

A guide to simple **PIKE** FISHING

Paul Garner admits he isn't a pike fishing master, but that doesn't stop him catching his fair share. Here he gives his simple guide to casual piking.

The sight of a big pike laying beaten on the surface as it is drawn towards the outstretched net is one of the most impressive in fishing. The combination of that huge toothy maw, sleek mottled camouflaged body and steely eye combine to give us the UK's ultimate freshwater predator. Pike are also one of our most widely distributed freshwater fish, being found from the North of Scotland to the South coast. Only the far tip of Cornwall remaining pike-free.

I guess I am like most anglers and nothing more than a casual pike angler. By that I mean that the pursuit of really big pike is something that I do not have the drive to attempt. To me, a double is a good fish, and a twenty something to be celebrated with the story recounted in the pub! Fish of this size are available

to all and are a realistic challenge from both stillwaters and rivers.

The other reason that I would classify myself as no more than a casual pike angler is that it has been more years than I can remember that I have used livebaits. This is not through any conscious decision, simply that I am more than happy with my results on shop-bought deadbaits to not feel the need to go to all the extra trouble of trying to catch livebait from the venues I pike fish. I am sure that lives would catch me more fish, but on most venues, most of the time, deadbaits are effective enough to keep me happy.

My approach to pike fishing, and some would say all my fishing, is not revolutionary or full of gimmicks. Location is the key, with a simple presentation of quality baits all that is then required.





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Two Rod Approach

One rod will always go on the margin either to my left or right. Pike will very often hug the margins, particularly between dusk and dawn and about a third of all my pike come from within a rod length of the bank. I fish this rod down the margin to hopefully stop any bankside disturbance from spooking any pike that are present. If there is marginal cover present then this rod will be fished tight to it, even if this is only a couple of feet deep. Prey fish will often seek out overhead cover during the day and as the light goes the pike will move in to the edge on the hunt.

The second rod is more tricky, as this is going out, but how far out and why? Whilst you can catch pike by just chucking a bait blindly into the distance, feature finding really will pay dividends. At the very least, have a few casts with just a lead to ascertain the depth (count the lead down), the presence of any weed and the type of lakebed. Changes in depth, which often also signal the edges of weedbeds, are prime spots from which pike can launch an ambush attack. Depressions in the bed, even just six inches difference, are also likely to mark patrol routes and are well worth locating. Always try to learn the maximum you can from each swim as the pike are not going to be evenly distributed and some days they simply won't move very far to intercept a deadbait.

Time For A Recast?

Because I will be moving swims regularly, once I am happy that the baits are in good areas they generally stay put. The margin rod will not be recast if I can help it, whilst the other rod might get recast every 30-45 minutes or so if there are a few different areas to explore. Recasting, moving swims, feature finding will all keep you warm, and when the temperature is struggling to get above freezing will definitely keep you fishing longer.

Keeping Mobile – Gear Choice

I like to keep mobile when piking, spending about an hour in each swim. This keeps me motivated and a bit warmer, even on the worst of days. Whether it catches me any more fish than staying static on a known hot spot is debateable, but if you are new on a venue then at the very least you will learn a lot more and may well drop on a fish or two.

On a lot of stillwaters you can take a mountain of gear and barrow it around if you want. This doesn't suit me though as a lot of my time is spent on rivers where muddy fields, gates and ditches make a barrow impractical. Over the years I have pared my gear down to just one small carryall, small freezer box, chair, mat and rod sling. If it doesn't fit in here then it doesn't come with me, but my tardis-like bag swallows everything I need quite easily. You do have to be realistic though about what you carry and chuck out anything that might be there 'just in case'.

The one area that I don't skimp on though is keeping dry and warm. If you get chilled you will be going home, so a decent umbrella, proper waterproofs and warm boots are an absolute must. Being comfortable will catch you a lot more fish than the latest shiny piece of tackle!

I normally only fish with two rods, as I find this also keeps me more mobile. It is surprising how awkward and heavy three or four rods get when you have to carry them any distance, so they are better left at home if you are going to be moving about. Most swims have only a couple of features so with more rods I find that I am normally only covering the same areas anyway, so don't bother any more. Rods are pokey 12ft 3lb test curve models with a semi-parabolic (middle to through) action, coupled with Shimano Baitrunners.



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Sorting Fact From Fiction

As a rule of thumb, in any fishery you get one pound of predator to every ten pounds of prey fish, so you don't have to be Einstein to realise that pike, and particularly good ones, are not going to be numerous. Location, both in terms of fishing venues that produce good pike, and then finding the right areas, is key.

