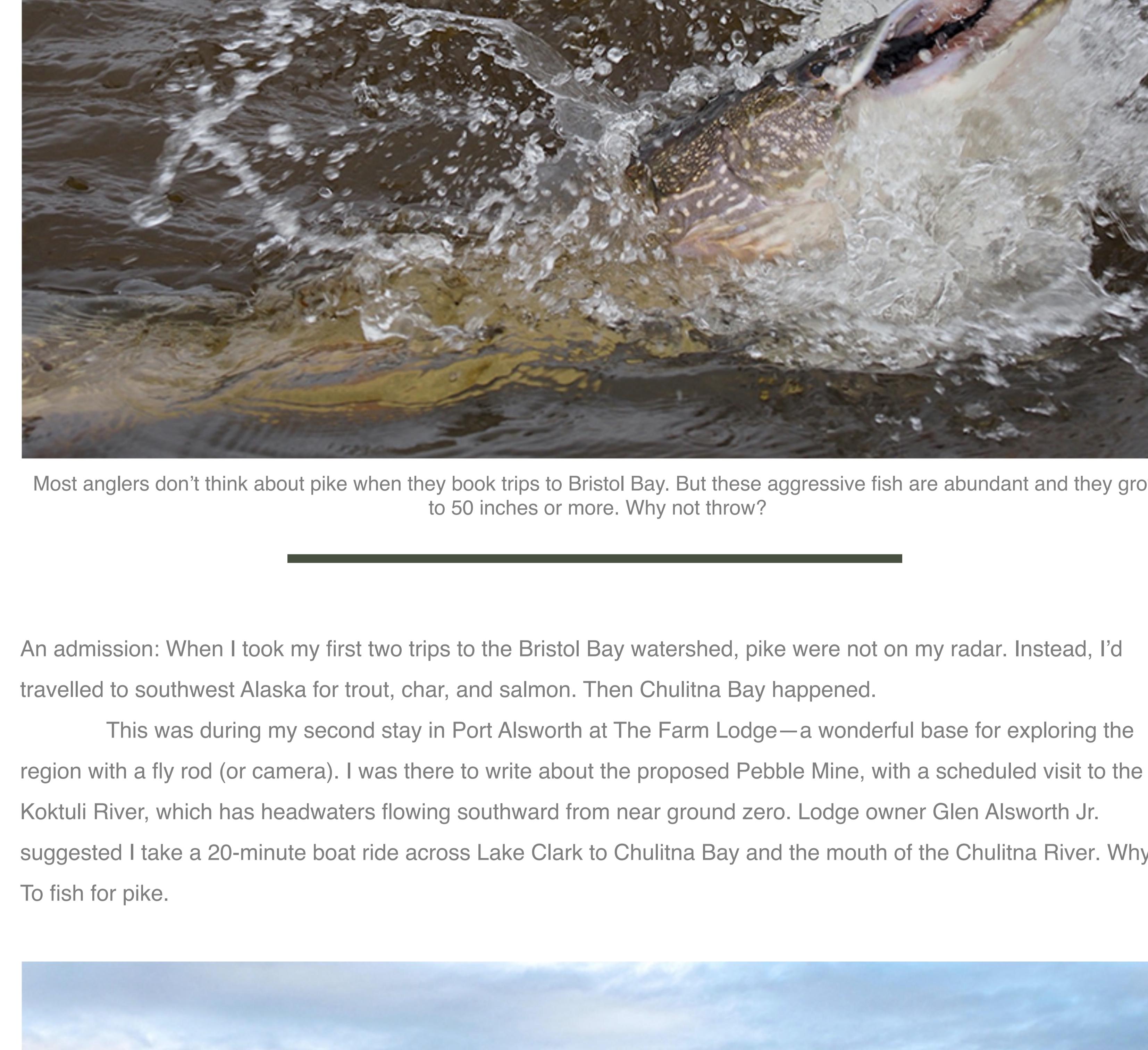


# Stone Cold Killers

Anglers headed to Alaska's Bristol Bay can get tunnel vision while searching for rainbows, dollys and sockeye. That could be a mistake.

By Matthew Dickerson



Most anglers don't think about pike when they book trips to Bristol Bay. But these aggressive fish are abundant and they grow to 50 inches or more. Why not throw?

An admission: When I took my first two trips to the Bristol Bay watershed, pike were not on my radar. Instead, I'd travelled to southwest Alaska for trout, char, and salmon. Then Chulitna Bay happened.

This was during my second stay in Port Alsworth at The Farm Lodge—a wonderful base for exploring the region with a fly rod (or camera). I was there to write about the proposed Pebble Mine, with a scheduled visit to the Koktuli River, which has headwaters flowing southward from near ground zero. Lodge owner Glen Alsworth Jr. suggested I take a 20-minute boat ride across Lake Clark to Chulitna Bay and the mouth of the Chulitna River. Why? To fish for pike.

