

THE WATER



A canoe and a Mepps are all you need.
© Joseph Jackson

STORY BY JOSEPH JACKSON

Green stems picket up through the water, forming a near-impenetrable labyrinth. The frog is nearly at the edge of my vision, and it blends into the pencil reeds like a chameleon. Did I lose it? I give the baitcast rod in my hand a jerk and watch closely as my action transmutes into a faint splash near the shore. Nope; my plastic frog lure is there, and I squint in the bright sunlight to keep from losing it again. I give it another lively splash and then pause. Pike love the hang time of a lure; it gives them that split second to zero in on their prey like a hunter aligning a riflescope. Another second and I twitch again.

BOOM! The calm surface of the Alaskan lake explodes in silver. I see the dark profile of a fish leaping into the air like a missile. The fiberglass in my hand arcs against solid weight, and I know the hook point has found home. My opponent tries every trick in the book; surging out past the boundary of pencil reeds and seeking deeper water, swimming hard against the tension of my line and doubling back quickly to try and throw the hook. A pair of spectacular leaps should have dislodged it, but as I finally subdue and hoist it into the canoe, I see that both hook points of the frog are securely impaled in its lower jaw. I pop them out with pliers and take a moment to marvel at the fish's nearly 30-inch length. I can't help but think that its 40-inch sibling may be waiting for me elsewhere on the lake.

By the time I decided to call it a day and reluctantly paddle back to the canoe launch, I had caught around 50 pike ranging from 15- to 28 inches. I didn't get the 40-inch bruiser, but the solid little hammer handles I did catch showed no mercy in demolishing whatever lure I happened to be using; a topwater frog, an in-line Mepps spinner, a Rapala X-Rap, etc. It may have been a level or two below the Innoko River or Minto Flats, but for a lake within 80 miles of the Anchorage metropolitan area, I couldn't be happier. On my return hike back to the truck, I couldn't help but begin to plan my next outing to this paradise.

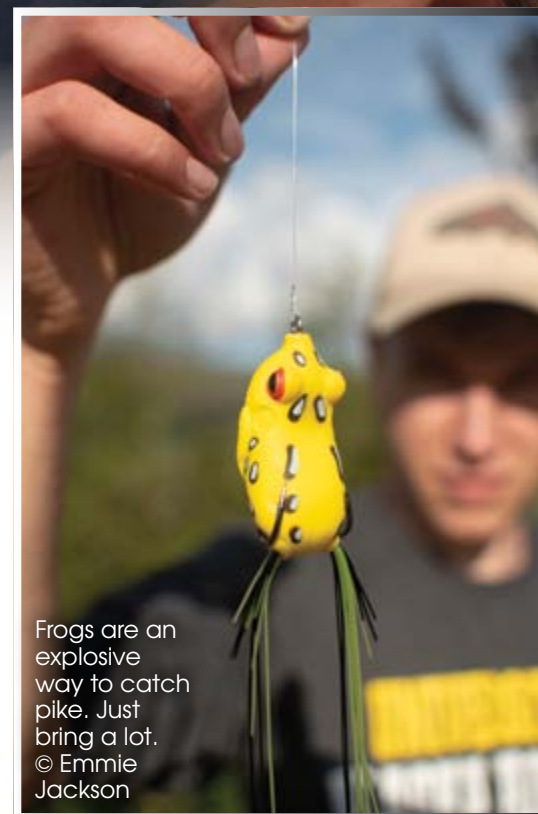
With a little planning and preparation, this lake is one that can be fished from ice-out to ice-up with a high degree of success. Another inviting prospect of the lake is that you don't have to fish elbow to elbow with anyone. The lake is over 1,100 acres, and I've been there a few times when I've seen nobody else. But how the heck can anyone within earshot of Anchorage, Wasilla, and Palmer get to experience such a phenomenon without owning a Cessna or paying an air service? Now comes what is perhaps the best part: You can hike there.