I must hold my hands up and admit that most venues I fish have been found as the result of either seeing catch reports in the weeklies, being told of captures by friends, or researching venues on the internet.

Carp anglers are a great source of information, as they will often spot big pike in the warmer months and are willing to share the information, and in syndicate lakes the pike are often left pretty much alone. Don't get too carried away though with reports of monster pike as it takes an experienced eye to tell a mid-double from a good twenty and then the girth of pike can vary so much that it is easy to be miles out with 'guesstimates'. Interestingly, on many venues, particularly gravel pits, pike can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, some long and lean, whilst others are much stockier. Why this should be the

case I have never yet fathomed out, but suspect it may be down to some pike learning to exploit locally abundant prey fish better than others. What it does mean though is that you shouldn't immediately rule-out a venue if you catch a couple of skinny pike.

Pike venues come and go, but as a general rule the larger the body of water the more consistently it will produce big pike. Remember even a reasonable sized gravel pit can only support a handful of good pike, reduce the prey fish numbers through cormorant predation, lose a couple of pike through old age, and all of a sudden a venue can be 'finished'. You often get a flurry of captures just before a venue goes off the boil as well, which makes the fall-off in sport seem even more pronounced.

Ignore rivers at your peril when looking for good pike fishing. Take my local River Severn as an example. You may have twenty miles between weirs. That is a massive sheet of water that holds plenty of prey fish and pike and you can rely on it to produce fish year after year. Once again, the size of the venue buffering any changes in the predator and prey populations.

Search Patterns

So you have done your research and found a venue with some form for big pike. Faced with a large sheet of forbidding water can be a daunting prospect, particularly with a cold northerly wind cutting you to the bone. Just where do you start? Initially I tend to break any venue down into more manageable lumps. This applies to both rivers and lakes. On rivers it might be each pool or bend, or on lakes it might be bays, or points, in fact any visible feature. Google Earth is a god-send when looking at new venues as you can get a really accurate map of any venue. On some you can even see the gravel bars and weedbeds, which can make life very much simpler! Once I have broken the venue up in this way I can start to work out a route that will allow me to search as many areas as possible.

Rather than fish blindly I try to apply some logic to my search and fish to features. This can be areas of changing depth, like the sides of bars or islands, weedbeds or close to snags. I am really looking for two types of area. Those that the pike will use as they patrol the lake and areas where prey fish are holding up.

STILLWATER LEDGER RIG

>>> There is no place for complicated rigs in pike fishing, and I like to keep mine as simple and as free-running as possible. Main line is 15lb minimum to combat any snags or weed that might be present and to handle the general wear and tear of mobile fishing. A leger boom with a large ring at one end keeps the line out of any debris on the lakebed and keeps everything hopefully a bit more free-running, and that is about as complicated as it gets.

Don't think that small leads will necessarily be more effective than large ones. As long as the large ring on the boom is doing its job then a big lead has several advantages. Firstly, even when using popped-up baits you can feel the lead 'donk' down on a clear lake bed when using a bigger lead. This is a real confidence booster as you can be confident that the rig and bait aren't encased in weed. The big lead also allows you to keep the pop-up bait pinned down just a trace length off bottom. The bigger lead will also combat drift better and stop undertow pulling the bait into weed.



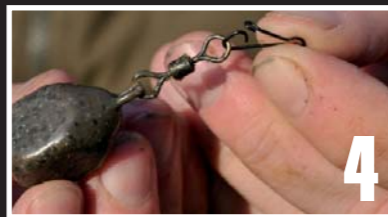
1 Thread a leger boom on to the main line. Follow the leger boom with a large buffer bead.



2 Tie on your trace using a grinner knot.



3 The leger boom should now sit up against the trace like this.



4 Use a minimum of 1.5oz of lead to give a firm anchor point for a pop-up. Step this up to bigger leads when fishing at range.

POP-UP BAITS GET NOTICED

>>> It's worth trying pop-up baits. I like to pop my baits up off the lead to keep them clear of any weed and make them blatantly obvious to any passing pike. Whilst this might seem unnatural, the pike don't normally seem to mind and it does increase the number of takes quite considerably. There are several ways of popping your baits up, but I prefer to simply use a polyball to create buoyancy and an extra visual attraction. Most freshwater baits will be naturally buoyant so a roach or pollan makes the ideal bait for fishing over weed.

Tie a 10cm (3 inch) loop of line to a 15-25mm diameter polyball and loop this over the eye of the bottom treble to hold it in place.



