

PICKEREL: Good sport, but be wary of those teeth

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backwaters and up the creeks around weeds,” revealed Cliff Mundinger, an angler. “They love being around thick matted grass, lily pads, hydrilla and other vegetation. Pickerel are very exciting fish to catch. When they hit a bait, you know it. A 3-pound chain pickerel will put up a great fight, especially on light tackle.”

Highly aggressive, pickerel feed primarily upon threadfin shad, bream, shiners, minnows and other small fish, but may attack anything. These opportunistic predators occasionally eat crawfish, lizards, snakes, amphibians and even mice or small birds that venture too close to the water. Sometimes, they grab dragonflies perched on grass stems or even leap from the water to snatch low-flying insects from the air.

“A pickerel will hit just about anything a bass might hit,” Greene confirmed. “A lot of anglers consider pickerel trash fish, but they can be fun to catch. They are powerful fish and hard hitters.”

In Alabama, anglers mostly catch pickerel by accident when fishing for bass. Crappie anglers also catch pickerel when fishing with minnows, threadfin shad, shiners or other live bait. Almost any lure or live bait that might tempt a bass could provoke a vicious strike from a chain pickerel. They frequently hit spinnerbaits, jerkbaits, spoons, crankbaits and similar lures that mimic baitfish. They occasionally hit topwater baits and relentlessly pursue weedless frogs or spoons buzzed across matted grass.

“My two favorite baits to catch pickerel are spinnerbaits and jerkbaits,” Mundinger recommended. “Pickerel abso-



Pickerel have razor-sharp teeth and will fight you.

lutely love a jerkbait because they are primarily fish feeders. I also like to catch them on topwater frogs run through the lily pads. In the middle of summer, anyone throwing a frog over grass in the backwaters will most likely catch a pickerel.”

When hooked, pickerel put up a spirited fight with lightning runs and powerful lunges. They frequently jump like bass. People intentionally fishing for these water wolves should use short steel leaders to prevent them from slicing through line with their razor teeth.

Big pickerel make excellent eating, but these long, skinny fish don't yield much meat. Most people release them because of their numerous small “Y” bones, but the white, flaky meat tastes delicious with a mild flavor and no oily taste.

Handle pickerel with care. Sometimes called snakefish, these agile toothy beasts often bend their bodies and shake their heads violently looking for something to bite when grabbed. If they don't bite a person, they might drive a hook into a finger. Also pay attention to the very sharp gill plates that can slice flesh. Use pliers to remove the hooks to keep fingers away from those teeth.

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