YOU READ CORRECTLY. THERE'S A LAKE WITHIN THE MAT-SU VALLEY FROM WHICH THE COVETED 50-PIKE DAY CAN BE ACHIEVED; A PLACE WHERE YOU HAVE PLENTY OF ROOM AWAY FROM OTHER ANGLERS; WHERE YOU CAN CANOE TO YOUR HEART'S CONTENT AND LITERALLY STAY ON YOUR OWN ISLAND. THIS EDEN IS CALLED RED SHIRT.

WOLVES OF RED SHIRT LAKE



A canoe lets you access tons of fishable pike water on Red Shirt Lake. © Emmie Jackson



Frogs are an explosive way to catch pike. Just bring a lot.
© Emmie Jackson

Nestled in the Nancy Lakes Recreation Area (accessed at mile 67.3 of the Parks Highway), Red Shirt is the largest lake of over 30 located within the park. Red Shirt is reached via a three-mile (one way) hiking trail that begins near the South Rolly Campground. This fact alone contributes hugely to the superb fishing. Because it cannot be accessed directly by vehicle (except by float plane), a huge amount of angling pressure is alleviated. A three-mile hike may seem daunting, but the trail is very well-maintained (some of it is covered by boardwalk) and traipses through a pristine forest environment. Remember your bear spray, though.

Upon reaching the lake, canoes and kayaks are nestled on racks and available for rental from Tippecanoe (907-355-6687), headquartered at the South Rolly Overlook on the Nancy Lakes Parkway. These rentals need to be set up ahead of time and I recommend booking them at least a week in advance (two or three, if possible.) Before beginning the hike to Red Shirt, you'll need to retrieve life vests, paddles, and the key to your canoe rental. Do not forget these things. It'd be a real bummer to hike those three miles only to reach your canoe and find out that you either can't unlock it or can't paddle it.

If you are so minded, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources maintains several backcountry campsites along the lake, as well as four cabins



Some days the eagles might be the only competition you see. © Emmie Jackson

(including a few on their own islands). Reservations must be made well in advance, as they fill up quickly during the summertime.

But let's assume you've made all your reservations, you've brought your canoe key, PFD, paddle, and ALL of your fishing gear. Now it's time to catch some pike.

Northern pike, also known as "water wolves," thrive in the lakes of the Far North where prey is abundant, winter ice cover is relatively consistent, and where extensive weed growth in summer provides them with a vast playground of ambush points.

Pike were first documented in Red Shirt Lake in 1980. In southcentral Alaska, they are considered an invasive species and can be detrimental to salmon and trout fry numbers. They aren't picky, however, and will happily demolish anything that crosses their path. This makes them rather predictable and easy to tempt with a half-decent spinning combo and a handful of lures. But to find scores of bigger fish, it takes a little more investigation into how these fish behave under the surface. The name of their game? Be lazy.

They want to eat as much as possible without spending much energy. The larger, older fish are experts at this. They achieve it by resting in thick weed growth and waiting for prey to come to them. The cooler mornings and evenings of Alaska's summer and early fall find these berthas deeper in the water column, relishing the latent heat. At such times, they are sluggish and usually only respond to dead baits tossed under a bobber. This form of fishing can be boring, especially on a beautiful lake in a canoe that is meant for exploring, so I have shied away from this technique.

Instead, I wait for the sun to rise and warm the waters of shallow, weedy bays. I have learned to time my travels to Red Shirt to correspond with an arrival time of around 10 in the morning. Estimate how long the three-mile hike will take you (two hours is more than enough time), and plan on being on the water by 10, at least. I've found that at this time, the sun is high enough above the spruce tops to begin warming the water, and pike will be moving slowly into their desired bays. Of course, in early summer when the sun never really goes away, the water will remain warm throughout the day.

Get as far away from the canoe launch point as you can before you begin fishing. These close areas receive the most fishing pressure, and you'll have more success if you travel a bit. A Mepps #3 inline spinner (preferably dressed with white squirrel tail) is perfect

for exploring Red Shirt's shallow bays. Fish actively and spread out your casts to cover the most water possible. Start with slow, steady retrieves that are just fast enough to keep the lure above the weed tops. Methodically fish each bay this way, then move onto the next one. As noon nears, you may find that you can switch up your lure selection as fish become more active.

