

# Northern exposure \*\* Plenty of pike to be found just across the Canadian border.

[FIFTH Edition]

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Author: Christian Berg Of The Morning Call

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## Document Text

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The wilderness waters of northern Canada are famous for producing huge pike that regularly measure in excess of 40 inches and tip the scales at 20 pounds or more.

There's no doubt catching a pike like that would be a thrill. The problem is, getting to the remote lakes that hold them typically requires extensive travel time, the assistance of a licensed outfitter and a cost of \$1,500 or more.

Although pike found in the waters of southern Ontario probably won't set any angling records, I recently discovered how fun they are to catch. Aggressive fish in the 25-30-inch range are plentiful, and pursuing them won't cost you an arm and a leg. With a little planning, you could spend an entire week pursuing pike, bass, crappies and other fish for just a few hundred dollars.

Perhaps best of all, the action is just a six-hour drive from the Lehigh Valley, making a Canadian pike adventure no less troublesome than a weekend visit to relatives in Pittsburgh.

As good as advertised

I owe a word of thanks to friend Joel Ritter of Upper Saucon Township, without whom I never would have experienced the excitement of Canadian pike fishing.

For years, Ritter and a group of friends have organized an annual pike-fishing trip featuring plenty of good food and a friendly tournament to see who can catch the most, and the biggest, pike. The group stays in Seeleys Bay and fishes on Whitefish and Cranberry lakes, which are part of the massive Rideau Canal Waterway, which stretches 125 miles from Kingston to Ottawa.

Although Ritter told me about the excellent fishing and issued numerous invitations to participate, it wasn't until this spring that I finally decided to go.

The results of that decision were staggering. In two-and-a-half days of fishing, I caught 17 pike up to 28 1/2 inches. As an added bonus, I also boated 21 bass up to 17 1/2 inches and an almost countless number of crappies, rock bass and bluegills.

The 22 fishermen who participated in this year's trip posted a combined catch of 298 pike, the largest measuring 29 1/2 inches. The total pike tally was a new record for the group -- which has been making its trip since the late 1980s -- and included an amazing 132 pike on a single day. On the second day of the trip, Ritter alone caught a remarkable 21 pike.

To say the fishing was as good as advertised is an understatement. It also proves that not every fisherman who tells a "fish story" is lying.

As if the fishing wasn't enough, the area offers beautiful scenery and a multitude of wildlife watching options. The Rideau Canal Waterway opened in 1832 and is the oldest, continuously operating canal system in North America. It is also considered among North America's most scenic waterways.

The Seeleys Bay area is a dairy-farming community, and the lake shores are lined with rolling pastures, barns, silos, woodlots and attractive vacation homes.

The water in Cranberry and Whitefish lakes is extremely clean and quite clear. During the trip, I saw numerous beavers, muskrats, great blue herons, common loons, ducks, Canada geese, ospreys and a variety of songbirds.

"If you don't have a good time up there, something's wrong," said Bob Bolger of Newtown, Bucks County, the group's patriarch and chairman of its fishing tournament.

The perfect distance

With all the Rideau has to offer, I was a bit surprised to find there were relatively few boats on the water during our

recent visit. And many of the other fishing boats I did see had Pennsylvania registrations.

Don Stinson, who owns the Rideau Breeze Marina in Seeleys Bay with his wife, Lynda, said anglers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio and Virginia provide the bulk of his business, particularly early in the season. While many Americans arrive shortly after pike season opens in May, he said most Canadian anglers wait until bass season opens the last Saturday of June.

Stinson believes the area is so popular with American sportsmen because the fishing is excellent and it's relatively easy to get there.

"You're far enough from home that you're going to forget about work," Stinson said, "but the drive isn't going to beat you up."

Stinson also runs a fishing contest out of his marina store and said action on the Rideau last summer was phenomenal. The biggest fish from last year's contest were a 32 1/2-inch, 7.61-pound pike and a 21 1/8-inch, 6.18-pound largemouth bass.

In addition to the excellent fishing and proximity to the Lehigh Valley, Canada is also an attractive destination because a favorable exchange rate makes traveling there relatively inexpensive. In our group, we shared the cost of lodging and meals and were able to stay and eat for four nights for just \$175 each. Add in gas money and another \$24 for a seven-day fishing license, and the total cost was still only around \$300.

How to catch them

Bolger plans his group's annual trip for the weekend after Mother's Day, which typically gets participants to Canada just a few days after pike season opens.

"I want to be here when it opens, because these fish haven't been touched," Bolger said.

Although being on the water at an opportune time -- before the pike have been heavily pressured -- undoubtedly helps, much of the anglers' success can be attributed to a rather unconventional method used to target their toothy quarry.

Most magazine articles and television shows the deal with pike fishing focuses on tactics involving large spinnerbaits, spoons and various topwater lures designed to elicit strikes from the notoriously aggressive fish.

There's no doubt such methods work, but nearly two decades of experience has taught Bolger and other veterans of the group that such a strategy does not pay big dividends on the Rideau.

In fact, the method we used to catch virtually all of our pike couldn't be simpler. We trolled.

Bolger, who has been making his annual pike pilgrimage since the late 1980s, said he sort of stumbled on the trolling method. When he first started coming, Bolger said, he was obviously unfamiliar with the lakes and figured trolling would be a good way to explore and perhaps pick up a few fish in the process.

It didn't take him long to realize trolling was an extremely effective method that, over time, has proven far superior to casting.

During my recent visit, I saw dozens of anglers anchored in coves casting their arms off. But I didn't see a single one of them reel in pike -- an observation Bolger said he had had for years.

Bolger said he isn't sure why trolling works so well, but he suspects it may have something to do with the water conditions in late May. Water temperatures during our recent trip ranged from 58- 61 degrees, and the tops of the weeds were still several feet below the water's surface in most places.