"Pop-ups increase the number of takes quite considerably"



1 Ensure that the line is well sunk and tight to the lead.



2 Position the drop-off indicator slightly below the reel, so that the line clip sits level with the spool.



3 Adjust the tension on the indicator clip so that the line will pull out easily, but is not disturbed by drift. My favourite clips are those on the Fox and Middy drop-off indicators.



4 If you are using bite alarms ensure that they work with completely slack lines as once the line pulls from the clip it will be under no tension.

BITE INDICATION DROP-OFFS AND ALARMS

>>> Nine times out of ten I want my deadbait within a couple of feet of the lakebed, and that means legering, either with or without a float. If you are moving about a lot and fishing swims of different depths on a stillwater a float set-up can be a pain, as it needs to be constantly readjusted. Another reason that I have tended recently not to use a float on lakes is because I like to pop my deadbaits up off the lead to make them more visible and avoid weed. With a float bringing the main line up semi-vertical as well there is the chance of the pike picking up both the bait and the line resulting in a bite-off. If you want to use a float leger with pop-ups then a long uptrace is a prudent idea.

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RIVER FLOAT LEGER

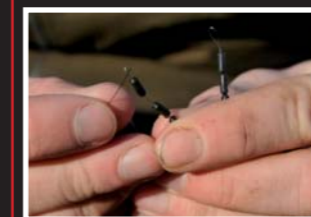
>>> I use a searching strategy on rivers too, with one rod fished down the near margin and the other to any feature that may be present. Normally on rivers I will be fishing pools where the water is deeper and slower flowing. These can vary from tiny slacks behind weedbeds to huge spate scoured pools. Often one rod is sufficient, with just enough lead to load a buoyant inline float and the bait allowed to move with the current.

Where two rods can be used then the second rod is often fished as a float leger with the bait anchored to the deck. In any kind of flow you will need a very buoyant float to stop it being pulled under. Probably the best that are readily available are the naff-looking white inline polystyrene floats commonly sold for sea fishing. These will need a good 2-3 ounce gripper lead to sink them, which might seem excessive, but, once again, as long as the lead is free-running the weight doesn't make much difference. What you need to ensure is that once the lead hits bottom it does not move an inch, otherwise the chances are it will snag.

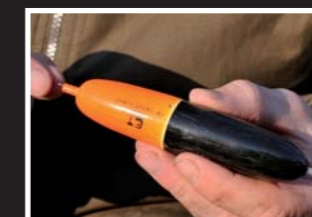
Another reason for using a big lead is that I like to keep the line off the water surface and tight to the float. With the rod top high and the baitrunner set fairly stiff this might seem a crude method, but it don't

half work! Often you will get screaming runs on the float leger as the pike pick up the bait and move off with it. At other times the bites can be incredibly subtle and just a slight rocking of the float and knocking of the rod top signalling that a pike has the bait and is holding station. Either way, strike immediately as the only fish you are likely to miss will be very small jacks.

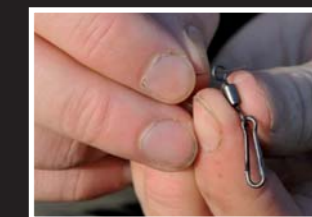
"I like to keep the line off the water surface and tight to the float."



1 Slide two large float stops on to the main line.



2 Use a large inline float with plenty of buoyancy.



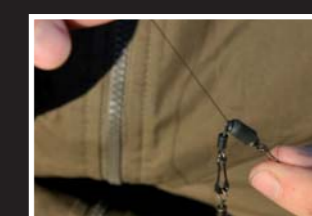
3 Add a rolling swivel with quick release attachment.



4 Finish off with a large buffer bead.



5 Tie on the trace using a four-turn grinner knot.



6 Use a 2-3oz lead attached to the rolling swivel.

DEADBAIT CHOICE

>>> You need to seek out quality deadbaits that are still firm and tough and smell fresh. Some, like sardines I can buy from my local supermarket, but a lot of the time to get baits of the right size and freshness it is much easier to buy baits sold specifically for bait. Several companies now sell pre-packed pike baits and having used them all I can say they are all of a good quality.

Each of us has our favourite baits and I am no different (I always have one rod on a sardine!), on some venues the pike do seem to show a preference for certain baits, so it is worth trying a few different variations. There are loads of exotic deadbaits on the market today, and most are readily available in your local tackle shop. I must admit though that I tend to stick to a few tried and tested favourites as I know exactly how each will perform and have confidence in when and where to use them.