Around this time, too, I begin to look for sharp drop-offs near weed edges and pencil reeds. Bigger fish will hold in these adjacent deep areas while the smaller hammer handles will remain among the weeds. Look for weedy points, weed flats surrounded by deep water, and creek inlets, as well. Anchor up nearby and work over the water with several casts and varying speeds of retrieval. Inline spinners, larger spoons, jerkbaits (Rapala X-Raps and X-Rap Sub-Walks in silver or clown color), and spinnerbaits can all shine in these locations, but my favorite is a six-inch Storm WildEye Live Pike swimbait. I've taken to removing the extra treble hook because it expedites the process of unhooking catches (and makes it a lot less dangerous for me).

In Red Shirt, I'm convinced that the top prey of big pike is smaller pike. When fishing these swimbaits, I usually cast into deep water parallel to a weed edge and retrieve it slowly at a depth of 5- to 6 feet. Give some lively jerks every now and then. My biggest unofficial pike from Red Shirt (unofficial because it threw the hook right at the boat) had to be near 35 inches and was caught using this method. But we all know how fish stories go.

Arguably, the most entertaining way of catching pike at Red Shirt, though, has to be skipping a topwater, weedless frog lure through the pencil reeds (Booyah Pad Crushers and American Baitworks Scum Frogs work beautifully).



It's tough to sit idle and enjoy your coffee when there are hungry pike within sight of the cabin. © Emmie Jackson



Scouring weed edges with spinners, spoons, and big, furry flies can yield a mess of fish. © Emmie Jackson

The afternoon is prime time for this. Anchor your boat at the edge of the patch (or otherwise tie a clump of pencil reeds to the yoke of the canoe), leaving the largest possible area to cast into. Throw towards shore and retrieve with erratic jerks, keeping your rod tip up to keep the line out of the weeds. Every now and then, give the lure a pause and wait. Pike will watch for a full minute or more without striking, and if they could drool, I guarantee that's what they'd be doing. Any movement after the pause is sometimes all it takes to get a reaction.

A word of warning about fishing with frogs—be prepared to get frustrated. Pike will miss the lure a lot, and even more often, they will hit it but you'll miss the hookset. As hard as it can be, wait two seconds after the initial strike to set the hook. This leaves some time for the fish to actually engulf it. When you set the hook, set it hard. Chances are that your line is woven through the reeds, and you may not have a direct path to the fish. Though it is aggravating (I once calculated my ratio of strikes to successful hookups at 7:1), this can be a blast on a hot Alaska afternoon. Bring a file and sharpen up your hooks after every few catches. Another frog tip: bring a lot of them, because pike will shred them to rubber confetti.

Whatever method you try, there are some bits of terminal equipment that will make it all easier. I prefer a baitcasting rod and reel, but a spinning combo works fine, too. Seven feet is a good length and allows enough load to cast relatively light lures, yet remains robust enough to throw the big swimbaits. As for line, braid allows for more direct contact



with your lure, even in deep water or with wind or weed interference. It also allows me to retrieve snagged lures a lot more easily. Thirty-pound-test braid is a safe bet.

Braid is not, however, compatible with pike teeth. Any nick in the line and it snaps like a sundried rubber band. Use either a 12-inch wire leader or a section of 30-pound-test monofilament or fluorocarbon leader at the business end where your lure attaches to save yourself from these bite-offs. Bring a pair of long-nosed pliers to remove hooks without getting your fingers near sharp pike teeth. A fish mouth spreader is also a good tool to have.

Late summer and early fall are especially good times to head out to Red Shirt. Pike will be on the prowl to prepare for the impending freeze-up, and even the bigger ones, which often stay well concealed during the heat of summer, begin to move around.

Head out and give it a try. Red Shirt is a gem that anglers in Alaska should take advantage of. When you get there, chances are the eagles will be out, the loons will be crooning, and the water wolves will be biting. The biggest challenge you may face is pulling yourself away from the water when it's time to head home.

Joe Jackson is a Wyoming-to-Alaska transplant and has spent 17 years seeking that ever-elusive fishing solitude. When he isn't chasing pike, he's either writing about it, tying coho flies, or having his heart broken by wild rainbow trout. Follow some of his escapades on Instagram: @saveawormfishafly