



PIKE *Pike* PARADISE

Fifty miles long, Manitoba's Utik Lake produces giant pike daily for every – well, almost every – angler.

by Ron Spomer



Sometimes the catching of the fish isn't as important as everything surrounding the catching of the fish. The dreaming, planning, preparing, traveling, exploring, casting, anticipating . . .

But it's still good to catch the dang things now and again.

At North Haven my wife did. I, not so much.

Maybe it's karma.

Whether the fish know it or not, there's been bad karma between me and *Esox lucius*, northern pike, for half a century. It began in the 1960s in South Dakota, a time of flooding. Melting snows in Montana's Rockies swirled and pooled behind dams newly erected on the Missouri River. The rising waters flooded prairie grasses, spring after spring. Those underwater grasses lured northern pike that writhed in spawning frenzy. Their fry emerged to flood the rising reservoirs and terrorize every minnow, frog, mouse and duckling unlucky enough to flounder within range of a quick dart, a gaping maw and slashing teeth. Within a few years Dakota dirt farmers, historically happy to catch two-pound bullhead catfish,

transformed into Leviathan pike slayers. Every week the newspapers pictured them, brown arms and white foreheads over blue coveralls, hoisting chain stringers decorated with 15-pound, then 20-pound and finally 30-pound pike that looked capable of eating small boys.

I was a small boy.

But I loved to fish, probing dark creeks and farm ponds for anything that could draw me into its mysterious waterworld via line and rod. Bullheads, perch, bluegills, crappies, bass – but pike were king. And pike I could not catch. So I dreamed. A recurring dream. About a flood, a ditch, giant pike and frustration.

Ditches were ubiquitous in the flat prairies of eastern South Dakota, necessary for keeping roadbeds high and dry. During spring snowmelt most ditches filled and slowly drained toward the Missouri. Pike swam up their currents, pioneering new spawning routes from rivers to creeks to the labyrinth of man-made ditches stitching the quilt of cornfields and roadways. Cousin Mike once found a spawning swarm and picked it clean with a red-and-white Daredevil. As a wide-eyed second grader, I never

forgot that stringer of long, lean, angry-looking pike. I began casting into wet but fishless ditches.

Except in my dreams. There massive pike lay like submarines, dark and menacing. I would cast only to find my reel tangled. Or the Daredevil would sail high and wrap the around a fence. The knot would break and the lure would splash unattached into the water. A tractor would rumble down the road and spook the fish. Or they simply wouldn't strike. Cast after cast, the spoon flashed right past them, right over their malevolent eyes, nearly nicking their jutting jaws, and still they wouldn't grab it. Dream after dream, year after year, right into a mid-life crisis.

North Haven Trophy Fly-In Resort on Utik Lake, Manitoba, was my last chance to stop that psychological trauma.

"We are going to Utik Lake and you are going to fish until you get this monkey off your back," Betsy said, which struck me as odd – until I



discovered the North Haven brochure she'd brought home from the Dallas Safari Club convention.

Here was a five-star resort with fully modern lodge, 30-foot ceilings, satellite TV, game room and bar, workout center, massage room, spa, sauna and cozy cabins with fireplaces and decks from which to watch the sun set over 50-mile-long Utik, a trophy pike "fly-out" lake famous among rough-and-tumble anglers willing to tent on its rocky shore, braving winds, rain and mosquitoes to catch giant pike and toothsome walleyes. North Haven's facilities are slightly more advanced than canvas and nylon.

Utik is now the place to wrestle the pike of your dreams – and nightmares – while bolstered by a crack crew of guides, an executive chef, hostess, wait staff and grounds keepers. Gourmet food. Soothing liquors. Crackling fireplaces. Hot showers and massages to soothe aching shoulders. And no ditches.

My cure was underway.

Never let it be said that my bride isn't willing to suffer in support of her husband's psychological well-being. Not only did she agree to accompany me to

the lodge, but into the boat, too. Every morning, rain or shine, she stood on the dock, awaiting the big Lund and our guide, Paul Jamie Canada. Imagine that. The country was named after our guide. He had to be good. To Betsy, he was.

"Keep your rod up! Keep the rod up! Lean out. Follow her around the bow. Let her take line if she wants. Lead her to the net. Whoo hoo!"

"How big is it? How big is it?" Betsy squeals. Jamie heaves the big log of a fish over the gunwale and lays it gently on the floor beside his tape measure.

"Forty-three inches!"

And then photos – *click whir, click whir, click whir* – before the massive female is lowered back into the lake, her spatula head parting the inky waters before her broad, stippled back follows like a torpedo into the depths. Then ensues the familiar hugging, the jumping, the giggling and crowing.

The cast is recast, the

hook is reset. The line is recalled zipping like electrostatic discharge through the surface film, hinting at the hitched but yet unseen power attached to it. The mass of the fish is once again telegraphed through the dangerous bend of the rod, the line now as straight as laser light. Did you hear it? Like sizzling bacon! It almost pulled you in. I thought I was going to lose the rod. Thank you. No, thank you!