MACKEREL

Baits up to around 20cm (8 inches) I use whole, above this the baits are halved and I have a slight preference for the head end as this contains more blood. A very tough bait, small ones cast well and they will work just about anywhere, my do-it-all bait.



SARDINES

Very soft-bodied meaning they need to be cast out frozen if you need to go any distance. Very oily and without doubt my favourite bait for short to medium range fishing.



SMELT

A very visual bait and one that is quite tough, making them useful when you want to recast regularly and maybe twitch baits back. Their small size makes them easy to pop up.



POLLAN

This freshwater clupeid (herring family) fish is naturally buoyant making it useful on weedy waters, effective on venues where the pike are wary of sea baits.



ROACH

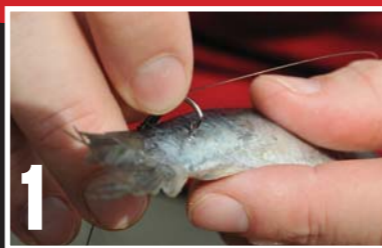
Very tough and natural in most waters. Naturally buoyant and also ideal for wobbling if you puncture the swimbladder.



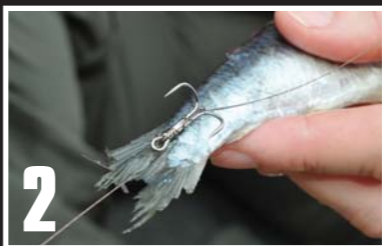
USING DEADBAITS

>>> I keep my baits in a small Coleman cool box that will keep them frozen solid all day. This is not only to keep the baits fresh, but also to make soft-bodied baits easier to cast. Sardines are notoriously difficult to cast, being very soft-bodied, but even these baits are easy to use from frozen. Hook placement is key, muscle and bone are tough, so this is where the hooks go. Avoid the soft belly and sides of the baits.

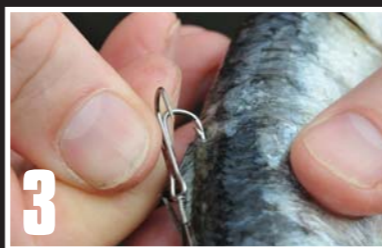
LEGERED DEADBAIT



1 Even on soft baits you will find that the tail root is quite tough.



2 Aim for the centre of the bait with the top treble.



3 The lower treble goes into the root of the dorsal fin where there is tough muscle tissue.



4 Correctly hooked even sardines can be cast a decent distance.

FLOAT FISHED BAIT



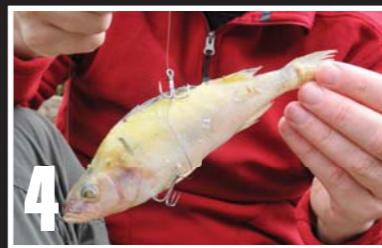
1 This hooking arrangement is designed to keep the bait sitting horizontally. Start with the upper treble in the dorsal fin root.



2 The lower treble goes into the root of the pectoral fin.



3 Don't worry if the trace is loose between the two hooks, this is fine as the casting stress is taken on the upper hook.

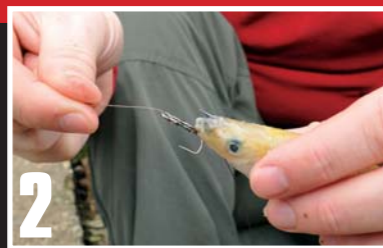


4 The bait should sit like this below the float in quite a natural position.

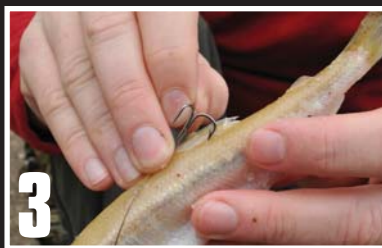
WOBBLED BAIT



1 Hook the upper treble through both jaws holding the mouth shut.



2 Ensure that the hook is centred otherwise the bait will spin.



3 I prefer to hook the lower treble in the root of the dorsal fin as it is less likely to pick up weed.



4 The finished bait is very streamlined, casting well and will stand up to continual recasting well.

"My pike fishing is not exactly revolutionary, but designed to be as simple and mobile as possible."

>>> So there you have it, as I warned you at the start, my pike fishing is not exactly revolutionary, but designed to be as simple and mobile as possible. With pike becoming increasingly rare creatures getting a bait in front of the fish is invariably the key. Go on, get your walking boots on and go search out some predators! **CF**

