

## July 2008: Meditations on Monster Fish

A Master Maine Guide and master storyteller I know likes to punctuate his hunting and fishing tales with descriptions of "monstahs"--the monster bull moose that got away, the monster 12-point buck he had to wrestle to the ground, the monster 6-pound salmon hooked in Pierce Pond.

I thought of his penchant for monsters recently when a friend in Camden explained to a small group of us that she hadn't yet swum in Megunticook Lake this summer because of "the lake monster." She and her husband, who live on the lake, heard a loon's loud alarm cry, and then her husband saw the three-foot body of some creature rise out of the water. (She only saw the large wake it left behind).

Naturally, we all questioned her: Did she think it was a snapping turtle? An otter? Did it just leap in the water or did it go up on land? She said her husband described it as breaching like a seal. So in the absence of an actual seal finding its way into Megunticook, or an otter with a sudden yen for loon eggs, it may very well have been an enormous fish.

There are few options for monster fish in Megunticook. Rainbow trout have been stocked there and can reach sizes of up to 20 pounds in some lakes. Lake trout, often called togue, have been stocked in the lake in the past but have apparently not "taken." They have been found weighing over 100 pounds, though not here in Maine.

But for the Megunticook Monster, my money is on an old codger of a brown trout that has resisted being caught for years. Lake Warden Ken Bailey has seen an eight-pound brown trout caught during ice-fishing season, as well as largemouth bass of about the same size caught during the summer in Megunticook. There are certainly waters deep enough for them in the lake, with depths of up to sixty feet, including a place off Fernald's Neck marked on lake maps as "Trout Hole." Is that where the fishy monster resides, brooding in the depths, waiting to rise up out of the dark depths to harass loons and hapless swimmers?

Maine is home to several gigantic fish. Once while fishing for striped bass (no small species itself) on the Kennebec with my husband, I was enthralled to see short-nosed sturgeon leap entirely out of the water, flinging themselves into the air like animated logs. They did this over and over. I wondered if they did this

for a practical reason, such as to rid themselves of parasites, or just to express some fishy joy.

The short-nosed sturgeon is apparently the smallest of its genus, growing to a mere three feet long. Atlantic sturgeon, however, which may still have a population in the Penobscot River, have been found up to fifteen feet in length and weighing over 800 pounds! That's the size of a small whale. Really. Those size stats are according to Wikipedia, the online reference source which then made me laugh out loud by continuing, "...but they typically grow to be six to eight feet and no more than three hundred pounds." That's it? Only three hundred pounds? That's a fish the size of Shaquille O'Neal--still a formidable creature no matter how you look at it. Just as loons are among the most primitive of birds, sturgeon are one of the most primitive fishes. They also live for decades. Imagine what kinds of things they remember from their watery travels up and down our major rivers, what secrets of the deep they hold in those unfathomable prehistoric brains.

Another large fish found in Maine is the northern pike, a true monster from the perspective of native fish species. This invasive introduced species is detrimental to native fish, so fishermen are encouraged to catch and kill them. Despite the havoc the pike wreaks on indigenous trout populations, fisherman like the challenge of catching a 10-plus pound fish that has some fight in it. Great Pond in the Belgrade Lakes is considered the capital of pike fishing in Maine; the state's largest pike (more than 26 pounds) was caught there. My husband was very excited to catch one recently on Great Pond on a fly. Pike can grow up to five feet in length and weigh almost 40 pounds, so they clearly dominate the food chain--the grizzly bear or wolf of the fish world. Besides being named for a weapon, the pike's Latin name *Esox lucius* means "wolf fish," so it has clearly long had the reputation as one mean fish.

The weighty tome "McClane's New Standard Fishing Encyclopedia and International Angling Guide" includes this poetic bit about the pike: "Mystery, of course, has always been an important ingredient in angling, and nothing stirs the soul more than the abrupt arrival of a twenty-pound pike behind the lure. With baleful eyes and underslung jaw, it comes grimly to the feast." This reference book also includes among the non-fish items on the pike's diet such creatures as frogs, aquatic birds, muskrats, mice, and crayfish. This explains why some antique ice-fishing lures were carved in the shapes of mice, loons, and frogs.

Fish biologists were horrified to learn that a pike was recently caught in Sebago Lake with a 13-inch landlocked salmon in its belly. Although it was suspected a few pike were in the lake, this evidence of its predation on landlocked salmon was no small thing. The landlocked salmon's Latin name is *Salmo salar sebago*, named for Sebago Lake and arguably Maine's signature fish. Pike are literally devouring our natural wildlife heritage.

There is something thrilling about knowing that Loch Ness isn't the only place with its monsters of the deep. Right here in Maine's picturesque lakes and rivers mysterious dark spirits of the wild live on in the shape of brown trout, short-nosed sturgeon, and the evil invading pike. Just thinking about that reminds me of an interview I once read with the cartoonist Gary Larson, in which he marvels that there are still animals out there that can eat us.

The more I've learned about monster fish, the more I understand my friend's reluctance to take that first plunge into Megunticook Lake. I myself am thinking twice now about jumping off my parents' dock into Megunticook River, which, where they live, is about four feet deep and usually warm as bath water. But a renegade pickerel might be lurking under their dock, just waiting for its moment, for my tender pink toes to wiggle by its long toothy jaw...

**Written by Kristen Lindquist**



101 Mount Battie Street, Camden, Maine 04843  
ph. 207.236.7091 fax 207.236.0612  
email: [kristenl@coastalmountains.org](mailto:kristenl@coastalmountains.org)