

Pikes (*Esoxidae*)

Pikes found in Indiana waters:

- Northern Pike (*Esox lucius*)
- Muskellunge (*Esox masquinongy*)
- Grass Pickerel (*Esox americanus*)
- Tiger Muskie (Northern Pike x Muskellunge)

Grass Pickerel

Grass pickerel are the smallest of the pikes and rarely grow larger than 10 or 12 inches in length. All pikes have duck-bill shaped snouts, large mouths with many sharp teeth, and a single dorsal fin located far back near the forked tail fin. They also have slender bodies that are covered in smooth-edged scales. The back and sides of the grass pickerel are olive or yellowish-brown and often barred with a darker color. Grass pickerels also have a dusky bar beneath the eye that is angled slightly backward.



Photo Credit: Ellen Edmonson and Hugh Crisp,
New York Stat Dept. of Environmental Conservation

The grass pickerel is common in Indiana and can be found in lakes and streams with clear water, little current, and aquatic vegetation. Grass pickerels are ambush predators that eat small fish, crustaceans, insect larvae, and other aquatic insects. Four years is the maximum life span for grass pickerel.

Tiger Muskie

Tiger muskies are the cross between muskellunge and northern pike. This hybrid can occur naturally in lakes where both parent species are found, however they are usually raised in hatcheries for stocking purposes. Tiger muskies have dark spots on a light colored body like the muskellunge, the lobes of the tail fin are rounded like the northern pike, and the tiger muskie has 5 to 8 pores on each side of the lower jaw. Tiger muskies are usually sterile and grow almost twice as fast as the parent species in the first few years of life. Because they cannot reproduce, it is easy for them to be managed by changing stocking rates and monitoring the harvest numbers. Tiger muskies reach around 50 inches in length and 20-50 pounds in weight. They are ambush predators and eat mostly fish and small birds. Tiger muskies are valued as a game fish for the fight they give when on the line.

Muskellunge and Northern Pike

Do they have any other names?

Muskellunge are commonly called muskies but are also called muscallonge, milliganong, and maskinonge.

The northern pike is sometimes simply called pike.

Why are they called muskellunge and northern pike?

Muskellunge: *Esox* is Latin for pike and *masquinongy* is the Ojibway Indian name for this species.

Northern Pike: *Esox* is Latin for pike and *lucius* is the Latin name for this species.

What do they look like?

Both species have a duck-bill shaped snout with a large mouth and many sharp teeth. They both have a single dorsal (back) fin that is located farther back towards the forked tail. Their slender bodies are covered in smooth-edged scales.

The muskellunge has the color pattern of dark spots or bars on a light background. The upper parts are silver-gray to yellowish-green and there is no dusky bar underneath the eye. Muskies also have a row of 6 to 9 pores along each underside of the lower jaw. Another distinguishing feature is that the lobes of the forked tail are pointed at the tips.



Photo Credit: Timothy Knepp/USFWS

The northern pike has a color pattern of light colored spots against a dark colored background. The upper parts are green or blue-gray and there is not a dusky bar underneath the eye. Northern pike have a row of 5 or less pores along each underside of the lower jaw. The lobes of the tail fin are round at the tips unlike the muskie's pointed tail lobes.



Photo Credit: Timothy Knepp/USFWS

Where do they live in Indiana?

Muskellunge are found in around 16 different waterbodies throughout the state, for example, Brookville reservoir, Waveland lake, and some lakes in Sullivan county. To find where muskies and other fish can be found use the “where to fish” feature on the DNR website. <http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/3591.htm>. To search for an individual species choose “search waterbodies”, then click the drop down menu that says “waterbodies” and select “fish species.”

Northern pike are occasional in Indiana and can be found mostly in the northern part

of the state in some lakes, rivers, and the Great Lakes.

What kind of habitat do they need?

Both the muskellunge and the northern pike prefer clear water with dense growths of aquatic vegetation and slow current. Both species can be found in lakes, reservoirs, and large streams.

How do they reproduce?

Muskies spawn from April to early May when the water is at or above 50 degrees F and Northern Pike spawn a little earlier with water temperatures of 48 degrees F. Both species release their eggs in shallow substrate where the eggs attach to vegetation and other objects. After the eggs have been dispersed the muskie and the northern pike do not provide any parental care for the eggs or the fry.

How old are they when they reproduce?

Muskellunge are 3 to 6 years old when they first reproduce and northern pike are mature in about 2 years.

How long do they live?

Most muskies reach around 15 years old, however some over 20 years old have been observed.

Northern pike live around 13 years but some zoo specimens have lived for as long as 75 years.

How fast do they grow in Indiana?

Muskellunge grow about 12 inches in the first 4 months and reach a length of 30 inches by the third year. Muskies can reach lengths of up to 5 feet long and weigh 70 pounds, however they do not usually get this large.

Northern pike grow about 17 inches by 8 months and reach a length of 30 inches by 2.5 years. Northern pike reach lengths of about 4 feet and weigh 40 pounds or more.

What do they eat?

Both muskies and northern pike are ambush predators that eat primarily fish. These fish lie in wait for prey to swim by, lunge out and grab the prey with their sharp teeth, and then turn the prey and swallow it head first. They will also eat any other animal

that comes in the water like muskrats, frogs, and small waterfowl.

What eats them?

Young muskies and northern pike fall prey to other fish, birds, and other muskies or northern pike. The adults, however, only are preyed on by anglers because they are generally the top predator in their habitats.

Are they safe to eat?

Both muskies and northern pike are game fish that can be eaten. Wild caught fish are just as healthy for you as most commercially bought fish and in many cases are healthier. You have probably heard about the fish consumption advisories and wonder if any Indiana fish are safe to eat. The fish consumption advisories that are posted are based on a model that people are consuming 8 oz. of fish on 225 days each year over 70 years. Most people do not eat fish anywhere close to that amount. However, any meat you consume will have some risk associated with it. If you are in a high risk group such as a pregnant woman or a child please consult the fish consumption advisory at: www.in.gov/isdh/23650.htm . You can also see which waterbody has advisories on it (most lakes and reservoirs are lower risk than rivers and streams).

How do I fish for them?

Muskellunge and northern pike can be taken by a variety of methods, including casting, trolling, and still fishing. Large spoons, plugs, and bucktail spinners, fished on or near the surface, are effective. Fish are the most effective live bait and suckers are a popular bait fish. Northern pike are more frequently caught with large, brightly colored spoons and plugs that imitate the action of swimming fish.

Both species are very popular, trophy-sized game fish that are sought after for the exciting fight they put up when hooked.

How is Indiana managing muskies and northern pike?

Muskellunge are stocked throughout the state in around 16 different waterbodies. Fisheries surveys are conducted to evaluate the condition of the muskellunge populations in each waterbody and the stocking methods are planned accordingly to improve the muskellunge fishery. Muskellunge and northern pike are both stocked as a trophy game fish but also to eat the large shad population across the state.

Northern pikes are found naturally in many northern waterbodies in the state. Around 18 northern waterbodies have northern pike available for fishing.