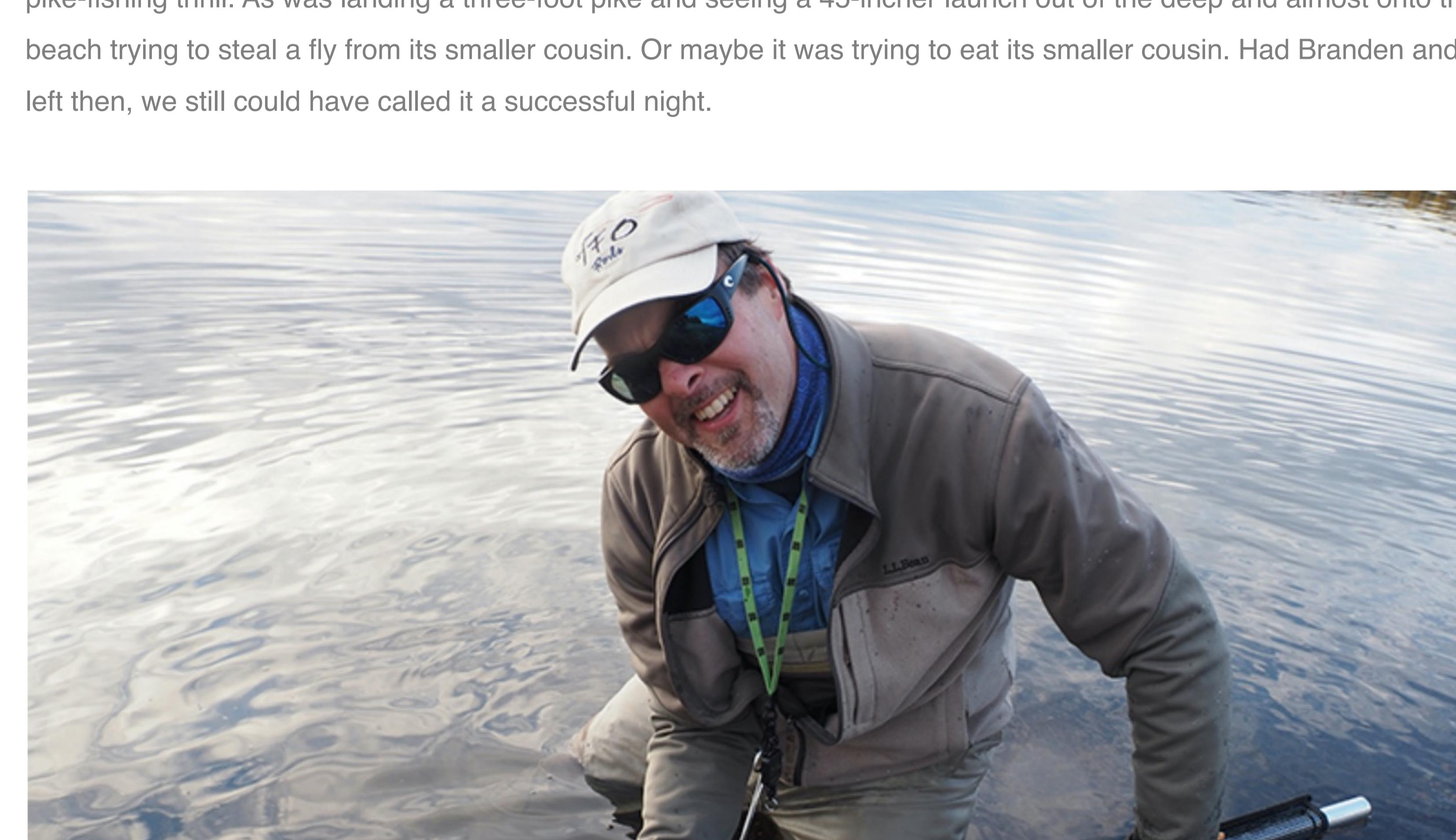


Most anglers head to Bristol Bay for salmon and rainbow trout. If you choose to fish northern pike you'll have plenty of water to yourself.

It wasn't a hard sell. Why turn down an opportunity to cast flies for big, aggressive fish in a spectacularly beautiful location? None I could think of. And I had a good excuse—the Chulitna, though not as close to the proposed mine as the Koktuli, does have headwaters in the same general area. Fortunately, I had my 8-weight rod with me. What I didn't have were pike flies. The closest matches were my largest trout streamers—black and white leeches and sculpin patterns only half the size of the pike flies I would later use. Still, I managed to land three pike in two hours. The first was a mere two-footer. The second an even three feet. The third fell just shy of four feet, which at the time was the largest pike of my life. Suddenly, I decided to take the region's pike fishing seriously.

