

Pike Anglers Club of Great Britain



Pike with horns



In moments of excitement I think many Pike anglers have compared the personality of the Pike to that of one of the more infamous, mythical or real, horned beasts. The same anglers would not, however, expect to actually find horns on their quarry once it was landed. Nevertheless in six isolated cases to date that is exactly what has happened. All six fish had very obvious structures referred to as "horns, spines or prongs".

Pike with HornsThe first of these, known to me, was one taken by a commercial fisherman in Lake Winnipegosis, Manitoba in 1963. The others, all angled, were -Bay of Quinte, Lake Ontario, 1968; Centennial Lake, Renfrew County, Ontario, 1970; Jim Lake, North Dakota, 1981; Lake Ashtabula (Shenoye R.), North Dakota (date unknown), and the most recent, from the Kamiskotia River, Cochrane District, Ontario, 1986. The first of these appeared in a Manitoba magazine entitled Fishing (1964 col. 4, no. 1). The Ontario specimens were referred to me by staff members of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, one North Dakota specimen was reported in North Dakota of Out of Doors (Feb. 1982), and the other N.D. specimen reported to me by Mr. Van Eckhout of the N.D. Game and Fish Dept.

The photographs published with the Manitoba and North Dakota reports indicate that all six cases of this odd condition were surprisingly similar, and virtually identical to that indicated here in the dorsal view of the head of the Bay of Quinte fish.

The bony structure along the midline of the upper surface of the "duckbill" snout of the Pike consists of long extensions of the paired bones (frontals) which roof the cranium. The horns have the appearance of being derived from a thickening of those extensions, which at some time in the life of the individual separated from the underlying frontal bones and became elevated over approximately one third of their posterior length. It is the elevation of the ends of these supplementary bones, or layer of bone, which forms the horns. These bones are flat in cross-section where they remain attached to the frontals, oval near the point of separation, and round in cross-section at the free tips. In all cases the top of the skull under the horns is covered with pigmented epidermis, and the upper and lower surfaces of the horns are similarly covered. This suggests the bones elevated early in the life of the individual and continued to grow. Uniquely the very tips of the horns are rather symmetrically pointed and free of epidermis. One can imagine that elevated structures of this nature would rub against objects in the environment. In that way the skin might be worn off the upper surface of the horns, and the upper surface of the bone flattened like the blade of a chisel. However, the epidermis is missing from the underside of the horns to the same degree, and the underside of each horn tapered to the point such that the tip of each horn is

more like that of an awl than like that of a chisel.

In normal specimens of Pike the frontal extensions are less thickened and show no obvious lines at which a portion of the bone could separate along its length. In the individual with horns, the upper layer forming the horns can be separated from what appears to be the underlying normal frontal bones without obvious damage to either element.

I was unaware of the 1963 published description when the first example I had seen was sent to me in 1968. Since it was an anomaly on a species in which I was interested, I took the trouble of having it photographed, made some drawings and notes, and filed it away as a one-of-a-kind anomaly. There are a number of bony anomalies seen regularly in fishes. These include pug-headedness in which one or both of the jaws are foreshortened through malformation or early damage. Curvatures of the spine and compaction of vertebrae are common, particularly in badly disturbed environments. However, in those cases the condition in each individual is usually different in some way. The uniqueness of the anomaly in these Pike is the striking degree in which they are similar.

I cannot at this time suggest an explanation for the secondary layer on the frontal bone, the separation and elevation of the posterior portion of this supplementary layer, or the uniform pointing of the tips. These bones seem to be developing in the manner of isolated units such as ribs or fin spines.

Real anomalies such as this soon become part of the folklore. Folklore is also amplified as a result of things foisted on the public as real by unethical taxidermists and others. Among these are the "Fur-bearing" trout's of Lake Superior and Glacier National Park, said to have evolved fur to withstand the cold temperatures of those lakes, and rabbits with antlers. If horned Pike continue to appear with increasing frequency I fully expect to be bothered by phone calls asking that I settle arguments as to whether or not they actually occur. The fur-bearing trout has been a trial in that regard.

This article first appeared in Pikelines 35 (February 1987) - on this web-site 27/02/04)

