

Y REMOVING THE BONES FROM NORTHERN PIKE

By Chris Grondahl

Photos by C. R. Grondahl

Some History

The pike rebound from the mid-1990s through the early 2000s was preceded by drought of the late 1980s. Vegetation growing on shorelines left high and dry for years was eventually inundated when precipitation returned, providing perfect pike spawning habitat.

For a time, the northern fishing across the state was outstanding. Fish in the 7-10-pound range were common. Bigger fish – much bigger fish in some instances – were also caught.

By the mid-2000s, however, the wonderful pike fishing began to wane. Much of the state, with the exception of the Devils Lake basin, was stuck in a trend of average to below average precipitation. Lake levels declined while vegetation climbed on rejuvenated shorelines.

When water returned, beginning in spring 2009 and continuing through 2010, exposed vegetation was flooded, setting the table for yet another pike boom. This time around, however, the fishing could be even better as there are more state waters holding pike today than a decade ago. Greg Power, Game and Fish Department fisheries chief, said there are more than 200 fisheries in the state with pike, including the Missouri River System and the Devils Lake chain.

While a number of waters across the state harbor nice pike, the bountiful 2009 and 2010 year-classes have some growing to do. These fish caught through the ice this winter will be less than 26 inches, but

may reach the 30 inches-plus category by next fall or winter.

Northern pike, North Dakota's state fish, are every bit as good on the table as other game fish, and fight better than most. Slight changes in attitude and fishing tactics can help you take advantage of tremendous angling opportunities. Tactical changes are as simple as awareness that walleye rigs with 4- to 8-pound test line and no leader will eventually be lost if a pike snaps at the bait. Losing too many rigs can be costly if you're not prepared. Beef up your line to 10- or 12-pound test and add a leader while fishing walleye in pike-inhabited waters. You may miss a few walleyes, but you won't spend near as much time tying on new hooks. (Darkhouse spearfishing in select North Dakota lakes is another alternative to harvesting pike for the table.)

A change in attitude about pike is perhaps best accomplished by solving the one major annoyance associated with them – eliminating those nasty Y bones. Picking through a dozen bones to get a bite of fish is an inconvenience for many anglers who shy away from keeping pike and have eliminated them from their menu. My attitude changed on a trip to Canada when a local showed me how to efficiently remove pike bones.

With a little practice, anyone can master the following process and provide delicious, boneless pike for the table for years to come.

CHRIS GRONDAHL is the Game and Fish Department's outreach section supervisor.

The first step is the traditional filleting or removing skin from the fillet. As for any meat processing, a sharp and flexible fillet knife makes a world of difference between an easy task and a frustrating one.



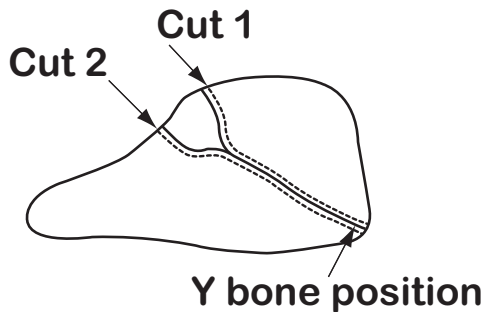
Once the fillet is removed from the skin, the second step is to remove the rib bones. In this step, the cut should start along the top edge of the rib cage. The knife blade should be roughly parallel to the cutting board and the cut made with the blade angled slightly toward the board. Begin the cut on either end of the rib cage and work the blade down along the rib bones toward the belly. On a fish of more than 4 or 5 pounds, the rib bones are thick enough so upward pressure on the knife will ensure a cut close to the rib bones so no meat is wasted.



