



photo-Brian M. Wiprud

The author has observed that as the water warms, there's an abundance of nymphs at a time when panfish and gamefish fry may be smaller and less nutritious than insects. It's also a time when alternate prey like frogs aren't that active and any tadpoles are likely to be tiny.

generally not in short supply, and pickerel salad and other pickerel recipes are good eating. Some fellow anglers who keep some of their catches also supplied me with extracted stomachs.

The sampling was not large, especially in fish over 21 inches. The results are represented as a proportion of bugs vs. other food (see Figure 1).

I discovered that pickerel can exhibit a distinct preference for bugs at certain times. I suspect that in early spring, when the water is below 50 degrees, the bugs aren't moving much, and the only prey around are baitfish like shiners or smaller gamefish and panfish. Suddenly, as the water warms, there's an abundance of nymphs at a time when the fry of panfish and gamefish may be smaller and less nutritious than the insects. It's also a time when alternate prey like frogs aren't that active and any tadpoles are likely to be tiny. There's also the possibility that nymphs require less energy to catch and—who knows—maybe pickerel like the taste?

As to flies, large, buggy patterns, such as Woolly Buggers, are quite effective, though I like to tie mine heavier with lead eyes and a bulky thorax to look more like a dragonfly nymph. Don't forget the flash material so the fly gets noticed. I find synthetic materials to be more durable for fly construction, and to some degree a palmered body can be substituted with chenille.

Obvious technical problems are inherent in keeping your

fly and leader safe from a pickerel's formidable teeth. Especially in the spring when waters can be very clear, I find that heavy leaders and wire tippets reduce the catch rate considerably, especially if you're targeting more than one species. A 2-inch to 3-inch bite tippet of 20-pound test is the ticket. I've found panfish and bass are forgiving of a bite tippet this sturdy, though after five or six pickerel, it will become frazzled and need changing. Going up to 30-pound test affects the catch rate of all species. A loop knot makes for the perfect connection because it lets the fly swing freely and thus have more action.

It's always interesting when you find that a fish you've taken for granted turns out to be a bit more complex than you imagined, and the pickerel falls into this category. If you already fly fish for pickerel, be sure to give nymphs a try at this special time of year. If you have pickerel in your neck of the woods and haven't been fly fishing for them, then you've been overlooking some fast action, and nymphs will make it all the faster. ☐

