

# Catching and Keeping Redfin Pickerel

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f the four species of pike in North America, two are small enough for the home aquarium. Of these, one is common to the Northeast, the redfin pickerel (*Esox americanus americanus*).

Redfin are a small elusive species unknown to most anglers. They are occasionally caught by trout anglers in small streams while using a fly or other tiny bait. I have never seen a redfin more than eight or nine inches long, although I have read books listing their maximum size as 12 or even 14 inches. For the aquarist they are an interesting fish that can add diversity to a tank with their long slender body and ducklike bill. They are also attractively patterned and can have striking colors. There are however, several drawbacks to housing redfin. For the enthusiastic aquarist, however, looking for a striking and unusual native, the results are well worth the efforts.

## Catching Redfin Pickerel

Redfin often inhabit brooks and slow-moving rivers. Although most of the specimens I've seen were in small brooks, I've recently noticed them at the edges of large rivers, hiding under suspended logs or in the crevices of rock piles. They can be seen busting out of their hiding place as one walks along the shoreline. While wading in smaller streams I often see them leave small pools as I approach. Their initial movement, at least when startled, is a sudden burst along the surface. Although I've seen hundreds of small chain pickerel (*E. niger*) in ponds and lakes, I've never seen redfin pickerel in these habitats. I assume that redfin are eaten by larger predatory fishes in these ponds and lakes, or else have difficulty competing with larger predators such as their cousin *E. niger*.

I've used several methods of catching redfin over the years. If your goal is to acquire small specimens (less than three

inches), dragging a dip net through heavy cover is a good method. Adults, however, are often too elusive and head for cover when approached.

During the summer I've caught several small redfin in a single drag with a long-handled dip net. Small specimens are difficult to keep as feeding them requires tiny, moving live foods which are often not readily available at the local pet store. Larger adults are more difficult to catch, but are easier to keep as feeder fish are readily available.

I've had little difficulty catching redfin with a fishing rod. A tiny live fish suspended off the bottom with a float or bobber works very well. I fish in water that's usually less than two feet deep and sometimes as little as six inches deep. The hook, of course, should be tiny (I recommend a size 8) and preferably barbless. Any hook barb can be rendered harmless by squeezing the barb against the hook with a pair of needlenose pliers. The most effective fishing area seems to be a small stream away from the current and near some heavy cover. If the stream has lily pads in a slow-moving area, at least one redfin should be present watching for small fish. Extremely light line (4 pound test) is helpful in making a realistic presentation as tiny baitfish have difficulty swimming with heavier line.

Because of their small size, redfin often seize baitfish in the mid-section without taking the hook in their mouth. Trying to hook redfin at this point is futile. However, within a few minutes the redfin should reposition the baitfish in order to swallow the fish head first. Once this happens, gently set the hook and land the fish as quickly as possible.

The crucial part in catching these guys with a fishing rod is having plenty of tiny live fish—one inch long or less—for bait. Plan on going through several baitfish before actually getting a redfin to shore.

Minnow traps are another way of catching redbfin, but this method takes some practice. Pickerel are not attracted to the usual minnow trap baits (e.g., bread, cat and dog food). Live minnows placed in the trap may escape before a pickerel enters. One way around these problems is to place bread in the trap hoping to lure minnows which then, eventually, lure redbfin in as well. I've had some success with this method.

Another minnow trap strategy is to leave the trap in the water for several days, or even a week or more. A pickerel will sometimes learn to associate the trap with confined (and helpless) bait fish and enter and exit the trap at will. One time I lost a large fish trap after the line broke. When I recovered the trap several weeks later, I found that two large chain pickerels had taken up residence in the trap and appeared to be very well fed!

Probably the most effective way to use a minnow trap to catch redbfin is to place it in a location where a fur trapper would place a trap to catch beavers or otters. Locate a narrow passageway in the stream through which any fish traveling upstream or downstream would need to pass; for example, an opening between two rocks where the water is a foot deep or less and fast moving. If all other paths are blocked or difficult to pass through, a minnow trap carefully placed in this opening can prove extremely effective. I often raise the trap slightly by placing small flat rocks underneath it. This brings the trap closer to the surface where redbfin often travel.

Expect to leave such a trap in place for several days. I've found that all the pickerel in a given area will often relocate at once, often after a rainfall, and fill traps placed in such a manner. It's not unusual to check traps daily for a week or more with no luck and then, one morning, find a dozen redbfin in a single minnow trap—all caught in one night! At this point it's just a matter of picking out one or two redbfin that are the perfect size for your tank, or a couple of healthy looking, attractively patterned individuals.

This method will also capture other species of fish—and other animals, too. I've inadvertently caught small water snakes, crayfish, large waterbugs, salamanders, and even small turtles in traps set in this manner. I've also found traps standing with one end out of the water, with a crayfish or small fish still inside. Presumably, a mink or other predator was trying (unsuccessfully) to get to my catch.

### Keeping Redfin Pickerel

In transporting redbfin from the stream to home you must remember that they are terrific jumpers. I've had redbfin jump

out of five-gallon buckets containing only one inch of water. I've also had redbfins jump out of a bucket placed on the passenger's side floor and into my lap while driving home. Always cover the container!

Once home, redbfins seem to acclimate to aquariums quite well. However, you must be careful in choosing their tankmates. Keep the following points in mind:

1. *Anything significantly smaller than the redbfin will be eaten.* Because redbfins are fairly small themselves, this should not pose a serious problem. For example, I've kept golden shiner (*Notemigonus crysoleucus*)—which are often as large as the redbfins—in the same tank without incident.

2. *Aggressive sunfish will often mistake the brightly colored, ever-moving pectoral fins of a redbfin for food and grab at them.* You may hear a loud smack—the same sound produced when a sunfish violently sucks a bug off of the bottom of a lily pad in a pond or lake. After a few aggressive smacks, the pickerel will lose so much of its pectoral fins that it will be unable to maintain an upright position. It will start listing and its fins will no longer be adequate to aid in moving water through the gills. Death will be imminent.

3. *Redfin pickerel require a "warm up" before feeding and, thus, cannot compete with many other predatory fishes for food.* When feeder fish are placed in the tank, a redbfin will initially show only a casual interest. Its markings become more vivid, its body arches, and it focuses on only one potential victim. The strike itself is swift but may not occur until after the redbfin has "stalked" its prey for several minutes. If there are other aggressive predatory fishes in the tank, such as any of the black basses (*Micropterus*), the feeder fish will be gone almost instantly and the redbfin will get nothing.

Fortunately, redbfin pickerel learn to associate their keepers with food. My well-established redbfins need nothing more than to see a bag of brightly colored goldfish pass by their front window to warm up. These fish will take feeders almost directly out of my hand.

### Conclusion

If you're looking for diversity or simply wish to have a representative member of the pike family in your aquaria, a redbfin pickerel is an excellent choice. Just keep in mind that this species is incompatible with many other native fishes. As long as you're willing to maintain the specimen with appropriate tankmates, I can strongly recommend the redbfin. 