Betsy Spomer and her North Haven guide hold the first of several huge northern pike she pulled from the dark waters of 50-mile-long Utik Lake in Manitoba. The spacious lakeside lodge offers five-star accommodations.





I'd endured the same euphoric banter when she'd caught the 46-incher the previous day. I'd also heard it our first day on the water when Betsy's partner in psychological hazing, Dean Shaver, caught his 47.5-inch behemoth, winner of the Big Fish of the Week plaque at the lodge. The deadly duo started an exclusive club with a motto: "Slime on!"

The Pike Masters toasted one another at dinner. Only those who had landed a pike in excess of 41 inches could join, which left Dean's wife, Susan, and me disconsolate, forced to find solace in double helpings of dessert and extra glasses of Argentine Malbec as our spouses recited ribald pike-catching songs.

Before this degenerates into full-blown whining, let me assure you I was quite enjoying myself while not catching the pike of my nightmares because I knew I was about to. Utik is one of those trophy catch-and-release lakes that kicks out giant pike daily. We caught them in the rain, sun, wind, calm – well, Betsy and Dean caught them. I excelled at hooking small to medium pike, once taking nine 24- to 36-inchers with nine consecutive casts. So I knew that each day, each new bay, each cast into silver wavelets dancing above hydroponic fields of "cabbage" brought me ever closer to the inevitable. Hope springs eternal in the hearts and psyches of piscatorially handicapped anglers. And I had Susan's complete sympathies.

"How are you doing Ron?" she

inquired warmly each time our boats passed within commiseration range.

“Got some nice walleyes!”

“Me too.” Whereupon she reared back and whooped as her line smoked the water like hot steel cable, straight as a laser beam. This was no walleye. She had to be careful so her fish wouldn't tangle lines with the big one, another one, Dean was battling. I had to look away.

“Come take pictures Ron!” Susan shouted. How could I refuse? Aha, her fish taped just 38 inches. I still had company. I snapped a few shots and pulled out before Dean's fish revealed itself.

“Slime on, partner!” he shouted to Betsy while leaning back against a deeply bent rod. Jamie quickly motored us to fresh waters.

Over our four days of fishing, I actually encountered two life-changing pike. One came in a deep, shadowy pool at the base of a small falls on a creek pouring into Utik, one of those isolated, intimate spots way back where you imagine you're the first human since some ancient Native American passed through with a spear.

I was again hooking small male pike on every other cast and beginning to suspect this was a confirmed bachelor pad when the matriarch of the clan rose up from the depths, opened a maw about the size of your average five-gallon bucket and nonchalantly gulped my spoon. And then, just like in my recurring dream, I set the

hook into – nothing. Nothing! It merely pulled between her lips (what are the odds?) and she turned back to her secret life as psychological tormentor.

My second chance came after I'd decided to class things up by fishing a Rainbow Leech, a flamboyant collection of gaudy feathers assembled by Michael Small who slays pike and muskies with them in Wisconsin. The sun was out, the wind down and the pike beginning to rise toward the surface when I began my workout, casting a 9-weight St. Croix rod with a Wet Tip III. *Whew.* I'd landed several small males before one of those bathtub bulges dented the bay. I reared back, felt a heavy weight, saw within that bathtub ring a bronze flash the width of my thigh – and lost the connection.

The hook had pulled free.

The nightmare continues.

But Betsy is enjoying sweet dreams, remembering not just the massages and gourmet meals, not just the dual-fireplace lodge and classic shore lunches, but giant pike that clamp onto silver spoons and Mepps spinners and don't let go. She asked me to convey a message to Dean:

“Slime on.” ➡

IF YOU WANT TO GO

North Haven provides weekly charter flights from Winnipeg to Utik Lake where you can rent any and all gear needed if you don't wish to bring your own. You'll fish from 1825 Lund Pro Guide boats with 75-horse Yamaha outboards, GPS locators, two-way radios, padded seats with backs and large, flat

casting platforms. Shore lunches consist of fresh-caught walleye prepared several ways, accompanied by salads, potato wedges, vegetables, fruits and deserts.

If the hundreds of sunken islands, eskers, bays and inlets on Utik don't feel right, fly-out in a turbo Otter to Bear, Hackland or Bigstone lakes for pike, walleyes, lake trout and whitefish.

A conference center is set up with wireless internet, conference call access, multi-use printer/scanner/fax and multi-media presentation capabilities. The workout center includes elliptical machine, treadmill, stationary bike, free weights, yoga mats and multi-use gym.

Call (866) 531-3848 or e-mail: info@northhavenresort.ca.

For more information visit www.northhavenresort.ca.

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Betsy and I kept travel simple by renting St. Croix casting, spinning and fly rods from North Haven. They were in perfect condition and effective.

ExOfficio BugsAway long-sleeved shirts kept the sunburn away, too. The lightweight and packable Rain Logic waterproof jacket turned spray, splash and rain during long runs against big winds and waves, enabling us to stay dry, warm and comfortable for a full day of fishing under the wettest conditions. Waterproof LOWA Renegade GTX boots provided ankle support and grip when rock-hopping while keeping our feet dry in the boat.