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Natural History Notes

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Muskies, Northern Pike, and the Chippewa System

Within the past 75 years the northern pike has invaded many musky lakes. In most lakes the musky has declined as northern pike numbers have increased. In some lakes the northern pike has completely taken over. This is the last in a series of five "Natural History Notes" that reviews the biology of these fishes and reasons why northern pike have displaced muskies in many waters.

Man has long had the fascination to improve upon nature, but in spite of our good intentions we don't always know what is best for nature and things backfire. In the early 1900's fish transfers by government agencies and individuals were quite common and carried out with the best of intentions. An individual could boast that he transferred northern pike into a musky lake, or walleyes into a largemouth bass lake, or carp into a lake where carp had been absent. He was considered a hero and both he and his neighbors would be provided with a new bounty. At that time few, if any, people realized that the reason those and many other species were absent is because they did not fit into the natural scheme of things. As a result of our industrious stocking, transfers, and introductions the ecological balance of virtually all waters was disrupted by 1920 and we will suffer the consequences for many many years.

Did you know that the first three introductions of carp from Europe were failures? In fact our ancestors chose to propagate carp over rainbow trout in the early 1860's because the carp was to them a more desirable fish. Today we spend millions of dollars trying to control carp and the habitat damage they do. Did you know that the introduction of walleyes into many of our top quality largemouth bass lakes eliminated the bass in many waters? The lesson here is "don't dabble with mother nature without knowing where the pieces fit".

In the early 1900's our industrious forefathers introduced northern pike into the major drainages of Wisconsin's northern highlands. Prior to this, rivers and lakes of the Flambeau, Chippewa, and other drainages contained no northern pike but were the exclusive domain of the musky. By the 1930's people began to realize that northern pike populations were expanding and the muskies were declining or had completely disappeared in many waters. The panic button was pushed and in the 1940's and the 1950's massive northern pike netting operations were carried out to rid the musky lakes of the invader, but it was too late. The damage was done and irreversible.

By the 1950's the Chippewa River above the Winter Dam was the only remaining major system in Wisconsin that hadn't been invaded by northern pike, but they were already there in very low numbers. In the

late 50's and early 60's I recall seeing my neighbor, a guide on the Chippewa Flowage, bring in a northern pike or two a year. Northern pike did have access to the Flowage from Reed Lake, and possibly Little Round, during exceptionally high water years. But populations remained so low that there was little or no natural reproduction. In the 70's northern pike began to show up near the headwaters of the East Fork of the Chippewa, in places like Bear Lake, and after a couple of good years of northern pike reproduction they rapidly moved down the East Fork into the Flowage. By 1983 there were substantial numbers of northern pike in Teal and Lost Land Lakes. The Moose Lake Dam now remains the sole barrier to invasion of the rest of the West Fork of the Chippewa. But chances are they will get over the Moose Lake Dam either in some unsuspecting angler's minnow bucket, or by a person not knowing the difference between musky and northern pike, or some do-gooder who just prefers northern pike.

How did the northern pike get into the upper Chippewa system? There are all sorts of rumors, but it appears that the most likely route of invasion was from Gordon Lake, near Glidden, via Dryden Creek into the East Fork. Gordon Lake has had northern pike for years and all it took was one high water spring where sufficient numbers of northern pike were able to migrate to the East Fork. Once sufficient numbers were in the East Fork, their expansion downstream into the Flowage and other lakes was unobstructed.

What the future holds in store for the muskies in these waters is not good for the musky. I have reviewed some of the biological and physical mechanisms involved in musky-northern pike interaction in the four previous *Visitor* issues. State surveys show that fall musky fingerling counts in the Flowage are down from eight per mile of shoreline in the early 70's to less than one per mile last fall. The fact that many hybrids or tiger muskies are present is a bad sign because this indicates that the two species are spawning in many of the same areas. You may recall from previous articles that the northern pike's prime ecological edge on the musky is during the first few months of the musky's life in the spawning grounds and nursery areas. Muskies will not vanish from these waters, but populations that were formerly sustained largely by natural reproduction will likely become dependent on stocking, although some low level of natural musky reproduction will always occur. I also feel that angler releases of large muskies already is, and will continue to be, a tremendous benefit. Learn how to release large fish properly so fewer are killed. Do your part as an angler to preserve the musky.