

Nymphs for Pickerel

by Brian M. Wiprud

Most Pennsylvania fly and spin anglers who've tangled with pickerel would probably say that most of the fish's diet is made up of smaller fish, the rest a combination of frogs, tadpoles, snakes and anything else that moves. It might then come as a surprise to some anglers that at certain times, pickerel actually target insects to the exclusion of other prey.

I first started investigating this idea when I devised a fly that was meant to target yellow perch. Several perch I had caught and cleaned had an abundance of these dark, half-inch to inch-long nymphs in their stomachs. I identified these nymphs as alderflies and dragonflies, both of which are particularly active early in spring. They are abundant in Pennsylvania pickerel waters and throughout the Northeast. Dragonfly (odonata) nymphs are fairly stout and bulbous with legs, a shape that doesn't suggest a hairy or "buggy" pattern. Alderfly nymphs (megaloptera) have many legs that go all the way up their long torso, so a buggy pattern seems to fit this body type.

While fishing a school of perch, I would often catch a pickerel. I thought the pickerel were dogging the perch, trying to pick off stragglers—until I examined the contents of a pickerel's stomach, and found 90 percent to 100 percent of the stuff was insects. This discovery led to a quantum shift in thinking and a question: Could the pickerel actually have been feeding on insects with the perch, instead of eating the perch?

I fish perch flies for pickerel all the time, and I know our toothy friends like to munch on perch. In fact, after ice-out, that's the first fly I tie on, and I usually have good pickerel fishing. As I studied this disparity, I found that the perch flies worked very well right up to the time when the water reached the low to mid-50s, after which the strike rate fell off. If I switched to my nymph pattern, however, I was quickly back in business with the pickerel.

But how could I be certain



The author's notion: At certain times, pickerel target insects to the exclusion of other prey.

of this? To find out, I began a non-scientific examination of pickerel stomach contents. To get the results I was looking for, I needed to see what the stomach contents were at different water temperatures and for different sizes of fish. I could pump the stomachs of smaller fish, but with larger fish I quickly realized that a minnow or frog wouldn't move into the pump. The only way to determine the stomach contents of these fish would be to kill some fish. Fortunately, these fish are

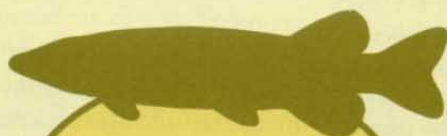


Figure 1. Pickerel stomach contents, bugs vs. food. Numbers indicate the percentage of bugs compared with other food.

	Pickerel 12 to 16 inches*	Pickerel to 21 inches	Pickerel over 21 inches
Water below 50 degrees	20	20	10
Water 50 to 60 degrees	90	90	50
Water 60 to 70 degrees	75	75	25
Water above 70 degrees	25	25	10

** The minimum legal size and creel limits for pickerel in Pennsylvania waters vary. Consult the Summary of Fishing Regulations & Laws for the minimum legal length and creel limits of the waterways you fish.*