

Panfish

Part Seventy-three



Snap Tandems For Pickerel

Brian M. Wiprud

Chain pickerel get little respect among most anglers because they fall easy prey to various spinning lures - sometimes to the exclusion of other, "more desirable" fish. They get even less respect among most fly anglers, whose tippets are parted or streamers are mangled with one swipe of a pickerel's dental work. *Esox niger* are green devils that will savage practically anything that moves in the water. But with properly constructed flies and a little modified technique, you'll discover eager pickerel on the fly is a blast, and you might just find yourself hooked into more of the elusive monster pickerel to boot.

Fly Construction:

Tandem flies are the trick to keeping those teeth away from the leader and weeding out strikes from some of the smaller chainsides. The big guys usually like a big fly four to six inches long. Of course, you need a hook in the tail with a fly this long and tandem #2/0 hooks are ideal for snagging pickerel that hit short to maim their prey from behind. And rather than opt for a fixed rear hook, I install a snap. This serves the dual purpose of allowing the rear hook to swing free for added action (if dressed) while aiding removal of a hook inhaled into the fish's gills.

Rather than try to extract it out the front, you reach into the gill plate, unsnap the hook, and back it out. The rest of the fly is removed from the front of the fish. Once the pickerel is released, you snap the hook back onto the fly. This arrangement also allows you to change the rear dressed hook. Some days a flashy tail will draw a strike, while other days it will make them hesitate. With a rear snap, you can mix and match to



suit the mood of the fish.

While there are several ways to connect the front hook to the back snap, I prefer either of two methods. The first is to braid four strands of heavy 30lb to 50lb mono, which is light for ease of casting but imparts enough stiffness to keep the rear hook from grabbing the front one during the cast. Taking two strands six to eight inches long, thread them through the eye of the snap, bring the ends together, and tie a figure eight knot just above the snap. Now the four strands can be braided and then secured with mono tying thread onto the full shank length of the lead hook, making sure the snap is oriented so that when the hook is attached, it will align the hook barb up or down. The second method is braided picture hangar wire, which has the advantage of a faster sink rate, but the disadvantage of more problematic casting characteristics. I use both solder, wire wrap and then epoxy to fasten the wire to the shank of the fore hook and to the aft snap.

Fly Dressing:

Constructing the tandem frames can be a pain, but this is the fun part. Feathers and hair won't cut it. Synthetic materials, such as Ultra Hair, Krystal Flash, Flashabou and woven poly body tubes are ideal. I like to encase the shanks of both hooks and the connecting wire in sturdy reflective braided body tubes cut to size. This is accomplished by feeding the aft hook through a tube to the rear, starting about one inch from the front of the tube. Then you can pull the tube forward and feed the eye of the fore hook through the same hole for a completely encased body. Two to four pound test will do for tying thread, and Crazy Glue does a better job binding the wraps than head cement, which bonds poorly with the synthetic materials.



Once the fly is complete, all wrappings need to be covered with epoxy to protect them from teeth. Depending on the depths you aim to fish, forward weight could be applied via dumbbell lead eyes. As you would expect, 'Clouser'ing the fly adds some very attractive action. However, lead wire can be wrapped into some of the rear removable hooks so that you can add or detract weight without changing flies, though this set up sometimes results in the rear hook snagging the front when you cast.

Dress steamers with hair and flashy stuff tied at the head, preferably in a way that imitates local baitfish. For shad, black hair atop white or pearl hair, with a pearl body. For golden shiners, switch pearl and white with gold. For perch, go with green on yellow, with some red tied in at the gills. Use a black permanent marker to add stripes. And red and white tandem streamers always seem to take some fish. Finish off the fly with some big, flashy eyes and epoxy the head.

Leaders:

Even in clear water, leaders don't have to be over six feet, which is a good thing when casting hefty streamers. Conventional steel leaders work, but have numerous drawbacks, not the least of which is that the fish can see them quite readily. Anybody who has watched them dog a lure right up to the boat can see that pickerel are infatuated with a fly's motion, and when they see a steel leader, they're not so much spooked as confused and ultimately distracted from striking. Other drawbacks include the weak, difficult connections, those little crimp-ons of which there never seem to be enough, and the weakening from repeated casts that send your fly merrily off into the bushes. At any rate, with long streamers, pickerel don't target the fly's head as often, and your main worry is that during the fight the leader may cross into that toothy mouth.

A six inch 50lb shock leader at the head of the fly thwarts fangs and goes unnoticed by the fish. For the rest of the leader, I use butt sections from spent trout and bass leaders, usually with little or no taper and tip sections comparable to at least twenty pound test. Of course, checking your leaders regularly while in action for frays and nicks is essential.



Tackle:

As always, this is a somewhat subjective choice, though I don't see why anyone would try to cast these flies with anything less than an eight-weight rod. Frankly, I sometimes use pickerel fishing as an opportunity to build up my arm for spring tarpon, give my twelve weight a work out and stretch the memory coils out of that WF12 line. You might want to spare your most expensive saltwater reel any wear and tear, and unless you hook a five pounder on a five weight, you won't find yourself into the backing. Fly lines will depend entirely on the water depth you intend to target, and weight forward lines work dandy.

Tactics:

Pickerel don't hit flies the way they do lures. Spoons, spinners and plugs generate both visual stimulus and vibrations that spur the fish to hit it on the move. Unlike lures, flies get strikes based almost entirely on visual stimulation, and the pause is often more pivotal than the retrieve. Experiment with the pace of your stripping. Watch the fly sink, and look for the green and white flash signaling a strike. Sometimes in bright sun, it will take a pickerel a full three count before he rushes the fly. And always play that fly right up to the end. As anyone who has tangled with this fish knows, chainsides have the bold habit of dogging a lure right to the rod tip - often with explosive boat side strikes.

Like pike, they will be found in the vicinity of weeds, but not just those you can see at the surface. I've found that large pickerel are most often found cruising points and drop-offs with weedy bottoms. Nabbing one of these monsters is like

hooking into the bottom and finding that it's alive. Early spring and fall are the best times to find the big guys, when the water is between 55 and 65 degrees.

Though pickerel can fight quite stubbornly, don't expect a protracted, drag squealing fight, even from the monsters. You can usually get them close in rather quickly, and the battle becomes a boat-side wrestling match that can require some fancy footwork. Perhaps the best part of pickerel angling is the slashing strikes, though I've known them to jump quite a bit in shallow oxygen-rich water. I recommend using a net to land this very slippery fish. To unhook, I use one of the commercially available gripping mitts or gloves, the kind with little plastic nubs on them. They're a little hard on the critter's scales but result in a quicker release and less strangling.

Needle nose pliers are a must, and jaw spreaders, while also a little hard on the fish, can be essential for a quick release. I slip surgical tubing over the sharp ends of the spreaders to keep them from puncturing the fish's snout. Be careful of the pickerel's teeth, and I don't just mean in relation to your fingers. The fish's bottom fangs are an essential feeding tool and can get badly damaged if you aren't careful with the pliers.



So take your next early season bass outing and turn it into a hunt for chainsides. You'll be sorry you spent time trying to avoid them. ~ ***Brian M. Wiprud***

About Brian:

Brian M. Wiprud is a New York City writer who fishes Pennsylvania and Massachusetts waters for pickerel and has published previously in American Angler, Mid Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide and Fly Fishing Journal.

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