



MassWildlife Sportfishing Awards File Photos

Toothy Twosome History

Northern Pike and Tiger Muskies in Massachusetts

Although there are records of northern pike, *Esox lucius*, from the Connecticut River dating as far back as 1846, most researchers believe the northern of Lake Champlain (VT/NY) represent the only native (not introduced) pike in New England. All other occurrences are likely the result of introductions. Tiger muskellunge are sterile hybrids created by crossing muskellunge, *Esox masquinongy*, largest of all the esocids, with northern pike.

The first stocking of northern pike in the Commonwealth occurred in Berkshire County in 1950. Several hundred Lake Champlain northern pike, 12 inches or better, were released into Cheshire Reservoir. Shortly thereafter, pike were also introduced into Onota Lake. These two waters provided most of Massachusetts' pike angling opportunities throughout the 1950s and '60s.

With northern pike established in Berkshire waters and anglers requesting more, the Division sought to create a new pike fishery mid-way between Springfield and Worcester. The agency released 30 northern pike — once again caught at Lake Champlain — into East Brimfield Reservoir in Brimfield in 1967. These fish measured 15-25 inches. This operation was followed up in 1973 with 3,000 16-inch northern pike purchased from Minne-

sota, and another 200,000 fry in 1974. The reservoir was stocked yet again in 1976, and an additional 1,000 pike were stocked into the Quaboag River system in an attempt to establish a spawning population.

Due in part to the high cost of purchasing northern pike and the logistics involved in transplanting them from other states, the Division began an attempt in the 1980s to raise our own northern pike. We took fry from Rhode Island and endeavored to raise them to stockable size at our Roger Reed Hatchery in Palmer. Although we produced lots of juvenile fish for stocking (10,000+ a year), the cold temperature of the hatchery water made it difficult to grow the fish to large enough size by fall to reduce predation after stocking (research shows that esocids need to be over 10 inches at stocking to maximize survival). Additionally, when Rhode Island discontinued their northern pike broodstock program in 1992, there was no longer a ready source of fry, therefore our program was discontinued.

Throughout this time period, the Division also worked to establish relationships with other states that were growing northern pike and routinely had surpluses. As a result, through outright gifts or trades for our surplus production (such as landlocked salmon from the



All the action isn't on ice. Tigers like this 15 pound, 39 1/2 inch beauty above, caught last September by Kristen Leary of Pittsfield, demonstrate that tigers and northern pike (left) are also caught in open water on conventional fishing gear.

Roger Reed Hatchery), the Division managed to get northerns from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia and New York whenever they were available. Surplus sources are rarely dependable, however, and northerns have become more difficult to come by in recent years.

Our efforts over the past 50 years have resulted in over 400,000 northerns being stocked into more than 40 waters across the Commonwealth, and the establishment of reproducing pike populations in a few waters. Since 1969, over 800 Freshwater Sportfishing Awards (currently issued for pike over 15 pounds) have been awarded for trophy northerns. Most of the 40 plus waters were not stocked with consistent numbers or sizes of fish, however, hence certain waters have a higher likelihood of producing a trophies than others. Concentrating your fishing efforts on our "Best Bets" selections will increase your chances, but bear in mind that most successful anglers spend hundreds of fishing hours in pursuit of each trophy.

Tiger muskies don't have nearly as long a history in Massachusetts as pike, in part due to the fact that they have not been cultured as long as pure strain northerns or muskies. The first stocking of these hybrids took place in the fall of 1980 when Division personnel picked up 5,000 10-12 inchers from the Pleasant Mount hatchery in Pennsylvania and

began a relationship with that state that continues to this day. The following spring, tiger muskie fingerlings were brought to our Roger Reed Hatchery, where they were raised until fall. This first attempt at raising tigers in Massachusetts resulted in the stocking of 10,000 fish. For better than a decade, fall surpluses and spring fingerlings from Pennsylvania provided tigers for Massachusetts anglers. Along the way, New Jersey, Virginia and New York have offered surpluses when they were available. As with growing northern pike in Massachusetts, however, it was always difficult to get tigers up to 10 inches or better in a coldwater trout hatchery, and we discontinued efforts to grow tigers in 1998.

To date, over 430,000 tigers have been stocked into nearly 50 of our lakes and ponds. Since 1984, over 50 Freshwater Sportfishing Awards (currently issued for tigers over 10 pounds) have been awarded for trophies. As with northerns, due to the inconsistencies in numbers and sizes of tigers available, the 50 plus waters were recently thinned down to one or two per District to insure more consistent stocking. Some waters therefore have a better chance of producing a trophy than others. Concentrate on our "Best Bets" list for a better chance at bagging one of these beauties.