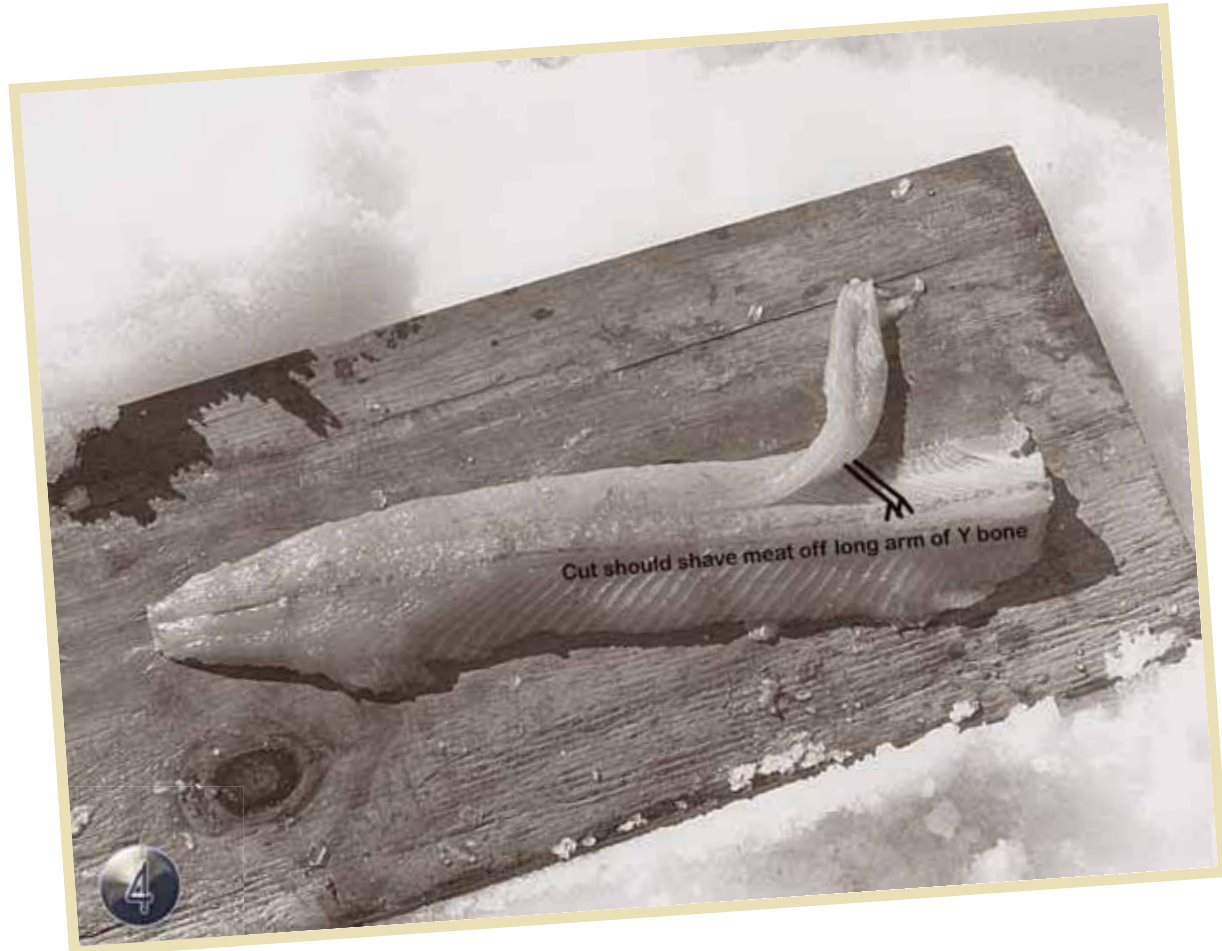
Next, remove the first boneless strip of meat located along the back. Make this cut initially at 90 degrees to the cutting board along the top side of the visible Y bones. These visible bones are one of the short arms of the Y bone. This portion of the Y bone can usually be distinguished in fresh fillets as small white dots at the surface which extend about three-quarters of the length of the fillet toward the tail. Larger diameter dots are more easily seen toward the head of the fillet. If white dots are not easily visible, they can be felt by running a finger along the area above where the ribs were removed.