When I returned to Port Alsworth last September I planned two pike outings to Chulitna Bay. And I arrived better prepared for pike, now armed with wire leaders and "real" pike flies. My friend Brian Cadoret, a pike fly-fishing legend in Vermont and a guide with Stream and Brook Fly Fishing, had generously armed me with five fantastic pike patterns tied by some other east coast esox legends, Brian Price, Jason Meindersma, and Chris Sampson. Just a couple hours after I landed in Port Alsworth, I hopped in a boat with guide Jeff Duck and headed to Chulitna Bay.

Wanting to imitate a rainbow trout or an undersized sockeye salmon, I tied on one of Price's creations, a bright pink and green fly he calls a Rotax. Despite several missed strikes, I still landed three fish over 30 inches. Jeff equaled me in number, including a 40-inch.



Lake Clark and Chulitna Bay offer scads of northern pike. Most range between three and 10 pounds, but giants are possible.

It wasn't a bad outing. But I thought I could do better because Lake Clark produces trophy fish. Branden, a local pike guru who guides for the Farm Lodge, had recently broken the magical 50-inch barrier with one of his clients. And Jeff has had 50-inch pike swim into his sockeye nets. Although high levels of glacial silt keep light from penetrating to the bottom in deeper areas (meaning little plant life to support the bottom of the food chain), in Lake Clark's shallow bays food is abundant and the pike habitat is fantastic. Plus, several hundred thousand sockeye migrate into the lake each summer to spawn, bringing millions of pounds of nutrients with them. And, each year salmon fry migrate to the ocean, offering another protein wave for those northerns.

A few days later I was back at Chulitna Bay, this time crossing choppy waves with Branden. We had our flies on the water about two hours before sunset on what turned out to be an epic evening.

Wading thigh deep off a sandy point, I launched a heavy pike fly as far as I could out into the bay. With wading limited by a steep drop-off, and my backcast by the trees behind me, I had to shoot the last 20 feet of line to get the fly where I wanted, just beyond the last patch of weeds where a slow current swirling the bay dropped into the deep. I let the fly sink, twitching it now and then.

I'd already landed six pike over the previous hour, all in shallower water further into the cove. Branden was doing just as well. While none of our fish had broken 40-inches, they'd provided plenty of excitement. One three-footer had absolutely torpedoed my fly, with 15 feet of visible wake before the hit—an experience that is part of the pike-fishing thrill. As was landing a three-foot pike and seeing a 45-inch launch out of the deep and almost onto the beach trying to steal a fly from its smaller cousin. Or maybe it was trying to eat its smaller cousin. Had Branden and I left then, we still could have called it a successful night.



The author and his amazing 48-inch long northern.

But we didn't depart. And 10 heart-pounding minutes later, I brought a locomotive to the cradle. We measured the fish at a full 48 inches. A new personal best. Based on length-girth formulas, it was a 27-pounder.

Lake Clark and Chulitna Bay aren't the only place to find pike in Alaska. Nearby, Lake Iliamna also

produces trophy fish. The state record pike is a 38-pounder that was caught on the Innoko River, a tributary of the mighty Yukon. Numerous lakes outside Anchorage also offer pike. The state of Alaska is trying to get rid of pike

where they don't belong, such as some Kenai Peninsula lakes, but in many places pike are native and belong.

After six trips to the The Farm Lodge, and with a seventh already booked, I can say that Alaska pike are definitely on my radar. Though often overlooked by anglers who are keyed in on rainbow trout, char, grayling and salmon, pike provide an outstanding opportunity when visiting Alaska. I wouldn't visit Bristol Bay without a decent supply of oversized pike flies. You never know when someone might suddenly say, "Hey, you interested in pike." And you can answer, "Well, yes I am."



## Matthew Dickerson

Matthew Dickerson is the author of several books about trout, fly fishing, rivers, and ecology including *The Voices of Rivers: Reflections on Places Wild and Almost Wild* (which contains essays about the Bristol Bay drainage), *TROUT in the Desert: On Fly Fishing, Human Habits, and the Cold Waters of the Arid Southwest*, and *A Tale of Three Rivers: On Wooly Buggers, Bowline Balls, Cigarette Butts, and the Future of Appalachian Brook Trout*. Look also for his forthcoming book *A Fine-Spotted Trout on Corral Creek: On the Cutthroat Competition of Native Trout in the Northern Rockies* due out soon. To connect with Glen Alsworth, Jr. and the Farm Lodge and arrange your own trip to catch footballs in late summer or fall, see [www.thefarmlodge.com](http://www.thefarmlodge.com).