor in Grand Marais, said most anglers who visit Pike Lake are after walleyes. "It's always been an abundant population with fairly good size distribution," he said. Weberg said anglers will find a mix of sizes here, with lots of fish running from 12 to 20 inches, and some even larger. The last fisheries survey in 2019 turned up 16 different year-classes. Weberg said one walleye was 24 years old!

"That goes a long way to describe our water quality and our habitat for these long-lived species," he said.

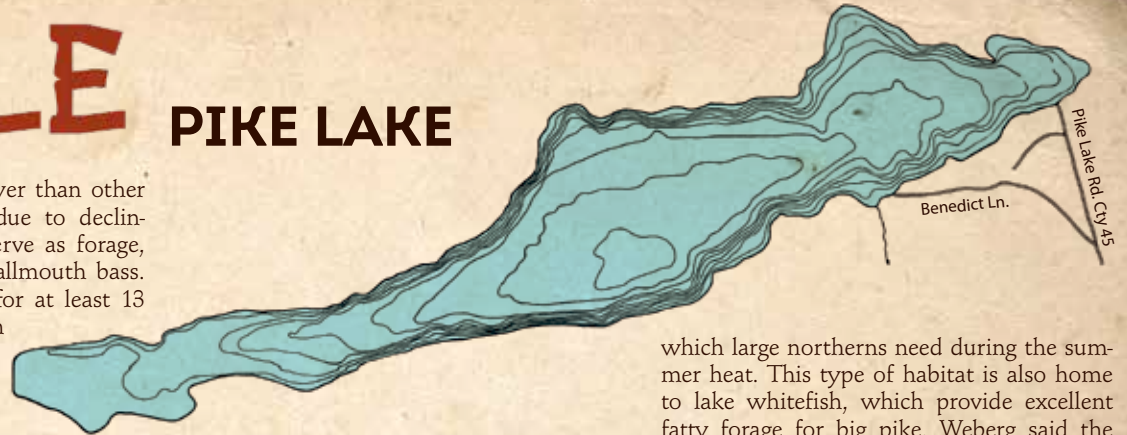
Walleyes were last stocked in the 1970s and the population is entirely self-sustain-

ing. However, growth is slower than other lakes in the area, possibly due to declining perch numbers, which serve as forage, and/or competition from smallmouth bass. The management plan calls for at least 13 percent of walleyes taken in gill nets during sampling to measure at least 16 inches in length, and the latest sample nearly doubled that figure. Weberg advises anglers to chase walleyes during low-light conditions. Water clarity runs from 17 to 20 feet, so plan your outings early or late in the day or on cloudy days with a chop.

SMALLMOUTH BASS: Pike Lake is gaining a reputation as an excellent smallmouth bass lake.

"For some, the smallmouth population might be more of a draw than the walleyes," Weberg said.

He said the lake has a really strong smallmouth population, and because smallies are net shy, the survey may not even reflect the true abundance of bass in Pike Lake. Like walleyes, you'll find a variety of sizes—from fish the size of rock bass, to trophy-caliber specimens topping 20 inches. Weberg handled a 21-inch smallie that was 19 years old. There is no shortage of forage for smallmouths. That's because the lake has a real problem with rusty crayfish. These non-native crayfish were first discovered by the DNR in 1995, although Weberg said they had likely been in the lake for some time before they were detected. Even today they are abundant; to the point some cabin owners trap them to try to eradicate them. When



rusties enter a lake, they destroy aquatic vegetation and are generally harmful to a lake. The upside is that smallmouths can and do eat them.

YELLOW PERCH: Pike Lake used to have a really good perch population, including good-sized fish.

"We've seen a steady decline, roughly tracking the establishment of rusty crayfish," Weberg said.

The perch population has been in decline since the 1980s. With few weeds remaining, perch have lost a lot of their habitat.

"The 2019 survey was among the lowest we've seen since very early in the survey history," Weberg said.

Not only does the perch decline impact anglers, who formerly caught nice-sized perch; it's also impacted walleye and northern pike populations, which prey on perch.

NORTHERN PIKE: Despite the name, Pike Lake does not have a high northern pike population. However, it does have a low-density population that produces some good-sized fish. With fewer mouths competing for available forage, the pike that do exist can grow large. Pike Lake has deep, cool water,

which large northerns need during the summer heat. This type of habitat is also home to lake whitefish, which provide excellent fatty forage for big pike. Weberg said the latest survey found pike in the mid-30-inch range, and fisheries crews have handled fish up to 40 inches. Weberg said he wouldn't be surprised if the lake produced fish that were even larger.

LAKE WHITEFISH: At one time, lake whitefish were commercially harvested from Pike Lake in great numbers. Those days are long gone, and no netting is allowed, either commercially or by sport anglers. However, Weberg said the lake still has a fairly consistent population of whitefish. Although few anglers target them, they are an important forage species for large northern pike.

BONUS BROOKIES: Once in a while a brook trout makes its way into the lake from Murmur Creek. However, catching one would be a rare occurrence.

HABITAT PROJECTS: Weberg said the U.S. Forest Service is planning to place woody debris along the shoreline to provide fish habitat. The project was supposed to start this winter, but has been delayed because of Covid-19.

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