END VIEW OF FILLET

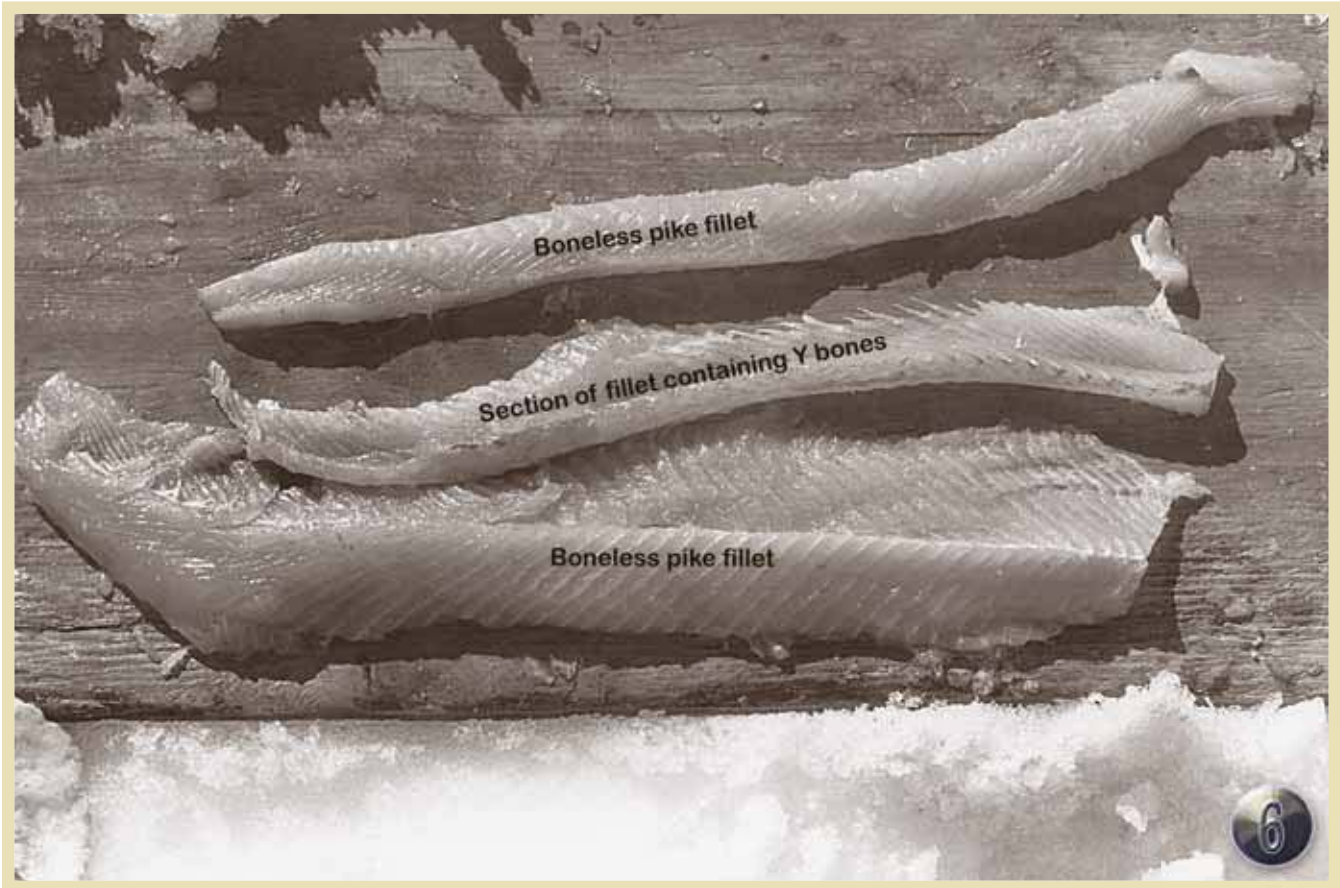


After the 90-degree cut has been completed along the top side of the Y bones, the knife is angled to cut roughly parallel to the board and toward the top of the fillet. The cut will run along the top of the long arms of the Y bones. Maintain slight downward pressure to keep in contact with the bones as this cut is made. Bones become smaller and less prevalent toward the tail end. The final product from this step is a boneless strip of flesh.



With the first boneless strip already removed from the top of the fillet, start the last cut. This cut is initiated along the length of the fillet about one-quarter inch below the cut made to take out the first boneless strip. This cut actually follows down along the opposite side of the short arm of the Y bones and along the back side of the long arm of the Y bones. Again, with upward and outward pressure toward the top of the fillet, you will be able to feel when the knife is running along the bone.

The final product shows boneless strips on top and bottom and the waste strip containing Y bones in the middle. Some waste is evident along the Y bones, but is a minimal amount. This technique produces excellent boneless pike, but like any filleting, may seem cumbersome at first. Be patient and practice, knowing you may lose more meat than you would like on your first few fish.



Above all, use a sharp, flexible fillet knife because deboning is a game of angles and following along bones. A regular or dull knife just won't work.