"I think the more the weeds grow up, the less effective trolling is going to be," Bolger said.

Most of the strikes seem to come about halfway down in 10-12 feet of water, with trolling speeds between 1.9 and 2.5 miles per hour. A landing net is a must, since you can't "lip" the sharp-toothed pike, which also have a nasty habit of thrashing violently alongside and in the boat. A pair of mouth spreaders and long, needle-nosed pliers also are required to quickly and safely remove treble hooks and release the fish unharmed.

Like all fishermen, Bolger and his companions have experimented with hundreds of lure styles over the years. However, the most consistent producers have been jerkbaits and crankbaits featuring fire tiger and perch patterns.

Cotton Cordell's Ripplin' Redfin and a variety of Rapala models were among the group's favorites. I had excellent success with a Cotton Cordell Suspending Spot Minnow that caught more more than 20 pike and bass before I lost it to

a failed knot on the final morning of fishing.

On several occasions, I gave into the temptation to tie on a spinnerbait or oversized swimbait in the hopes of enticing a truly large pike to strike. However, I found it nearly impossible to stick with such tactics while my partners in the boat were reeling in fish after fish.

Medium-action rods and spinning reels spooled with 10-pound test monofilament were used by most of the anglers. Surprisingly, wire leaders and braided line weren't necessities. In fact, I believe the use of monofilament elicited more strikes. While I did have to re-tie several times after my line was frayed by a pike, I didn't lose a single lure to a fish the entire trip.

Although we were targeting pike, numerous largemouth bass up to 18 inches were caught, along with a surprising number of crappies, perch and other panfish hungry enough to impale themselves on baits half their size.

Because bass season is not open, it is illegal to target them specifically. But, as Bolger pointed out, the bass are so aggressive "you can't help but catch a few of them."

## IF YOU GO

How to get there: Seeleys Bay, Ontario, is about 330 miles from the Lehigh Valley. The drive can be made in about six hours, including time for food and bathroom breaks.

The best route is to take Interstate 81 north to the Canadian border. Then, take Highway 401 West to Route 32 north (at exit 465). From there, follow the signs to Seeleys Bay.

What you need to cross the border: Security measures at the U.S.- Canadian border have increased in recent years. A valid passport is the best form of identification for crossing the border. However, U.S. citizens may also cross with a valid driver's license and a copy of their birth certificate.

Where to stay: The Rideau Breeze Marina (613-387-3100) caters to fishermen and offers three housekeeping cottages that can accommodate a maximum of six people each, including children. In-season rates, from late June through Labor Day, are \$600 (Canadian) per week, based on quadruple occupancy. Rentals include private docking for two boats, including electricity.

Another establishment that caters to fishermen is the Sunny Acres Resort & Marina (613-387-3379). A bit more rustic than the Rideau Breeze, Sunny Acres offers 14 housekeeping cottages that can accommodate up to eight people. Rates during the peak tourist season range from \$450-\$650 (Canadian) a week. Use of a private dock with electricity is available for an additional \$40 per boat, per week.

Fishing seasons: Ontario uses a rather complex zoning system that governs fishing seasons. However, generally speaking, seasons on the Rideau Canal system are as follows: walleye, first Saturday in May-Dec. 31; largemouth and smallmouth bass, last Saturday in June- Nov. 30; northern pike, first Saturday in May-Dec. 31; muskellunge, third Saturday in June-Dec. 15; brook, brown and rainbow trout, Jan. 1-Sept. 30; lake trout, first Saturday in June-Sept. 8; and yellow perch, crappie and bluegill, open year-round.

Fishing licenses: The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources requires all persons ages 18 and up to possess a valid fishing license. Licenses can be purchased at Rideau Breeze Marina.

A seven-day, non-resident, sportfishing license is \$41. A seven-day, non-resident, conservation license (which limits daily creel and possession limits) is \$24. Prices are in Canadian dollars.

Boat rental, tackle, etc: Rideau Breeze Marina offers fishing boat rentals for \$80 a day or \$385 per week, including unlimited gas, oil and docking privileges. The marina also has a well-stocked tackle and convenience store offering live bait, ice, gasoline, snacks and ice cream.

Travel tip: Gasoline is very expensive in Canada -- about double what we pay in the United States. Fill your vehicle and boat before you cross the border to minimize fuel costs.

For more information: The following Web sites offer additional details about the Rideau Canal region: [www.rideau-info.com](http://www.rideau-info.com); [www.rideaufriends.com](http://www.rideaufriends.com); and [www.ontariotravel.net](http://www.ontariotravel.net).

Christian Berg

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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For years, [Joel Ritter] and a group of friends have organized an annual pike-fishing trip featuring plenty of good food and a friendly tournament to see who can catch the most, and the biggest, pike. The group stays in Seeleys Bay and fishes on Whitefish and Cranberry lakes, which are part of the massive Rideau Canal Waterway, which stretches 125 miles from Kingston to Ottawa.

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3 PHOTOS by [Christian Berg], The Morning Call and Contributed photo and MAP by Craig Kackenmeister, The Morning Call; 1. NORTHERN PIKE aren't shy about going after an easy meal. This pike was one of many caught during a recent trip to the Rideau Canal in Ontario using this fire-tiger pattern lure. 2. BRIAN VANDENBERG of Milford Township, + Bucks County, caught this 29.5-inch northern pike on May 22 while fishing in Whitefish Lake near Seeleys Bay, Ontario. Vandenberg's son, Samuel, is also pictured in the photo.. 3. IT'S A SHORT WALK from cottage to boat at Sunny Acres Resort. 4. + MAP: Map of New York State and Ontario, Canada shows location of Seeleys Bay.

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